



the Billionaire's
CHRISTMAS SEDUCTION

INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLER

CLARE
CONNELLY

THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CHRISTMAS SEDUCTION

CLARE CONNELLY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Connelly grew up in a small country town in Australia. Surrounded by rainforests, and rickety old timber houses, magic was thick in the air, and stories and storytelling were a huge part of her childhood.

From early on in life, Clare realised her favourite books were romance stories, and read voraciously. Anything from Jane Austen to Georgette Heyer, to Mills & Boon and (more recently) 50 Shades, Clare is a romance devotee. She first turned her hand to penning a novel at fifteen (if memory serves, it was something about a glamorous fashion model who fell foul of a high-end designer. Sparks flew, clothes flew faster, and love was born.)

Clare has a small family and a bungalow near the sea. When she isn't chasing after energetic little toddlers, or wiping fingerprints off furniture, she's writing, thinking about writing, or wishing she were writing.

Clare loves connecting with her readers. Head to www.clareconnelly.co.uk to sign up to her newsletter, or join her official facebook page.

THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CHRISTMAS
SEDUCTION

All the characters in this book are fictitious and have no existence outside the author's very-vivid, non-stop imagination. They have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names and are pure invention (mwah-ha-ha).

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The illustration on the cover of this book features smokin' hot model/s and, as gorgeous as they are, bears no relation to the characters described within.

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PROLOGUE

“YOUR MOTHER’S GONE, ALESSIO. She no longer had need of us.”

Eight-year-old Alessio Cavalcante met his father’s eyes with a look of confusion. “Gone? Gone where?”

The senior Alessio regarded his son with a face that was ice cold. “She has left. That’s all that matters.”

Alessio nodded, but it made no sense.

His mother was always there, always cooking, always smiling, always reading to him before bed. At most, she’d gone away for a night, when it couldn’t be helped. Never longer.

“When will she be back?”

“Damn it,” his father swore. “She won’t be. Don’t you understand? She has gone. Left us for good. You are to stop thinking of her, and certainly never speak of her. Do you understand?”

Alessio flinched at his father’s unusually angry tone, the words cracking through the room like a whip before devolving into muttering that made no sense to Alessio. Words like *other man*. *Unfaithful*. *Cotswolds*. *Miserable life*. Words that were of no consequence to a little boy who was still reeling from the idea that his mother was *gone*.

“She...didn’t want...”

“No. She didn’t want you. Or me. She has gone.” Alessio senior held out a hand to his son, his eyes expressing a

challenge, daring him to be brave. The young boy stared back even as his lower lip began to tremble, and he tried to make sense of the idea that his mother had left. The feelings crashing through him were new and strange, but there was no time to study them, far less to understand them.

His father was asking something of him, and Alessio had only one parent left now—he didn't intend to lose him as well.

“I'm coming, papa,” he said quietly, pressing his hand into his father's. As they walked, side by side, from the palatial living room, Alessio wondered at the pain in his chest, and if it would ever go away again. In truth, it wouldn't. Not, at least, for a great many years and even then, only if he was brave enough to let it...

CHAPTER I

“WE’RE CLOSED!” Charlotte called through the heavy oak doors, wiping what felt like the millionth table of crumbs and sticky ale marks, her eyes lifting to the clock in the hall. At just past ten, she was already working an hour beyond when her shift was supposed to have ended. As so often happened, she’d been the only one available to cover closing. It was one of the cons of living just upstairs—everyone knew you were almost always available.

The knock sounded, louder than before, and she ground her teeth together before weaving through the remaining tables, placing the dishcloth on the bar as she passed. A coaster was on the floor, and she crouched on autopilot, lifting it between fingertips and placing it beside her cloth. *The Duck and Fig*, it proclaimed in elegant gold script against a matte black background—the colour theme had been her suggestion, shortly after taking up the head chef position in the quaint Cotswold pub’s kitchen, three years earlier.

Wiping her hands on the apron as she approached the front of the pub, she pushed the heavy lock down, and drew the door inwards, a polite yet cool look of enquiry on her face. She was too tired for any of the regulars to be deciding they wanted to ‘make a night of it’.

It was dark out, the light to the pub switched off and the cloudy, mid winter’s eve offered little moonlight, but even with only the blade of warmth thrown from the pub behind her, she could see this wasn’t a regular patron. Having lived in the little Cotswolds village for years now, she knew most

residents—certainly the pub-frequenting ones—quite well, even in silhouette. This person stood easily six and a half feet tall with broad shoulders and a body that was quite impossible to discern beneath his heavy wool overcoat. The boxiness of it simply made him look...enormous.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was a little squeaky. “We’re closed.”

“I have reserved a room.” His words were accented, Italian, she guessed, and deep, a tone that was quite fascinating.

She frowned, mentally toting up the guest list for the day—not difficult to do when only one person was due to arrive. This close to Christmas was usually flat out, but a new hotel had just opened across town, filled with all the old-world country style people came to the Cotswolds for, meaning the pub was a little slower than normal. The weekend should have a full house though, she thought with crossed fingers. “Mr Gray?”

“No.”

“Oh.” She cast a glance over her shoulder. “Are you sure you have the right place? The Duck and Fig?”

“*Si.*”

Charlotte’s lips tugged to the side in an unconscious gesture of consideration.

“At the Duck and Fig?” She repeated.

“As I said.” A large exhalation could be heard—a sigh of exasperation and she smiled despite herself. She could barely see the man and yet he immediately gave her the impression of being impatient and haughty—two qualities Charlotte generally found best when teased.

“Well, then, you’d better come in and take a seat while I get to the bottom of it,” she said with a small sigh of her own. She was bone-weary, but there was a strange electrical current in the air, and it was breathing fresh energy deep into her body. “What was your name?”

“Alessio,” he replied crisply, the word sending a strange shiver down her spine. She stepped backwards, waiting for him to follow her before bolting the door locked and turning to regard him properly. He was tall even when compared to the Christmas tree that dominated the space, its old-fashioned lights casting the pub in a quaint and cosy atmosphere that Charlotte adored.

Haughty, definitely, but also, utterly ridiculously handsome. Her lips parted on a quick rush of breath as feminine instincts long ago exiled to the recesses of her brain and mind jangled to life in one screaming fever pitch of awareness. It was impossible not to stare—at his thick, dark hair, strong, proud brow, dark eyebrows, aquiline nose, square jaw with just the right amount of stubble, strong, chiseled lips, strong looking neck and shoulders and a physique that was, quite simply, stunning.

While she knew men like this existed, or at least, had been photoshopped into existence, she had no idea they were really out there, moving around in the general population. Truly, he should come with some kind of public health announcement. Even his hands earned her interest and enjoyment, with long, commanding fingers and short, neat nails. He held an overnight bag, black leather and every bit as expensive and well-made as his jacket, she guessed.

Her mouth felt quite dry as she tried to swallow and remember even a modicum of clear thinking.

“Alessio,” she finally managed to repeat, the word barely audible courtesy of her hoarse voice and totally distracted mind.

“*Si.*”

“You’re Italian?” She asked, simply to fill the vacuum that was her mind, as silence roared around the room, terrifying her.

“*Si.*”

Pull yourself together, Charlie. She finally, belatedly, managed a polite smile and managed to weave past him—but

not far enough past him, because a hint of his fragrance tickled her nostrils, so woody and masculine, and her knees responded with an immediate quiver and her stomach dropped to her toes.

Moving quickly now, she slid behind the bar and flicked open the reservation book—Winnie, who owned the hotel, preferred the old-fashioned record keeping to a computer, which could explain why this oversight had taken place.

“I’m sorry, Mr...Alessio...I don’t have any record of you in the book.”

A muscle jerked in his jaw, and he focussed such a firm stare in Charlotte’s direction that she thought he might honestly burn a hole through her flesh, so intense was the derision she felt emanating off him in waves.

“That is not my oversight.”

“No,” she agreed with a grimace. “I’m sure it’s not.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, watching her without speaking. A silence that unnerved her, as Charlotte was sure it was designed to.

“We do have rooms available.”

“Good.”

“But I’ll need to make one up.” She thought wearily of her own bed, and of Dash, whose little body would be fast asleep, but who she desperately missed and wanted to kiss goodnight. She was fortunate to have a job that made it possible to accommodate the demands of looking after a little boy, but there were times when she wished for a more normal existence, the ability to ‘clock off’ at five and be home for dinner with him every night.

“I would be grateful.” He said it in such a way that left her in little doubt of his genuine gratitude, but no matter. The pub couldn’t really afford to lose an overnight booking, and reviews were everything—better accommodate the man than risk a one star write up going online.

“It won’t take me long,” she said, cursing Winnie and her son Caleb, and their disorganised management of the

accommodation. She was the chef—this was definitely not supposed to be her job. Nonetheless, she was, as always, the last person standing and therefore, the duty fell to her.

“Would you care to fill out a guest card while you wait?” She pulled a piece of cardboard from beside the register and slid it over the counter, noting a mark she’d missed earlier and reaching to wipe it on autopilot.

“My details are already recorded.”

She pulled a face. “You might *think* so, but Caleb can be...”

Alessio’s eyes narrowed, and Charlotte compressed her lips, aware she was straying into the unprofessional.

“It doesn’t matter. Take a seat. I won’t be long.”

Only as she left the bar did it occur to Charlotte that she was taking a lot of what this man said on faith. After all, she didn’t know *anything* about him, and certainly had no way of knowing his story was true. She’d let him into the bar, and in fact left him there now unattended, with the day’s cash takings in a velvet pouch in the office—albeit locked, but with a pretty flimsy door—and there was only herself and Dashiell in the whole hotel. While she adored the little boy, he was only eight and not likely to offer much deterrence to a would-be attacker.

She abruptly stopped walking, turned, and tiptoed back down the hallway, avoiding the reliable creaks in the floorboards, then peeking around the doorframe.

He didn’t *look* like a nefarious character.

He stood now, exactly where she’d left him, but with his eyes fixed on the wall behind the bar—littered as it was with staff photos and postcards that the regulars had sent from all over the world. Charlotte had suspended a jaunty string of lights around the pin board earlier that week, which now formed a brightly coloured border. One of the pictures in particular caught her eye—a snap of her and Caleb taken after Dash’s birthday earlier that year. A flop of Caleb’s blonde hair had dropped over his brow and Charlotte was reaching up to move it, midway through laughing at some shared joke or

other. She couldn't remember now. It had been a happy night, and Charlotte had been glad—glad that in the wreckage of Dash's young life, she could give him such a joyous celebration.

“Finished already?”

She jerked her gaze back to Alessio, the smile on her face carrying the remnants of that night's warmth, changing her eyes so they glowed from within. “No.”

“And yet, you are back,” he drawled, his gaze fixed to her face with an expression that was impossible to read.

Consternation flickered inside Charlotte.

“I should at least take a deposit,” she moved back behind the bar. “For the room.”

His eyes narrowed.

“This isn't usually my job,” she waved a hand through the air, her bangles making a pretty jingling noise in response. “I should have thought of it sooner.”

He reached into his back pocket and removed a slimline wallet, really more of a credit card holder, and slid a black Amex across the counter. She didn't know much about such things, but the card was somewhat legendary and only served to confirm her first evaluation of the man as extremely wealthy.

“Thanks.” She ran her finger over the black lettering then transcribed his name into the book with care: A L E S S I O C A V A L C A N T E. A moment later, she'd swiped the card and charged the room holding fee, and she returned it to find his dark black eyes resting on her face. A shiver, but one of warmth, ran the length of her spine.

“What *is* your normal job?”

“Oh,” she looked down at her apron, her cheeks dimpling as she smiled. “I'm the chef.”

A thick, dark brow shot up. “Really?”

“Do you always sound so sceptical or is there a reason you find that hard to believe?”

His laugh was a hoarse, deep sound that reverberated around the walls of the pub and filled it with more warmth than even the Christmas lights.

“It was not scepticism so much as gratitude.”

“Oh?” She drawled, her own voice sounding rich with disbelief.

“I have not eaten since—at least lunch time.”

“Good heavens. Ten hours? How will you survive?” She couldn’t help teasing.

The corner of his mouth quirked in a surprising show of amusement, just enough to make her tummy do a strange zipping thing. “It’s impossible to say, and I can’t imagine you’d want my death on your hands, would you—?”

He let the question hang in the air just long enough for the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end. He was only asking for her name, it wasn’t a big deal, yet some sixth sense was warning Charlotte to take care, to be wary with this man. Not because he posed any danger but because he was making her aware of feelings, she’d thought dead and buried.

Since taking custody of Dash, Charlotte had ceased to think of herself as a woman and had instead been all about her little nephew. She had to be. While Maggie’s parents had allowed Charlotte to proceed unchallenged as Dash’s custodian, they’d made it all too apparent that they were watching her like a hawk. They expected Dash to be her priority and certainly didn’t want random men filtering through his life. Nor did Charlotte, but just knowing her private life was under such scrutiny made it impossible to contemplate dating—she wouldn’t risk doing anything to jeopardise her custody of Dash.

“Charlie,” she provided belatedly.

His brow, thick and dark, lifted up a little. “Charlie?”

“Charlotte,” she waved a hand in the air. “But no one calls me that.”

Those same lips that had quirked upwards a moment ago tugged downwards now, showing his contemplation. She blinked away, surprised by how mesmerising she found him. Such a sinkhole! As though he had a gravitational pull all of his own.

“Anyway,” she paused, halfway to forgetting what she was saying.

“Alessio,” he provided, as though she could have forgotten his name.

“Right.” She played along, sliding his card back quickly, and jamming her hands into the pockets of her apron.

“Food?” He prompted.

The kitchen was long past closed, but it was not in Charlotte’s nature to turn away anyone who was hungry. With an unintended look of chagrin, she nodded once.

“I can fix you something quickly. Is there anything you don’t eat?”

His eyes sparked with hers, amusement in their depths, as he shook his head. “I’m Italian.”

“But also very fashionable, so for all I know, you’re a card-holding member of the vegan society.”

He laughed properly then, a rich, deep sound that made her freeze to the spot, her eyes wide, locked to his face in that moment of amusement.

“I assure you, I have never had tofu in my life.”

“Well, that’s not something to boast about,” she responded quickly. “Tofu is an excellent addition to many dishes.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He was back to normal. Not laughing, but looking at her with eyes that seemed to follow her more closely than she knew was possible.

“Wait here,” she instructed, knowing she needed the breathing space of the kitchen, the familiarity of the

furnishings and equipment in there. As if she doubted him, Charlotte cast a last glance over her shoulder before disappearing through the wide doors and flicking on a light. Alessio stayed at the bar; good. Her own tummy gave a little twist of hunger. Usually, Charlotte would have made herself something light at the end of the shift but being short-staffed, she hadn't got around to it. Her plan had been to have an egg on toast up in her apartment, but now that she was here...

She chose one of the quickest things she could think of—ravioli—bringing a pot of water to the boil as she heated up some butter and sage then tossed in sliced mushrooms until they were glistening and soft, flicked off the frying pan and added her homemade ravioli to the water. Cooking it for only a few moments, she used a slotted spoon to remove the little parcels, adding them to the buttery mushrooms and tossing them gently before seasoning with a little salt and pepper, a dash of cream and some more sage.

Her stomach gave an appreciative growl as she reached for two bowls and dished up the pasta, before adding a few lashings of Parmesan cheese to the top and carrying them out to the bar. He was reading something on his phone, a frown on his face, so she paused, wondering if she was intruding, then told herself he was the one who'd shown up in the middle of the night—practically—demanding food and a bed!

“Dinner is served.”

He lifted his face in her direction, his expression momentarily lost, as though he hadn't realised where he was, then, he was himself again, commanding and enigmatic.

“Thank you.”

Strangely, though it was normal, she hadn't expected the small civility from him.

“Where shall we sit?” He asked, gesturing to the empty room.

“We?”

“You have two bowls.”

“Right.” Her teeth pressed into her lower lip, and she cursed herself for grabbing both on autopilot. She’d intended to eat her own dinner in the kitchen. “I don’t usually join guests.”

He pulled a face. “Is there some rule against pub staff fraternising with hotel guests?” He said with a hint of mockery. “Like doctors not being able to date their patients?”

He was mocking her, but that didn’t change the impact of his words, the idea of *dating* this man. Any man, but particularly *him*. She felt her skin lift in a thousand goosebumps and looked away quickly, swallowing past a lump in her throat.

“Do you want company?” She asked, thinking that surely, he’d prefer to sit quietly or scroll his phone.

“Actually, yes. I do. Oblige me.”

Oblige me. The goosebumps had goosebump babies, all over her body and her heart began to rabbit fast and hard in her chest. “Oh.” She was about to gesture to one of the tables in the middle of the space, but he moved to the window booth and pressed his hand to the top.

“Here will do.”

“Right.” She carried the plates and forks to the table and placed them down, but it was impossible to do so without getting way too close to him, so she breathed in that addictive fragrance of his once more and felt a thousand blades of something unfamiliar but urgent pressing to her belly. Alarmed by the strength of that unknown response, she placed down the bowls and took a quick step backwards.

“Would you like something to drink?”

He glanced at the meal. “I’ll have a wine.”

“Red?”

He nodded once.

She moved back to the bar, grateful for the reprieve, though it was only momentary. He moved with her. “How long have you been working here?”

Of their own volition, his eyes strayed to the pictures pinned behind the bar, the signs of many happy nights, happy guests. Charlotte spared the pictures a glance before reaching for an open bottle of Shiraz and pouring two glasses—her own just a few sips to accompany the meal.

“It was three years in August.” Her heart gave a little pang as she remembered that awful time. The death of her brother and his wife, Michael and Maggie such wonderful parents to little Dashiell, and the only family she had. The madness that followed, of trying to work out how she could raise a child in her tiny room in Putney, on her pittance of a salary.

“My best friend grew up out here. She’s friends with the family that owns the place and put in a good word for me. I needed...for personal reasons, I needed to get out of London.”

She grimaced. “Sorry. You didn’t ask for my life story...”

“But I am willing to hear it regardless,” he said with a dip of his head, reaching across to lift both wine glasses and carry them to the table.

“It’s not a particularly interesting story, anyway,” she said with a small smile, feeling the heat of his gaze as she moved to the table. He watched her in a way that heated her skin, and he waited for her to sit down before he slid into the space opposite her, his frame too large for the ancient timber booth.

“This smells good.”

“It’s just ravioli,” she dismissed, but with a hint of pride because she *knew* it was good. She’d perfected the recipe the first year she’d come to work at the pub, and it was now pretty famous in the district.

He pressed a fork into one of the pillows and Charlotte sat there, inexplicably nervous despite the dish’s renown, watching and waiting as he took his first bite, only exhaling when he made a small noise of appreciation and immediately stabbed another pillow.

“It’s very good.”

She smiled, pleased with his praise even when she knew it to be true. “Winnie, who owns the pub, she used to live in Italy

and is incredibly fussy about the kinds of pasta we're allowed to serve. She deploras bad Italian, so everything must pass her taste test before it goes on the menu."

He was busy devouring ravioli, as though he hadn't eaten in days, not hours, but even then, she had the sense he was keeping his eyes averted from her on purpose, as though the way he gripped his fork was unnaturally tight. She frowned, dismissing the instincts, lifting some of the pasta into her mouth and relaxing as the warmth and flavours hit her stomach. Delicious.

"The Cotswolds has an amazing selection of produce. I'm spoiled for choice. The mushrooms are all grown locally. When it's off season, I use dried, which takes a little manipulation, but creates a different, nuttier version of the meal."

He reached for his wine, sipping it, and now his eyes found hers with the full force of his curiosity. She found it hard to hold his gaze, but impossible to look away.

"You're passionate about food." It was a statement, said in that spiced accent of his, that made her insides leap with a strange, unfamiliar recognition.

"Yes." She scooped some pasta into her mouth. "I always have been."

He waited for her to continue.

"My mother died when I was a twelve. Dad was..." she searched for words, a sense of loyalty making it hard to be completely honest about her father's failings. "Not particularly domesticated *before* mum died, but afterwards," Charlotte lifted her shoulders. "He was lost. My brother wasn't much better—Michael was a scientist and had his head in a book and his brain in the clouds a lot of the time. Which left me," she said with a flippant note that she hoped would hide the layers and layers of hurt she'd felt over time.

"And so you learned to cook?"

"I'd always cooked. With mum." Damn it! Despite her best intentions, tears formed on her lashes. She blinked away

quickly. “But the responsibility of it became mine.”

“You didn’t mind?”

She shook her head quickly, furtively wiping at one eye. “I loved it. It gave me something to do, something to focus on. A sense of purpose in the midst of the most devastating loss...” her words trailed off into nothing as she saw her mother as viscerally as if she were sitting right there with them.

“And then, I discovered, I was quite good at it,” she said with no false modesty—she had no time for it. “I got a part time job in a restaurant, Michelin-starred. It was a wonderful experience. I knew that I never wanted to do anything else.”

“A Michelin-starred restaurant in London is a long way from a place like this,” he said with a probing look. His bowl was empty, hers almost full still. She made a more concerted effort to catch up.

“True,” she was too busy moving food to her mouth to answer beyond that.

“Do you miss it?”

“London?”

He nodded. “And the commotion of a bigger kitchen.”

She lifted the last parcel of pasta to her mouth, savouring it before responding. “Yes. If there were only me to consider, I don’t think I’d have left.”

“But there’s someone else?” He probed, his eyes guarded.

“My—,” her throat thickened, the unexpected assault of emotions making it hard to speak.

He waited, sipping his wine, watching her from his seat across the booth, with an intelligently assessing look that would have taken her breath away if she’d had any brain space left to notice it.

“Nephew,” she finished softly. “He’s eight.”

Alessio frowned.

“I’m his guardian.”

Something softened Alessio's eyes a moment. "How old are you?"

The change of subject surprised her.

"You are young, to have the care of a child," he observed thoughtfully.

"I'm old enough," she tilted her chin in unknowing defiance. The same charge had been levelled at a twenty-one-year-old Charlotte, when Michael and Maggie's will had been read out, their custody arrangements expressed to Maggie's devastated parents. *How can you possibly care for a child? You are a child!* From that moment on, every decision she made had come down to this: being the best guardian she could possibly be for the little boy she loved more than anyone on earth and proving the doubters wrong. She knew Maggie's parents were there, waiting in the wings, desperate to claim custody of Dash if they felt Charlotte put a foot even halfway to wrong.

"Of course." He drank his wine, eyes resting on her face.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She couldn't help asking after a beat. "It's..."

He lifted a brow.

"Unnerving."

"Is it?"

"A little," she conceded, thinking of the dozens of other words she could have used. Like tempting and sexy and seductive...

"I didn't mean to unnerve you. I simply find you quite... fascinating to observe."

Heat flushed her cheeks. "Fascinating? I don't know how I'm meant to feel about that."

"It's a compliment."

"Then, thank you, I guess?"

He grinned, the expression changing his face completely, so she stared right back at him, mesmerised, devouring his

face with her eyes. Her response terrified her. She stood abruptly, the room lacking enough air for Charlotte to be able to breathe properly.

“Anyway,” her voice cracked. “I should get your room ready.”

He continued to watch her, all the way to the wide door that led from the restaurant.

She turned almost against her will, casting a quick glance over her shoulder as she left, finding his eyes resting on her, and her pulse shot up accordingly.

Heaven help her, he was truly, devastatingly handsome.

CHAPTER 2

THERE WAS NOTHING ALESSIO liked about coming here. Nothing he liked, nothing he appreciated, nothing he savoured. In fact, he hated it.

This village, this pub, the prospect of seeing his mother and half-brother. It filled Alessio with a sense of ice, a feeling of disdain and disgust in equal measure, and something more complex, something harder to comprehend, so he ignored those emotions and focussed on the ones he could easily untangle.

His mother had walked out on him decades ago. She'd chosen her new husband, her new son, her new life. She'd discarded Alessio, never once attempting to bring him here, never once lifting a finger to fight for him.

She left him.

And on the few occasions he'd visited, he'd only been reminded of those feelings, never mind how much time had passed. Suddenly, he was not a grown man—one of the wealthiest in Europe, and CEO of an enormous corporation known the world over—but a child again, desperately missing his mother, wondering when she would be home and finally coming to understand that she really wasn't coming back.

Ever.

And she hadn't.

This pub of hers...he looked around with eyes that were as hard as stone. Everywhere he looked, he was reminded of his mother and her new life. He felt her presence even when she

was miles away, in her country manor, the house she'd invited Alessio to come and stay at over Christmas.

It's been too long, darling. I know you usually spend the holidays with your father, but now that he's...

Dead.

Alessio's eyes closed against that, harshly rejecting the reality of a life without Alessio Senior, the man who had shaped Alessio in so many ways.

We'd love to see you.

We.

He'd rejected her suggestion immediately before remembering the deathbed promise he'd made his father—foolishly, because he was bound to it now, to at least make some effort with the woman who'd rejected him as a young boy.

Against his better judgement, he'd come, but he was not relishing the visit.

Or, he hadn't been.

With long, even strides, he crossed to the bar, his eyes fixating on the photos again, particularly those that featured Charlotte and his half-brother, Caleb. All of the dislike he felt for the younger man stirred through him, and seeing him with Charlotte only aggravated him more.

His phone buzzed and he lifted it out of his pocket to read the screen. Another text from his mother.

Darling? Where are you?

He ground his teeth together.

I'm in town. See you tomorrow.

He waited for a reply, but his mother's dots indicated she was typing, deleting, typing and then finally, a simple, *Goodnight*, came through.

He wasn't looking forward to anything about this visit but maybe Charlotte was just the distraction he needed? Maybe

she could take his mind off his father's death, his mother's desertion, and his hatred for the younger half-brother who'd ruined his family? Just maybe, she'd be the Christmas fairy he needed...

X

"YOU LOOK TIRED." Melody Sampson swung her petite five-and-a-half-foot frame onto a stool in the commercial kitchen, propped her elbows on the solid stainless-steel counter and regarded her very best friend in the whole world with all the concentration she could muster at six in the morning. "Like you didn't sleep."

Charlotte's smile was automatic, but she couldn't deny the truth to Mel—she had never been able to.

"But you're baking, so that makes up for it," Melody said impishly, reaching for one of the just finished almond croissants.

"You could at least make me a coffee if you're going to sit there and throw insults at me."

"Did I not just tell you your baking is the work of the gods?"

Charlotte raised her brows then returned to the ingredients she was measuring out for the Christmas plum puddings.

"So? How is my favourite little human in the world?"

Charlotte smiled. "Dash is fine."

"Sleeping okay?"

The little boy had nightmares at first, after his parents' deaths. He'd been inconsolable. It had taken Charlotte time, patience, a lot of sleepless nights and reassurances before he'd finally managed to settle into a better rhythm.

"He's fine," she reiterated, but with a catch in her voice, and crossed fingers, because she *hoped* rather than knew that to be the case.

“Then...?”

“I worked late last night,” Charlotte said, turning towards the door almost guiltily, then startling when a ghost of Alessio’s image, so vivid and real she could have sworn he was standing right there, appeared before her eyes.

“How come?”

“We had a guest arrive. Late.” Her brow furrowed against her will, without her realisation.

“And?”

Charlotte lifted her shoulders, unable to meet her friend’s curious gaze for reasons she couldn’t fathom. “And, I had to make up his room. Cook dinner.”

Melody nodded slowly. “I see.”

Heat flushed Charlotte’s cheeks, the tell-tale blush surely obvious to her friend. But when she lifted her eyes, it was to see Melody munching on the almond croissant, dropping flaky little crumbs all over the counter. Charlotte turned back to the pudding mixture, breathing in the reassuring scent of spices, the connection to her mother warming her soul.

“I know how close you are to Winona and Caleb,” Melody said, thoughtfully. “But they do tend to take advantage of you.”

Charlotte bit down on her lower lip. It was a thought that had occurred to her the night before.

“They are also incredibly generous,” she pointed out. “Letting Dash and me live here...”

“You could afford to get a bigger place, away from here. Then you wouldn’t be on call whenever late-night guests arrive.”

“But I’d have to find a sitter for Dash, and with you about to kick up your heels and leave me for London, or Paris, or whichever job you decide to take—,”

“That’s not decided,” Melody interjected quickly. “And Madrid is the front runner.”

“Madrid? Tell me more.”

“Later. You’re changing the subject.”

“No, I’m not. There’s just nothing more to discuss. I know I end up doing more for the pub than my role— strictly speaking—entails, but there’s a lot of give and take. When Dash is sick, they’re the most understanding employers in the world, and I love that I don’t ever have to leave him. Plus, he gets to help out in the kitchen and with clearing tables. He’s close to me, always. It’s...important.”

Melody’s expression showed sympathy. “You’re doing such a great job with him, Charlie. Michael would be proud of you.”

Charlotte’s smile was watery, but she didn’t get a chance to reply. A moment later, an accented voice wafted into the kitchen with as much pungent deliciousness as the pastries spread out on the airing racks between them.

“Carlotta?”

Melody’s pale brown eyes widened as she mouthed silently, ‘*Carlotta?*’

“Um, just a moment!” Charlotte almost upended the pudding mixture in her haste to wipe her hands down the front of her apron.

“Carlotta?” Melody repeated with a speculative glint changing her eyes to a darker shade.

“He’s Italian,” she muttered, wondering if any of the totally illicit dreams she’d enjoyed overnight were apparent, just by looking at her. Probably, to Melody.

“Obviously. And?”

“And nothing,” Charlotte shoved her apron onto the counter then moved to the doors of the kitchen, shooting Melody a warning look before pushing one open—and barging right into Alessio.

“Oh, bloody hell, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you were right there.”

He rubbed his elbow with a look of amusement that turned her bones to puddles. “*Evidentemente.*”

“Right.” She had no choice but to take a step backwards into the kitchen; Alessio followed, and suddenly, Charlotte felt incredibly self-conscious, to have this man, and her best friend, in the same small space, despite the fact she had no earthly reason to feel that way. But the truth was, while Charlotte slept, her brain had done all sorts of things to the image of Alessio, turning him from a stranger into something else entirely, removing his clothes with artful finesse, allowing her to dream-marvel at his broad, naked chest, his even, golden tan, until dream Charlotte was salivating. And now she had the sound of her name, Italianised, to pepper through her next set of fantasies.

Great.

“Hello there,” Melody purred, standing and wiping almond croissant flakes off her chest.

“*Ciao,*” Alessio glanced at Melody, then back to Charlotte. “Do you always start work so early?”

“Yes,” Charlotte agreed, moving back to her spot in the kitchen simply because it put enough space between herself and the other two to feel somewhat safe. Except desire, as it turned out, was airborne, and now that Alessio was breathing the same air as her, she felt very much at risk of catching fire.

She had to get control of this.

There was a reason she’d consistently rebuffed Caleb’s overtures. Actually, there were several, starting with her only enjoying his company as a friend, progressing to the fact he was her boss and her role here was too comfortable to jeopardise, and finishing with the most important fact of all: she couldn’t do anything to destabilise Dashiell’s life. She had decided from the moment she’d taken custody that she wouldn’t date. She wouldn’t let anyone burst into the bubble she’d created for the two of them, and sadly, that meant that no matter how vivid her fantasies were, they had to remain exactly that: fantasies.

“She’s a total workaholic,” Melody explained, moving towards Alessio.

Alessio’s frown etched lines in his face that Charlotte wanted to trace with her fingertip. She shoved her hands in her pockets to blot that temptation from becoming reality.

“It fits my schedule,” she explained away quickly. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Coffee,” he confirmed with a nod. “I presume that machine out there isn’t purely ornamental?”

“No,” she agreed. “It’s still early.”

“Yes?”

“I just meant...why are you awake?”

“I always wake up early. Like you, I prefer to get a jump on my work.”

“Ah. Which is,” Melody interjected, coming to the rescue of Charlotte, who was finding it almost impossible to form sensible thoughts. “Let me guess. Banking?”

Alessio gave Melody the full force of his attention which was even more disastrous for Charlotte, who could now study him unobserved.

“No.”

“Hmm. But something in finance?”

“Finance is involved in my job.”

Melody tilted her head to the side and Charlotte felt a pang of envy for her best friend then, who was beautiful, graceful, and oh so confident with men. Whereas Charlotte had never felt particularly good at flirting.

“You’re an estate agent?”

Charlotte couldn’t help the little laugh that escaped.

He turned back to her with a quirk of his lips. “You don’t think I could sell houses?”

“Oh, I think you could sell ice to Eskimos, actually,” she corrected, looking away quickly when she realised what that

admission sounded like. “Anyway. I’ll go switch on the machine. It takes a while to boot up, so don’t feel you have to wait around. I can bring the coffee to you.”

She skipped from the room without waiting for a response, and a minute later, was joined by Melody. Or rather, passed by Melody, who was making a beeline for the front door of the pub.

“You’re going?” Charlotte pleaded to her best friend’s retreating back.

“Oh, yeah,” Melody winked over her shoulder. “I’m going to finish my run. You’d better believe I’ll call you later.” Heat stained Charlotte’s cheeks as the front door slammed shut and a moment later, Melody’s slim figure buzzed past the window.

And then, he was there, filling the space of the bar as he had the night before.

“How do you take your coffee?” She asked, though the machine was several minutes off ready.

“In the morning? Black with a dash of steamed milk.”

“But only the morning?”

“Only the morning.”

She had heard that about Italians—the milky, frothy drinks were only for sometimes, not to be enjoyed at all hours of the day.

“What brings you to Morincester?”

“Why do you think it’s anything specific?”

She tilted her head to the side. “Just a hunch.”

“Your hunch is correct. I have family locally.”

“You’re visiting them for the holidays?”

His lips tightened into something like a grimace before he concealed it. “Yes.”

Charlotte flicked a switch on the machine to test its readiness, but the steam was still building. “You’re not looking forward to it?”

“Why do you say that?”

“You look a bit like I feel whenever I have a dentist appointment.”

He laughed then, a short sound that filled the bar with delicious warmth. Charlotte flicked on the coffee grinder abruptly, glad for the noise to drown out the addictive sound of his voice.

“You’re very perceptive,” he said, when she stopped grinding the beans, propping his elbows on the bar top and leaning forward, so that they were closer than she realised, closer than she wanted, even when her body was throbbing with a strange and unfamiliar awareness.

“Maybe you’re just easy to read.”

“We both know that’s not the case.”

“You seem to know a lot about how I feel.”

“You *are* easy to read,” he said quietly, eyes running over her face, so her skin pricked with goosebumps and fear lurched inside of her. Was that true? She didn’t want him to be able to see her as she was. She had no business drooling over a guest in the hotel.

“When are you checking out?” She asked quickly, not meeting his eyes because the question was so obviously rude—and hopeful.

“Not for several days.”

Several days! Her insides clanged together. “You’re not staying with your family?”

“No.”

“They don’t have space for you?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not necessarily.”

“You’re welcome to go back to your room and wait for your coffee,” she reminded him with an overly sweet voice. “If

you don't like my questions, I mean."

"I don't dislike them. Some are not so easy to answer."

"Really?"

"The situation with my family is complicated. I prefer not to discuss it."

She exhaled slowly, wondering why that should pull at something in her belly.

"We can talk about you instead, if you'd like," she suggested, surprised that she'd even thought the words, much less said them. It wasn't in her nature to be so forthright. For a moment, Charlotte felt the pull of her old life, her old self, the woman she'd been when the world was at her feet and she had to think only of herself and her wishes and her needs, and responsibility, permanence and consequences were nowhere on her horizon. It had been liberating and emboldening. The truth was, everything felt hemmed in by consequence now. She was aware, always, of what was at stake if she were to mess up, and so she *never* messed up, which meant thinking of what she was saying before she said it, most of the time.

"I am prepared to sing for my supper, or coffee, as the case may be."

She smiled at that. "Excellent." The machine gave a fizzing noise as steam began to escape from the nozzle, so she quickly flicked it off and began to go through the very familiar motions—filling the basket with freshly ground coffee so the air hung with the fragrance, then gently tamping it down to flatten the top. She hooked it into the machine, placed two cups beneath, and began to run water through it as she filled a milk jug.

"Does your friend work here also?"

"Mel?"

"I didn't catch her name."

"No, Mel's like you—just up here visiting family for the holidays. She's taking a slightly longer break though, as she

recently left her job and is taking her time before deciding what to do next.”

“Ah.”

“She’s incredibly clever, and is being headhunted by about a dozen firms,” Charlotte supplied with pride. He hadn’t asked but since when did that get between a best friend and her right to brag?

“What does she do?”

“She’s an executive assistant. The kind who works for Prime Ministers and Kings and billionaire CEOs who need their life organised to a tee. She is fastidious, meticulous, smart, versatile, speaks about seven languages, and dedicates herself three thousand percent to any job she has. Which is why she’s taking time to make sure it’s the right fit. If you’re going to make your job your life, you want to make sure it’s worth it, yeah?”

“Makes sense.”

“And you speak from experience?” She prompted, flicking off the steamer once it started to scream, banging the bottom of the jug gently on the countertop before angling one of the cups and letting the milk pour in, leaving a beautiful pattern in the top of the crema.

“I was fortunate to find what I love to do.”

“Which is?”

“The family business.”

Charlotte repeated the milk pour with the other coffee, then added a drift of chocolate to hers before handing Alessio’s over the bar.

“Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“I’ve just made a batch of pastries, but I’m happy to cook you something if you’d prefer—,”

“Something light would be fine.”

“Great. Did you want to take a seat—,”

“There’s one in the kitchen,” he said with a challenge in his eyes, so her pulse speeded up and she spun away before he could see the pink of her cheeks.

Holding her coffee in both hands, she shouldered through the kitchen door, keeping it open with one foot as he followed.

There had been no other guest, in the whole time she’d worked at the pub, who’d had this kind of access to the kitchen. None who’d acted as though this were a social visit rather than a paid hotel stay. Despite it being unusual, she really didn’t mind at all.

He stood opposite her, right beside the seat Melody had recently occupied and Charlotte’s eyes lifted to the clock above the door. Dash would be asleep for another hour or so, there was no need for her to rush.

“You’re sure you wouldn’t like something cooked?”

“These look great.”

She glowed with warmth.

“I love pastries,” she admitted. “They’re not really my specialty, but I can’t resist making a big batch whenever I can. I freeze them, so we’ve got them on hand for guests as needed. They reheat really well...” she realised she was babbling and stopped speaking immediately. “But we’re supposed to be talking about you.”

He sipped his coffee then reached for a croissant. On autopilot, she fished a plate from behind her and handed it to him.

“Are we?”

“You’re singing for your supper, remember?”

“So I am.”

“So?”

“You would just like me to monologue?”

“Why not?”

“Where should I start? As a three-year-old, I broke my arm, whilst riding my bike. It was...”

She laughed. “I’m sorry, that’s not funny.”

“Actually, the way my father tells the story, it is. I was *outraged* at the bike for failing me. I had considered us to be such good friends.”

“The betrayal,” she said with a tone of mock surprise.

“That is how it seemed to me. I can still recall my anger, in fact.”

“Even though you were so young?”

“Strong emotions stay with us, I think.”

Charlotte’s eyes dropped to the pudding mix and she frowned. “Do you think so?”

“You disagree?”

“I suppose I hadn’t thought about it.”

“You are thinking of your little ward?”

“Yes,” surprise at his perceptiveness made her eyes wide.

“Worrying about him?”

“His parents died suddenly.” She bit on her lower lip. “It was traumatic.”

“For everyone.”

“Yes.”

He finished his coffee, placing his cup to the side. “Life is unpredictable. It is a shame he had to learn this at such a young age, but perhaps it will make him stronger, protected a little, against the pain of future loss.”

She blinked across at him, the pragmatic approach one she hadn’t really considered.

“Maybe.”

“You cannot change what happened.”

“I know that.”

“But you worry about him.”

“It’s normal.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“I take it you don’t have kids?” She asked, wondering why she was putting so much emphasis on his response.

“*Cristo*, no.”

She finished her own coffee, replacing the cup gently. “Not on your radar?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He regarded her through steady eyes that might have been intimidating if he were less...familiar to her. Crazy, when they’d just met, and he’d be leaving the hotel in a matter of days.

“I’ve always known I didn’t want to be a father.”

She tilted her head to the side.

“You find that strange?”

“It’s exactly what I would have said, before...” She shook her head. “Actually, that’s not quite right. I didn’t think I didn’t want kids, but I just didn’t consider it.”

“You probably hadn’t reached the point of needing to.”

“But you did?”

“No.”

“So how old were you, when you had this reckoning?”

“A reckoning makes it sound as though I angsted over it. I didn’t. There were certain things I knew weren’t for me. Playing happy family was definitely one of them.”

“Sometimes, fate can throw you a curve ball, you know. In my experience, it’s better to be prepared for anything.”

“Good advice, but I don’t expect anyone would be stupid enough to nominate me as legal guardian for their child.”

She laughed despite herself. “You have such little faith in your abilities as a parent?”

“My inclination. I’d be a terrible father figure because I have no interest in it.”

“I guess it’s good that you’re so honest with yourself.”

He grinned and her heart tied itself in knots. She forced herself to focus on the job she should have completed much earlier than this, crouching down to remove the pudding pots from the back of the cupboard. She wiped them inside and moved back to the pudding bowl.

“But when it happened...” she swallowed past a lump in her throat. “All of my doubts went straight out the window. I knew I had to look after him.”

“Was there anyone else?”

“My sister-in-law’s parents. They would have loved—they would still love—to raise Dashiell. But Michael and Maggie—that’s my brother and his wife—they were explicit in their will.”

“Did they ask you about it beforehand?”

“Actually, yes,” she bit down on her lower lip, carefully pouring the pudding mixture into the bowls evenly. “But I was only nineteen when they had it drawn up, and it seemed impossible to contemplate a time when they would both...not be here.” Her face paled as shards of memory speared her out of nowhere. “No one really plans for the worst and expects it to happen.”

“No, perhaps not.”

“ANYWAY.” She poured water into the side of a deep dish and placed the pudding bowls inside. “These need to go in the oven now and I should be getting back to Dash. Do you need anything else?”

He was watching her, frowning, and her heart gave a strange little kick. Confused, she picked up the large container—heavier than she realised—carrying it towards the stoves,

one of which she had preheating. But with the dish in her hands, and the oven closed, she needed to get creative and was midway to resting the basin on the edge of the bench when he moved quickly.

“Allow me.”

He anticipated her need, opening the oven door then staying right where he was, oh so close to her. Heat blossomed into the kitchen, from the oven, for sure, but also, from Alessio to Charlotte, so she felt gooey and warm all over and barely able to concentrate.

“Do you want me to do it?”

“Do what?”

“Put that in the oven?”

“Oh!” She swore softly, squeezed her eyes shut then blinked up at him. He was so close that she could see all the little flecks of grey in eyes that were otherwise a shimmering black. Her knees almost gave way. “No, I’ve got it.”

With fingers that felt oddly clumsy and disconnected from her body, she lifted the basin and slid it with care into the oven. Alessio closed the door, but neither moved. The warmth from the oven brushed Charlotte’s legs but it was a sensation she was barely aware of.

He stared at her as though he was looking for something in her face, as though he could see right through her, to all the little prisms that formed her whole soul, and she stared back: lost, powerless to move, quite literally enthralled by everything about this man in this moment. From his eyes to his lips to his closeness and smell, his hair mussed by sleep, his five o’clock shadow that made her palms tingle with the temptation to feel the roughness beneath her skin, his air of masculinity that engulfed her and wrapped around her and made it hard to think straight, so she was dumbfounded and silent, except for the rough little breaths that burst from her.

“Usually when I share coffee with a woman, it’s after sharing a bed together first,” he said quietly, so close now she

felt his breath against her temple. Her pulse gave a strange tremble.

He was being deliberately provocative, and somehow, she liked it. It was...intimate and personal.

“Do you do that a lot?”

“Coffee or sex?”

Her throat felt constricted. “Either.”

“Daily for the coffee. Sex, not quite so much.”

“But still often?”

He made a deep, guttural growling noise of agreement. “It’s a good form of exercise.”

“And here I opt for running.”

“That works, but it’s considerably less fun.”

A strange sense of unreality unfolded around Charlotte. Were they really having this conversation?

“I’m not—,” she searched for something to say. “Dash is my life,” she finished after a beat. “I don’t—,”

He lifted a finger and pressed it to her lips. “I’m only staying for Christmas.” His accent was heavier, or perhaps she simply heard it more clearly now, as every single part of her was focussed on him. “I have no interest in...stealing your focus. Not much of it, anyway.”

Oh, how Charlotte wished she understood men better. Was he saying, was he suggesting, some kind of short-term fling? Melody would know exactly what he meant, and how Charlotte should respond. For her own part, she was flying blind.

He leaned down, closing the gap between them, his eyes probing hers, and then, his lips brushed hers, lightly, teasingly, and oh so quickly, she barely had time to moan and lean into him before he’d pulled away and stepped backwards, putting at least an oven’s width between them. “Think about it, Carlotta,” he murmured, then smiled, slowly, teasingly, but in

a way that didn't reach his eyes—which burned, absolutely burned, with desire and promise.

Her breath snatched in her throat, and she nodded—what else could she do? She would think of nothing else...

CHAPTER 3

“BIGGER. BIGGER. KEEP GOING.” Across the bar, Caleb watched as Charlotte poured a glass of red wine, a sceptical expression on his face. “Seriously, don’t stop,” he said, then reached for the wine and took a gulp.

“What’s going on?” She murmured, pouring herself a small glass then taking the seat beside him. Charlotte’s workday was finished, and the kitchen was now in the excellent hands of her team, who worked like a well-oiled machine, leaving her free to finally sit down for the first time all day. She sipped her own wine and her whole mouth buzzed, remembering the sensation of Alessio’s lips as they’d brushed hers.

He’d been out all day.

Not that she’d been looking for him, of course, but in a small hotel like this, it was pretty standard to know when guests came and went, and he’d left shortly after breakfast. She’d busied herself with taking Dash to school, then her work shift, bringing Dash home and settling him with some schoolwork and dinner, and was just now having a quick catch up with Caleb before throwing herself into an evening of Jurassic Park and pasta.

“You don’t want to know. Tell me about your day?”

She stared at Caleb and wondered at the sense of guilt that flooded her. Betrayal. Because even though they were ‘just friends’, she knew—as did everyone in town—how Caleb felt about her, and the very idea of having let someone else kiss

her, of having wanted them to do a whole lot *more* than kiss her, made her feel as awkward as anything. But she'd never given Caleb false hope. She'd been bluntly honest with him, in fact, about her priorities and lack of availability.

They really were 'just friends' now, and she was almost sure he'd given up hope of anything more happening with her.

"Nothing to tell," she said quickly, her voice sounding false even to her own ears. "Dash got a headmaster's award."

"Bless. Good on him. What for?"

"Picking up litter, I believe."

"He's such a good boy."

"I know." Pride made her heart swell. "Your day?"

He drank half of the wine then placed the glass down heavily. "I told you my half-brother is coming for Christmas?"

"That's Winnie's son from a previous marriage?"

"Right."

"You hate the guy," she said with a nod, remembering previous conversations from over the years. "Alex, right?"

"Yes. He's such an arrogant shit, and the way he treats her...he's truly vile. I hate that she cares."

"He's her son," Charlotte pointed out. "I don't think she has the option."

"He might be her son, but he treats her like dirt. It's as though he's here only to torment her. And that just makes her try harder, because she's so desperate to fix whatever's broken between them. As for how he is with me—,"

"No one could hate you," she said, nudging him with her shoulder.

"Oh, he's too cold to really hate anyone. You need to have a heart to hate, right?"

She nodded, silently encouraging Caleb to get it off his chest because she could tell he simply needed to vent.

“This guy is—unbelievable. He hasn’t seen her in over a year, even when she went to Rome especially for his birthday, he made a point of going to Sydney with his girlfriend—some supermodel or other. It’s *always* a supermodel,” Caleb added with bitterness. “Mum arrived, so nervous and excited, and he just didn’t show.”

“I remember her trip,” Charlotte said quietly, because Winona had returned downcast but not speaking about it at all. “That’s awful.”

“He’s awful. I know he’s only here for a week, but God help me, it’s going to be a long week. I suppose I should just be grateful he’s not staying with mum.”

Something prickled on the back of Charlotte’s neck. A moment of realisation that happened at the exact same time she had a sixth sense she was being watched. Her thoughts scrambled into order, as the dots connected one after the other in rapid succession, and she turned her head over her shoulder, with the appearance of casual disinterest, scanning the near empty bar to find Alessio standing with one arm propped on the counter, his eyes locked to Charlotte with a possessive heat that unspooled in her belly.

“Speak of the prick,” Caleb muttered, so all the little dots that had been forming inside Charlotte’s mind became one huge, distracted red flag.

“You said his name is Alex?”

“Yes. Alessio, technically, but mum calls him Alex. I call him asshole.”

Charlotte’s stomach dropped to her toes, and she turned back to Caleb quickly, her pulse in overdrive now as the sense of betrayal grew.

She drank her wine then replaced the glass.

“Just pray he doesn’t come over.”

Charlotte’s pulse spiked.

“I should get back to Dash. I told him I’d only be twenty minutes.”

“Come have dinner with me tonight,” Caleb suggested, putting his hand on Charlotte’s knee beneath the table, the gesture one of friendship.

“I can’t,” she said, breathlessly. “I promised Dash a movie and his favourite pasta.”

“I could join you?”

Her heart squeezed. Any other time, she’d have probably agreed. They loved hanging out with Caleb. But right now, she felt like she’d unwittingly walked into something way bigger than she knew how to handle.

“Not tonight,” she said with a shake of her head. “You’ve got to help out down here and I’m beat.” She offered Caleb a smile, but it was tight and awkward because she knew they were being watched. She felt Alessio’s gaze on her, hot and possessive, and every cell inside her body began to quiver and reverberate. Suddenly, the kiss, the missive to ‘think about it’ took on a whole new level of complexity.

She stood, grabbing both of their now empty wine glasses on auto pilot. “I’ll see you later,” she said, barely looking at Caleb, before turning her back and moving towards the bar—but the other end from Alessio. As far from him as she could get, in fact. A few locals engaged her in conversation, and she responded automatically, placing the wine glasses in the washer. But there was no way to exit the bar without passing him.

There was nothing for it.

She breezed past him without looking even once in his direction.

She couldn’t.

She wouldn’t. She needed to take a moment to unravel how she was feeling, and the mess she’d unwittingly walked right into.

“NO, IT’S DEFINITELY BEDTIME,” she said with a laugh, as Dash loaded up the second Jurassic Park movie and pressed

his palms together in a gesture of hopeful prayer.

“But...Jeff Goldblum. You know he’s your favourite.”

Charlotte nodded. “He is, and with good reason, but it’s late and my little headmaster award recipient needs a good night’s sleep.”

“Half an hour?”

“No,” she said, softening the demurral with a kiss on Dash’s forehead. “There has been pasta, a movie, ice cream and if you shower quickly, we’ll read a book together. Deal?”

He considered that. “But I get to choose?”

“Yes, of course.”

“O-Kay,” he said with an exaggerated sigh, then grinned, his green eyes—so like his mother’s—sparkling as they met hers. “I suppose I can’t complain.”

“Damn straight.”

“Charlie!” He pressed a hand to his mouth, and she lifted her shoulders.

“That’s a grown-up word, I know, but I am a grown up, so it’s alright. Now, go shower, Mister.”

She waited until the water was running then poured herself a second glass of wine, the pleasant warmth of the earlier glass having evaporated completely the moment she realised the object of her dreams was in fact the much-hated half-brother of one of her dearest friends.

The evening rituals with Dash were some of the best times of Charlotte’s day, but they were also some of the worst, because it was impossible not to be cognisant, as his little body snuggled into hers and grew heavier and heavier as he fell asleep, how much Maggie and Michael were missing.

He’d chosen one of his most beloved books, one that Charlotte knew by heart, so she read it softly, with her eyes on his face rather than the page, and even when he’d drifted off, she kept reciting the words, turning the pages, relishing the moment until finally, it was all done. She kissed his forehead,

stood, and moved to the door of his room. With one last glance at the sleeping boy, she turned off the lights, except for his little bedside lamp, and closed the door with a soft click, smiling to herself as she moved back to the kitchen.

Charlotte wasn't a night owl, but there was a restlessness in her bones, and she couldn't shake it. She felt...more alive than she knew possible, utterly full of energy and adrenaline, like she needed to go for a long run. She couldn't settle to anything—not to a book, nor a TV show, not even to the prospect of trying a new recipe. She felt jumpy, and it didn't take long to understand why.

Alessio.

How come he hadn't told her the truth? It would have been the easiest thing in the world to mention his connection to Caleb and Winnie. She'd spoken of her bosses on multiple occasions, and he'd referred to his family, and the difficulties he had with them? So why not be honest?

Had he intentionally meant to deceive her? Had he enjoyed knowing she was in the dark? And why did that bother her so much?

X

“GOOD MORNING,” his voice was low and deep and unraveled right in her gut, low down, haunting her, teasing her, spreading inside her body like wildfire, so she felt warm from the inside out.

His arrival, though unplanned, wasn't unexpected.

With a mask of polite disinterest on her face, Charlotte looked towards the door of the kitchen.

“Good morning.” Her tone was cool, definitely not inviting further conversation, but he stepped deeper into the kitchen anyway.

“Did you think about it?”

Her stomach swooshed. “About what?” She asked unevenly, with saccharine sweetness.

But it was the wrong thing to say. A moment later, Alessio was right there, beside her, behind the cooktop, eyes holding hers, challenging her, as his body moved closer still and the air in the kitchen evaporated. She held her breath, staring up at him, bewildered and lost, until he dropped his head and this time, when he kissed her, it was not a tentative, gentle promise, but something far more urgent, something that reached right inside her and rearranged the pieces of who Charlotte was.

Having not made out with a guy in a long time surely explained why the kiss shook Charlotte as though a bomb had just detonated. But maybe it was also a little do with his skilled, masterful possession, of the way his lips parted hers and his tongue slid into her mouth, duelling with her tongue, just a little, then retreating, one hand placed possessively on her hip, holding her still and steady when she was beginning to tremble all over.

“Did you think about this?” He asked gruffly, the words pressed into her mouth before he lifted his head and looked down at her, something intense in the depths of his eyes that made her chest hurt.

“No,” she lied, because she’d thought and dreamed of little else. “And that’s—it can’t—I can’t let that happen.”

“Can’t you?” His eyes dropped pointedly to the space between them, and Charlotte realised she was gripping onto his shirt for dear life. And what a shirt! Expensive, starched cotton, buttoned up, he looked perfect and so sexy, and now she’d rumped him. But somehow, that was even better.

Always supermodels.

Caleb’s words spun through her mind, reminding her of the revelations she’d learned yesterday, of her place here in this pub, of Alessio’s tangled relationship with his family—her friends. She swallowed, and forced herself to look away, but her hands wouldn’t move. His chest was so warm beneath her touch, and he smelled so good.

“I didn’t know who you were yesterday,” she said softly.

“I’m a guest in your hotel.”

“No, you’re a guest in your family’s hotel, and obviously there’s a lot of water under the bridge there.” She bit down on her lip. “Caleb and Winnie are friends of mine. Good friends. They’ve been so supportive of Dash and me since we moved here—,”

“While simultaneously extracting more than a pound of flesh, by the looks of it,” he cut in with a voice that was dark and resonant.

“I work long hours, so I have the freedom to be with Dash,” she said. “And that’s none of your business. You said your relationship with your family is something you don’t like to discuss, and I respect that, but if anything were to happen between us, anything *more*,” she added pointedly, “It would be a betrayal of them, and I can’t do it.”

“Are you involved with him?”

“Caleb?” She blinked up at Alessio again and her heart dropped to her toes because she ached to feel his lips on hers. She wanted him so badly it hurt. Having not been intimate with a man in forever, she yearned for that closeness now. It had nothing to do with Alessio and just the feelings he’d reminded her she possessed.

“Yes, Caleb.” He spat his half-brother’s name with derision.

“It’s none of your business.”

Again, he looked down at his shirt front and this time, she did move her hand, dropping it like she’d just been splashed with boiling water, but Alessio’s reactions were just as swift. He caught her hand at their sides and lifted it back between them, to his lips this time, pressing a kiss to her palm while his eyes held hers. She shivered, the pleasure and intimacy sending little trembles through her veins.

“It’s a simple question.”

“Nothing about this is simple.”

“If you are not sleeping with him, then of course it is.”

“He’s my friend.”

“And I’m the big, bad wolf,” Alessio surmised. “Come to blow your house down.” He drew her thumb into his mouth, nipping at the pad of flesh with his teeth so she moaned, swaying forward without realising it.

“Something like that,” she gasped, as he brought his other hand to her back and pulled her against his body, so she felt every inch of him, the hint of his hardness against her belly making her heart run so fast she thought it might crack a rib.

“I told you, I do not like to discuss my family.” He moved her hand, holding it in his, against his chest, as his head moved closer to hers. “But I will tell you this—what I want from you has nothing to do with them.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Why?” She whispered, as he kissed the flesh at the base of her ear, flicking her there with his tongue until she was a puddle of nerves. “Why do you want me?”

“I don’t think I should justify that with an answer.”

She could barely think straight. “I’m serious,” she tilted her head back to give him better access and now his whole body seemed to wrap around hers, one arm behind her back holding her clamped to him, his size so much greater than hers, his ability to kiss her senseless on full display as his lips made their way from Charlotte’s earlobe to her jaw and then to her mouth, his stubble in contrast to the softness of his lips.

She was tumbling out of control, all of the familiar landmarks of her life disappearing under the weight of his skilled touch.

“You are irresistible,” he said, finally. “And I have no interest in trying to resist you, which puts us right here.” He moved his hips, so his arousal pressed to her core, and she gasped, the visceral, desperate need almost tearing her in two. It had been eons since she’d felt and acted like a woman.

“Alessio,” she groaned, trying so hard to grab hold of the threads of sense in her life, to remember who she was, and what mattered to her, but *nothing* mattered quite as much as the way he was making her feel, the promises his body was making that she was desperate to have fulfilled.

“You want this,” he said, his tongue flicking the base of her jaw again as her hands buried into his shirt.

How could she deny it?

“You want to feel me, all of me, to touch me, to know my lips on your body—all of your body—to be naked in my bed with me, don’t you, *cara*?”

Cara. So close to Carlotta but so different.

His words were like fine, silver threads, wrapping around her, tying her in knots, so her good intentions were shattered.

Always a supermodel. It wasn’t the fact he slept with beautiful, glamorous women that made Charlotte fight for a grip on reality, but the fact that he did this kind of thing all the time, and she definitely did *not*, meaning she was so different to what he was used to. How could she possibly compare to the glamorous, sophisticated women he usually slept with? Even before Dashiell, she’d been relatively inexperienced with this stuff.

“I can’t—,”

“Can’t you?” His voice was hoarse, the challenge pulling at her, making reality seem silly and far away.

“I want—,”

“Yes, tell me what you want,” he growled, as his fingers pulled at the bottom of her shirt, freeing it from her jeans so bare skin touched bare skin and she jumped at the unexpected euphoria of that. Sparks of electricity jolted inside her.

“I’m not—you don’t understand—,”

“Do I need to understand?”

Did he? Did it matter that she hadn’t been with a guy in years? That she’d only really had one boyfriend before, and

he'd been as unskilled and clumsy in bed as she had? With a man like Alessio, would that matter?

He was only here for a week—if he even lasted that long, which given the incendiary situation with his family, wasn't a given. What if he left and they hadn't explored this? What if she turned him away and lost the chance, forever, of knowing what this would feel like?

Desire was a fire, licking flames at her feet, pushing her towards wildness and impulsiveness.

“Come to my room,” his words were a command, a statement, a demand and she felt herself succumbing to them, aching to agree, to nod and go with him, but the pressures of a lifetime weren't so easy to forget.

“I can't.” He lifted his head, his eyes boring into hers with a look that turned her stomach and made her heart twist painfully. “I can't *now*,” she muttered, licking her lower lip, as if that could erase the heat from his kiss and return her to her normal self.

“You hide behind the phrase ‘I can't’.”

“I'm not hiding,” she denied, tilting her chin defiantly. “But I have a job to do, and a child I'm raising, and a whole life here that matters to me, that I can't just walk away from because you've waltzed into the kitchens and—and—kissed me until I can't think straight,” she finished with chagrin, blinking away so she didn't see the look of amusement that lightened his handsome face.

“*If* we're going to do this, it has to be in a way that works for me.”

“It will work for you.”

“I don't mean that,” she muttered, her insides swirling with heated anticipation. “You have to respect my boundaries. You're on holiday,” she said, frowning, because that wasn't exactly the right way to describe his reason for visiting. “But this is my life, and I have responsibilities—,”

“Yes,” he agreed quietly, lifting his hand to cup her cheek. “Don't get upset. I like it much better when you're feverish for

a different reason.”

Heat flushed her cheeks.

“Tell me when, then.”

He was respecting her boundaries, just as she’d asked, putting the ball back in her court. She felt a glow of something inside of her, but it was edged out by nerves. Was she really going to do this? And how could she not?

“Dash is sleeping at a friend’s tonight. Why don’t you... come over after I finish work.”

“Tonight?” His eyes roamed her face, and she wondered if he was thinking, as she was, that tonight was about a billion miles away.

“Yes, tonight.” She nodded emphatically, because it was wise to wait, to give them both time to think about this, and change their minds if needed.

“Tell me a time, and I’ll be there.”

BUT AS THE time drew nearer, Charlotte angsted back and forth about their agreement, for a thousand reasons. Loyalty to Caleb and Winnie, the feeling she was in the middle of something she shouldn’t be, and her own inexperience with men at all, let alone men like Alessio...the ‘cons’ column was full of items, but the ‘pros’ list was far more persuasive.

If she was irresistible, then he was far more so, and she had no real ability to resist him. Not after years of celibacy, of forgetting or wilfully ignoring her needs as a woman.

The fact he was here for a short time made this all the more possible. There was no possibility of complication, for emotional confusion. Their relationship would be almost transactional, she thought with a nod, proud of herself for being so mature. Afterwards, he’d leave, and she’d continue with her life as it was now. Caleb and Winnie didn’t even need to know that she’d had more of a personal interaction with Alessio. She was under no obligation to tell them anything

about her personal life, and he was someone who played his cards close to his chest.

She could do this, and the world wouldn't fall apart. She could give herself this little slice of Christmas joy, and damn it, she would. Life was too short for regrets.

CHAPTER 4

THE MAIN STREET OF Morincester was hung with Christmas lights, long, looping sashes of balls that glowed gold against the crisp night, and Charlotte never failed to look at them without feeling a corresponding sense of warmth. Or maybe it was anticipation that was overheating her blood, the clock in her kitchen ticking inexorably towards the allotted time, her mind racing, her nerves fluttering as she tore her gaze away from the medieval streetscape and instead regarded her flat.

It wasn't hers, though, but over the years, she'd made it feel like a home for herself and Dash. There were pictures everywhere—photos of Dash's parents, his maternal grandparents, and of the two of them, and all the silly things they'd done since the accident. There were pictures with Melody, too, because she was like an aunt to Dash, or a fairy godmother, a beloved part of his life. But it was the photos with Caleb and Winnie that gave Charlotte a momentary anxiety. Given the fractured nature of Alessio's relationship with his family, should she remove those photos? Just for the night?

She moved to one in particular, taken during the summer solstice festival—a truly sensational event with cheese rolling competitions, cider tasting and pie eating. Tourists came from all around to enjoy the Morincester fair. In this photo, the four of them were standing against the backdrop of the main street, only this time, instead of being speckled by Christmas lights, it was dotted with colourful tents and many, many people, bunting waving in the light breeze. Dash had a candy apple

and was pulling a silly face, while the three adults were smiling straight at the camera, posed close together, like family.

A lump formed in her throat, and she spun away. It had been important to fill Dash's life with love after his awful loss. Despite the constant threat from Maggie's parents, Charlotte made sure Dash saw them often, and when he was here, in the village, there were his school friends, who she encouraged close knit relationships with, her friends, and Melody. Caleb and Winnie were valuable parts of their lives.

She wasn't going to hide that from Alessio—it was beneath her, beneath what Caleb and Winnie deserved from her. If he had a problem with their relationship, then that's exactly what it was: his problem.

With a little nod, pleased with her decision, she went back to her post by the window, fidgeting her fingers at her sides. Her reflection struck her, catching her by surprise.

She had agonised over what to wear—not wanting to appear as though she'd gone to too much effort, while simultaneously feeling the weight of Caleb's characterisation of Alessio's previous girlfriends in her mind, so feminine pride had gotten the better of her and she'd pulled on a simple jersey dress, knee length, form fitting with a high neck, so while it showed the slender curves of her body, it wasn't super revealing, and she felt comfortable in it. The colour was creamy, not quite white, and her skin looked golden against it. Her hair, which she wore up almost all the time by virtue of her work in the kitchen, she'd brushed until it glistened and had distractedly pulled over one shoulder now.

Her eyes strayed to the kitchen clock at the exact moment a knock sounded on her door. Everything inside of her tensed, then released, then tensed again, as all of the panic she'd surfed over the last few hours formed one last, crashing wave, making her wonder why the hell she'd agreed to this?

Because you had no choice, she reminded herself, moving towards the door. Some things in life seem almost pre-ordained, and whatever was happening between herself and

Alessio, it was bigger than her, bigger than her will-power, and she wasn't going to fight it. Not anymore.

Drawing the door inwards, a nervous smile on her face, she thought she'd braced to see him, but how could she have? Their previous interactions had all been somewhat accidental. Neither had prepared for them, nor had any expectations of what might happen.

The man on her threshold was there by arrangement. A date. He'd dressed for that, and when his eyes met hers, there was a charge of expectation that almost knocked her backwards.

"Hi," she managed to say, the word barely audible though, as her eyes dragged over him, from his dark hair to his stubbled face, square jaw, then to the open collar revealing a thick, strong neck, to yet another superbly starched shirt which he wore with a dinner jacket—the shirt snowy white, the jacket navy blue, the jeans dark denim, with a black leather belt that matched his shoes. He looked like a catalogue model. Her heart dropped to her toes.

It took her another moment to realise he was just standing there, and a moment after that to recognise that he carried a wine bottle and a brown paper carry bag.

"You brought dinner?" She surmised, because the fragrance was wafting towards her.

"It seemed only fair. You've cooked for me the last few meals."

She wrinkled her nose. "That's my job."

"But tonight is not about work."

She had been starting to relax, just a little, but his statement reminded her of what tonight *was* about and her eyes took on a slightly panicked quality.

"You're nervous." He made the assessment with a lift of his lips that only compounded her sense of panic.

"I'm—yes. A little."

His laugh was soft, like melted butter. She bit into her lower lip and stepped back into the room.

“Wine will help,” she muttered, earning another laugh from him.

“No, it won’t. If you have to drink wine to want this, then you should listen to your instincts.”

“My instincts are the problem.”

“Oh?”

He stepped into the hallway and suddenly, everything felt too small and close, particularly Alessio. She moved away quickly, only exhaling when he shut the door. Once in the kitchen, she turned around, facing him and feeling a now-familiar rush of awareness.

“Your instincts?” He prompted, placing the paper bag down and beginning to lift takeaway containers from within.

“Mmm,” she agreed, opening the bottle of wine and pouring two glasses. “They seem to take over whenever we’re together and override everything else.”

“Isn’t that what instincts are supposed to do?”

She considered that. “What if they’re wrong?”

“And this is a mistake?”

She nodded slowly.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” His eyes bore into hers. “I’m leaving town as soon as I can. Maybe even sooner.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Why do you hate them so much?”

“Will that affect your instincts?” He asked after a beat, and his tone, while light, showed that he was holding something back.

She slid one of the wine glasses across to him, her eyes on his face, wondering at the sense of frustration she felt at being kept in the dark, then dismissing the emotion. After all, what did it matter?

“I care about them,” she said, finally. “They’ve both been very good to me, since I moved out here.”

A muscle throbbed at the base of his jaw. “Is it necessary that we feel the same way?”

“No,” she pushed the topic aside. “I was just curious.”

“Naturally.”

His response put her at ease.

“As for the matter of instincts,” he continued, lifting his wine glass midway to his lips. “I have learned to follow mine, unfailingly.”

“And are you always right?”

“No, not always.”

“Then that’s not very helpful.”

His grin was wolfish. “Actually, even when they turn out to be wrong, I find I learn something from the experience. Sometimes, that is more valuable than getting it right the first time.”

“Interesting. You strike me as someone who wouldn’t like being wrong. In fact, you strike me as someone who’d find that hard to admit.”

He laughed. “Well, I don’t *like* it,” he said with a lift of his shoulders and Charlotte found she was smiling too. “But only a fool believes he doesn’t ever make mistakes.”

“And you’re no fool.”

“I hope not.” There was arrogance in his statement though, and she understood that he knew he was almost always the smartest person in the room. He spoke with that kind of confidence, with the unflinching certainty that all would bow down and obey him.

“Do your mistakes tend to be business, or personal?”

He sipped his wine. “They have been both, in the past.”

“Like what?”

“More curiosity?”

“You just told me it’s natural,” she grinned, sipping her own wine, then moving to look at the label. It was French, and obviously excellent. The richness hit her palette, reminding her of fire and stone fruit, and spices and wood, all at once.

“I passed on the opportunity to buy an airline two years ago.”

“An airline?” She repeated.

He nodded. “It was dismally underperforming. I ran the figures, thought it would cost too much to get the fleet operating properly. The consortium who purchased it has already posted a profit. In the end, it was a good deal.”

“And your instincts told you it wouldn’t be?”

He nodded.

“You really could have bought a whole airline?”

He lifted a single brow. “With some leverage, yes.”

“Wow.”

“But I didn’t.”

“What did you buy instead? A country?”

He laughed. “I expanded our operations.”

“What exactly do you do?”

His eyes fell on the canister besides the kettle, and he moved to it, removing one of the chocolates inside—her weakness, and Dash’s too.

“See this?” He passed it to her, and she took it without removing her gaze from his face.

“See it? I eat it, and a few of its friends, every day. Why?”

“That’s what I do.”

“You’re a chocolatier?”

“Not exactly. I own the company.”

“You own—,” she stopped abruptly as realisation dawned. “The company that makes this? And about a thousand other types of chocolate and packaged foods worldwide?”

“And household products.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not?”

“Because...that’s...a seriously huge company. I mean, huge. Right?”

He lifted his shoulders. “Yes. So?”

“I don’t—how come your mum never mentioned that?”

It was the wrong thing to say. His face lost its animation and colour, so for a moment there was only tension and grey. “It’s my company, not hers. Why would she mention it?”

“Well, it’s unusual, I suppose.”

“Not for us.”

“I don’t understand. *How* do you own the company?”

“I inherited it.”

“From your father,” she said quietly.

“Yes.”

“Wow.”

“You said that already.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s kind of a ‘wow’ thing to tell someone. Especially someone like me.”

“Why especially you?”

“Because I live for food. And chocolate is a huge weakness of mine. These bars,” she said, lifting it between them, “Have gotten me through some seriously awful times in my life.”

“The healing power of chocolate?”

“Something like that,” she agreed.

“Good to know.” He lifted his glass towards hers. “Cheers.” It was a simple salute, nothing particularly sensual, and yet the way his eyes met hers sent a sizzle into her

bloodstream. She moved her glass closer to his, fingers tingling.

“What’s it like?” She asked, mouth dry.

“The wine?”

“No, I can tell the wine is excellent,” she said on a soft laugh. “Working with chocolate all day every day.”

“I don’t actually work *with* chocolate,” he said. “My office is a high rise in Rome, about a hundred miles from the main factory.”

“Tell me your desk is at least made of chocolate? So you can have a nibble whenever you’re in the mood?”

He moved closer to her, the smile on his lips taking her breath away. “At the risk of ruining all your fantasies, I should tell you, I don’t even particularly *like* chocolate.”

She gasped. “You can’t be serious?”

“Deadly.”

“Are you human?”

He reached for her free hand, lifting it to his chest. “You tell me?” He placed her palm over his heart, so she could feel the solid, steady beating, and her insides twisted sharply in response.

“Your heart beats, but not for chocolate.” Charlotte was pleased the words emerged without even a hint of sense, given that her brain was turning to mush. “You must have some other weakness?”

“Must I?”

Of course not. Looking at the man, she felt only strength and determination. “Everyone has an Achilles heel,” she said, sure there must be a chink somewhere in his armour.

“If that is true, I have not yet found mine.”

“What about women?” She said, pulling her hand free and putting some much-needed space between them.

“Are women a weakness?”

“For some men.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“My experience is very limited,” she said, before she could stop herself, but she found she didn’t regret sharing the truth. After all, it was exactly that: the truth. Something he should probably know before they took this any further.

“But you know I like women,” he said thoughtfully.

“It’s obvious you have all the experience I’m lacking,” she said with a wry grimace. “I doubt you can walk past a woman on the street without flirting just a little.”

He shook his head. “That’s not entirely accurate.”

“Halfway?”

He moved to the other side of the bench, directly opposite her. “Is our difference in experience going to be a problem?”

“You tell me?”

“How inexperienced are we talking?” He asked after a moment.

Her heart twisted and her breath burned as she felt the peril of this moment. And just like that, any doubts she might have had about what she wanted evaporated completely leaving only certainty. The idea that he might leave, if she were to tell him the truth, showed her just how much she wanted him to stay. But not enough to lie.

“I’ve had one boyfriend,” she said, refusing to look away. “It was years ago. After my brother died, and Dash came to live with me, there hasn’t really been time.” Or opportunity. She thought of Maggie’s parents and their implication that they’d go to the judge if they thought Charlotte was involved with someone unsuitable. It had terrified her to think how perilous her place in Dash’s life was, and so she’d stayed resolutely single.

“And Caleb?”

“Just a friend,” she said, her cheeks heating up as she blinked away.

“You both feel that way?”

Her skin flushed and she sipped her wine. “I can’t really speak for his feelings,” she said unevenly.

“I think you can,” Alessio murmured. “But I respect that you don’t want to.”

Her eyes, widened with surprise, met his. “Thank you.”

“If anything,” he said, after a moment. “The fact you have not been with a man in so long makes me think you need this, even more than I do.”

“You pity me?”

He frowned.

“I don’t want you to take me to bed out of pity,” she said forcefully.

“Believe me, that’s not it.”

“Caleb says you date supermodels,” she blurted out, a moment later. “Why do you want me?”

“Caleb has about as much nuance as a potato,” Alessio muttered, and despite the shifting currents of their conversation, Charlotte smiled. “I do not date *only* supermodels. My last girlfriend was a human rights lawyer, but my half-brother would have no idea about any of that.”

Charlotte had been intimidated before, now she felt on completely unsteady ground. “When did you break up?”

Alessio scanned Charlotte’s face, his own showing a hint of consternation. It was just a flicker of emotion, but enough for Alessio to understand that he’d said something he regretted.

“Last month.”

“How long were you together?”

“Is this necessary?”

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.”

Charlotte frowned. “Okay.”

Silence fell, punctuated after a moment by his sigh. “We dated for three months. We broke up because she wanted things I wasn’t prepared to offer. We have not stayed friends and do not speak. I don’t regret it.”

“What things did she want?” Charlotte pushed, even though he was obviously speaking through gritted teeth.

“She wanted the fairytale.”

“The fairytale? What’s a fairytale?” She said with irony.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“What was her version of a fairytale?”

He ticked his fingers off, one by one. “Prince Charming. A declaration of undying love. A marriage proposal. A trip to England to meet the family.”

“You didn’t want to bring her here.”

“I didn’t want any of it.”

“So what did you want?”

“What I thought we had—an easy, light, expendable relationship.”

“Expendable,” Charlotte said with a slight shake of her head. “I mean, I don’t believe in fairytales, but even I can see that’s pretty callous.”

“Is it? Why?”

“Because...no one likes to think they’re expendable.”

“But everyone is,” he said, simply. “People have unrealistic expectations about commitment and love, thanks, no doubt, to a billion romance books and Hollywood movies on the subject. I personally don’t buy into that. We’re born alone, we die alone, why not live that way?”

Charlotte’s lips pulled to the side. “That’s incredibly cynical.”

“But am I wrong?”

“I can’t imagine my life without Dash.”

“He is like a child to you,” Alessio dismissed. “That is not romantic love.”

“But it is love,” she said emphatically. “I will never be alone, because I have him. I don’t think it’s written in the stars that we must live alone. I think you’ve made a choice.”

“Even if that were so, it’s my choice to make.”

“Don’t you feel—,” She cut herself off when she realised what she’d been about to say—and how rude it might have seemed.

“Don’t I feel?” He prompted, and even though she’d stopped herself before, she sipped her wine, then answered:

“Don’t you feel like you should have told her all this? If she wanted the fairytale, and you didn’t, wasn’t that something she should have known, before things between you got serious?”

“I am always honest about my feelings for the simple reason that I am not ashamed of them. The fact Lucinda fell in love with me is her failing, not mine.”

Her lips parted into a perfect ‘o’ of surprise.

“You are judging me anyway?”

“I’m—yes. No. I don’t know.” A divot formed between her brows. “It’s just very...cold.”

“I am not a cold man,” he said. “But I am unfeeling. They are different.”

“You’re saying you never *feel* anything, for anyone?”

“I loved my father, a great deal. I felt, when he died, as though I had lost a limb. It was an attachment I had no choice in. To love one’s parent, or child, or ward, is something we cannot resist. Now that he’s gone, I am completely alone, just as I want to be, for the rest of my life.”

“And your mother?” She asked, her voice colouring as she thought of Winnie.

“She made the choice to leave me, many years ago. If I am guilty of anything, it is only of making her live with that decision. Is that so very wrong?”

SHE ATE as though each mouthful were a religious experience, her lips forming around her fork, taking the food from it, her eyes drifting shut as she savoured the taste, and he watched, quite transfixed, as much in her thrall now as he had been earlier, when they’d spoken about subjects he usually avoided with all that he was, and instead, he found himself being drawn to reveal parts of himself he would have preferred to keep private.

But she asked, and he answered, and suddenly they were talking about his family—the very subject he liked least in the world, the subject he would give almost anything to avoid.

He’d known it was a mistake to come here, but in the back of his mind was the promise he’d made his father—that he would finally let bygones be bygones and allow the resentments of the past to die. *I don’t want to think of you alone, Alessio. You are not alone. You have a mother, and a half-brother. They are your blood—that means something.*

Not to Alessio.

At least, it didn’t mean anything *good*. His mother might share his blood, but she’d left him—blood connection or not. It hadn’t mattered to her. So why should he particularly care now?

Because he’d promised his father, and Alessio was a man of his word. It was why he was so careful not to give it lightly. He hadn’t promised Lucinda anything like a fairytale, which had made it easier to leave their relationship, guilt free, when it had ended. But his father had been on his deathbed and Alessio would have said anything to ease his mind at that point. The old man had been besieged by regrets—so uncharacteristic for him—speaking about things that made no sense to Alessio. Since Winona had left, it had been just the two of them, and Alessio Snr had been stronger than steel.

To see him so pale at the end of his life, his face lined, his eyes clouded, of course Alessio said whatever he could to placate his father. He'd promised he wouldn't continue to ostracise his mother, and so he'd come to England, for Christmas.

And it had been torture.

Hell.

A trip that he'd regretted making instantly, here in Morincester, surrounded by his mother's heritage and the life she'd reached for with both hands, while walking away from him.

Only his promise to his father had convinced him to stay longer. And now...now, there was Charlotte.

She was a distraction. A very pleasing, beautiful distraction, and he intended to enjoy that, and her, for the next few days. If he had to put up with his half-brother, and seeing his mother, he could at least soften the blow by spending time with a beautiful, sensual, interesting woman. The fact she was so inexperienced with men and had kept herself shuttered off from the world for the last few years, only made him want this more—not because such things mattered to him, but because she deserved more. He knew from experience how great a fulfilling sexual relationship could be—everyone deserved that kind of satisfaction.

And afterwards, he'd leave town, and his family, content that he'd fulfilled the promise to his father, and sweetened the deal as best he could, with Charlotte's company.

Briefly, he remembered the awful scenes with Lucinda, right at the end. The way she'd stared at him, her eyes wet, her lips pulled downwards, and accused him of breaking her heart, all of her heart, and he paused, because despite what he'd said to Charlotte, he was human and of course he felt remorse over Lucinda's heartbreak. Despite the fact he knew he'd done everything he could to avoid it.

But they'd dated for months. Things with Charlotte would never get that far; they couldn't. He was here a few nights

more, a week at most, and he'd been so completely transparent with her. There was no room for hopes or expectations beyond a short-term fling...he could enjoy this, and her, without a hint of worry that anything could go wrong.

CHAPTER 5

“YOU PROBABLY THINK IT’S silly,” she said, self-conscious suddenly. How could she not be?

They’d eaten. Then had seconds. They’d had two glasses of wine each. Then some fruit for Alessio and Charlotte enjoyed a few of her chocolate bars, which, now that she thought about it, were technically *his* chocolate bars—something she still couldn’t get her head around. And now, they sat, side by side on her suddenly too-small couch, him with a coffee in hand and indolent expression, her with a growing feeling of impatience and a rush of adrenaline and nerves.

“Why would I think it’s silly?”

“Because the apartment’s small and there’s a huge tree down in the bar.”

“The bar is not your home, and you have a child living here,” he said, with a little nod towards a picture of Dash. “I don’t think having a Christmas tree is silly at all.” His eyes took in the large, fresh fir, and a small frown flickered on his face.

“But?” She prompted, leaning forward a little, sure he was biting back some words or other.

“It’s a large tree,” he said, his eyes turning to hers. “I don’t actually see how you got it through the door.”

“Caleb helped,” she admitted, looking at the tree now, rather than Alessio, so she didn’t see the look that flickered in the depths of his eyes. “And it was quite tricky. But last year, I

got a more sensible tree, and Dash had some friends over one afternoon, and one of them laughed at the tree. Dash was devastated. I didn't want him to feel that way again."

"Any kid who laughs at a Christmas tree—of any size—isn't worth your time."

Her eyes widened. "That's almost exactly what I told him. But he's still young, it's hard to process your feelings sometimes. Plus, he's been through a *lot*. Whenever possible, I like him to have great experiences."

"Hence the tree."

"Right."

"And what else do you do, for Christmas?" He asked, reaching an arm along the back of the sofa, so his fingers dangled close to her shoulder. She jumped a little. He saw, she could tell, because he smiled, and her heart twisted with nerves, uncertainty and a raw, primal need that was pulling her apart at the seams.

"Um," she winced at the child-like pause. "Well, Dash spends Christmas Eve and morning with his grandparents, then comes home Christmas afternoon sometime. It's a deal we made right at the beginning—it seemed fair." Her eyes narrowed as she thought back to that time, that lawyer's cold office, the impossibly shiny wooden table. "Their daughter, Maggie, was my sister-in-law. They have a home, not far from here—it's one of the reasons I left London and took this job, so I could be close to family. His family." She smiled awkwardly, hoping to cover the indication of how alone she was. "They love Dash to bits. They spoil him, actually, which is good, in a way, because I can't really afford to. I mean, he never wants for anything, but it's not as if he's getting a new bike every year, you know? At least, not from me." She was babbling, and the more she spoke, the more she found her nerves stretching, and the babbling problem grew worse. "They love him a lot."

"They don't have any formal custody?"

She shook her head. “Maggie and Michael were very clear. They left Dash to me.” She furrowed her brow. “I don’t think they imagined anything would ever happen to both of them. It’s one of those things you put into your will without imagining it will ever come to pass. Maybe one of them, sure, but not both. Not at the same time. It was so awful.” Her eyes swept shut as memories clamoured against her mind, sharp, awful memories that made swallowing difficult and filled her mouth with the strangest taste, like sawdust and rotten milk.

“They must have felt you’d be able to give him something no one else could.”

“I love him,” she said simply, sadly. “But so do his grandparents. Sometimes I wonder...if he wouldn’t be better off with them.”

“Why do you say that?”

She lifted her shoulders. “There are two of them, for a start. They’re retired. They’d have more time to spend with him.”

“Did your sister-in-law have a happy childhood?”

“So far as I know,” Charlotte nodded. “But her parents were in their forties when she was born. Perhaps she felt that Dash would be too much of a burden for them. I don’t know. They didn’t write an explanation in their will, only a few short sentences with their very clear instructions.”

“And so you’re using that as a guide.”

“What choice do I have?”

“And if you did have a choice? Would you do things differently?”

“If I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Dash was going to turn out okay, that I wasn’t going to screw him up in some way, then I wouldn’t change a thing. But it’s a huge responsibility to raise a child, especially someone else’s child. You have to make sure you’re acceding to their wishes, and sometimes it’s hard to know what they’d want me to do.”

“It seems to me that they’d want you to do whatever you feel is right in the moment. Why else would they have chosen you?”

It was a logical point, and she’d thought that herself, from time to time, but hearing him say it was a balm to her soul.

“Thank you,” she murmured, blinking away.

“Is there anyone who spoils *you, cara?*” His fingers began to stroke her shoulder, slowly, rhythmically, so she could barely think straight.

“I have friends. You met Melody—she’s wonderful.” And even though it was the last thing she felt like doing, she would have felt disingenuous if she didn’t add, “And Caleb and Winnie.”

To his credit, Alessio didn’t respond, and he almost didn’t react. There was only the smallest darkening of his eyes before he lifted his coffee cup and drained it, the rich, black liquid no doubt hitting his central nervous system like a bullet.

“Do you work over Christmas?” He asked, placing the cup on the coffee table and then, whether by accident or design, moving closer to her, so their knees brushed and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

She shook her head, her brain too scrambled by his proximity to form words.

“But the pub is open for lunch?”

She nodded. “It’s tradition—for over a century, this pub has offered meals on Christmas Day. It used to be for the provision of alms to the poor.”

“And now?”

“It still is, really. We charge people for lunch, but Winnie’s always been adamant that the proceeds of the day would be used to feed those less fortunate. It’s a community event, more than anything. I *should* work. It’s busy. But I was clear from the very first year: Dash was my priority, and Winnie always understood that. She said I should be with him, too, that

childhood passes so, so fast, and I shouldn't miss any of those important milestones.”

She studied Alessio through her lashes, wondering how even that didn't soften his attitude to his mother. Whatever had happened between them, it had clearly brought on an enmity that ran deep.

“And even now,” she continued thoughtfully. “When Dash goes to his grandparents, Winnie staffs the roster so I get a break. She calls it a ‘thank you’ for how hard I work year-round.” Charlotte's lips pulled to the side. “Last year, I couldn't help myself—I dipped into the kitchens over service, just to help out.”

Silence fell, warm and fuzzy, and Charlotte relaxed against the sofa, into the crook of his arm, aware of his smell, his closeness, of how good it felt.

“I like your tree.”

The statement came almost out of nowhere and brought a slow smile to her lips.

“I'm glad.” She turned to look at it, and of its own accord, her body moved closer to his, seeking nearness and warmth. “I do too. Even though you sort of have to shimmy your way around it.”

He reached down and caught her hand, lifting it towards his lips. “Are you still nervous?”

She hesitated a moment before angling her face towards his—an action that brought them so close they were almost touching.

“Yes,” she said after a beat. “But it's a good kind of nervousness.”

“A good kind of nervousness,” he repeated. “Almost like excitement?”

She arched a single brow, proud she could keep a straight face when her insides were zipping like fireworks, but when she spoke, her voice shook a little. “Is an evaluation of my mood some kind of foreplay?”

He laughed quietly. “It’s more about me, being sure.”

“Sure that I’m sure?”

He nodded once.

She bit down on her lip. “I am. I know that’s strange, because we don’t—we just met—but I know I want this. I know I want you.”

His eyes flared wide, her boldness filling the room with the sort of confidence that made it impossible to ignore what was happening. The spark that had glowed between them from their first meeting had been humming all evening, an electrical current barely controlled, and now, it flared to life, fully and undeniably, brighter than either could hold, so when he touched her now, it was a live current, bolting from him to her.

She drew in a sharp breath as a thousand feelings rammed into her, new and different, urgent and vital, and she couldn’t have said if he pulled her or she pushed, but suddenly, she was leaning forward, and then, she was in his lap, his hands on her hips, his mouth seeking hers, and it was the kind of kiss that could stop time completely, a kiss that made everything seem new and over-bright. It was a kiss that changed everything Charlotte knew about the world and herself and for a moment, a single moment, put Alessio right at the center of all things. All that she was, all that she needed, was bound up in this kiss, this man, this moment.

His tongue flicked hers, slow and curious at first, and then, hungry and desperate, as his hands moved from her sides to her bottom, bringing her closer, so she shifted again, straddling him now, her tube dress unable to bear the strain so it lifted right up to the top of her legs, exposing so much of her that if she had been in a less feverish state, it might have occurred to Charlotte to feel embarrassed, but such pedestrian emotions were way beyond her. There was no embarrassment here, just the simple, biological exploration of a man and woman, touching and learning, kissing as though their bodies were being ravaged by fire and only sensual touch could ease it.

She arched her back, some ancient, primal part of her knowing exactly what to do and how to move. His hand

pushed up her thigh, beneath her dress, and she trembled, not out of fear but from the strength of her need, which was shocking her central nervous system.

His hands didn't stop. Broad, capable, determined, they pushed all the way up, so the dress lifted higher, over her bottom, her flat stomach, higher, to her breasts, where she held her breath and waited until he pushed it over her head and off her body altogether, and she wore only a bra and underpants—which suddenly felt like nothing altogether.

He made a low, growling sound, barely a word, and yet it was the best compliment she'd ever received. She glowed from the inside out, and the way he stared at her only underscored his genuine admiration.

He looked at her as though he wanted to eat her all up. He stared as though he was committing her to memory, inch by inch, and then, he made another of those delicious, masculine, growling noises and shifted, standing and carrying her easily, wrapped around his waist as though she weighed nothing, towards the two doors that came off the living room.

“Your room?” He grunted.

She pushed towards the half-open door, and he moved towards it with his long strides, motivated now by a need to possess her that was entirely mutual.

He didn't turn on the light switch, but enough of a glow sliced into the room from the lounge for her to see him, and she *wanted* to see him, she realised, staring unashamedly as he removed his own shirt and tossed it to the foot of the bed, then brought his body back to hers, kissing her until stars glimmered against her eyelids. All the while, her hands roamed his back, his shoulders, feeling his flesh, his warmth, his strength, until it was more than she'd dreamed of and yet, not quite enough. There was a hunger in the pit of her stomach that was swirling almost out of control.

It was a hunger that was matched by Alessio, as his own hands mirrored hers, touching her bit by bit, removing all the fabric from her body, her bra, so he could rain kisses over her breasts, and feel them with his fingers, tormenting her nipples

with his intense exploration, and then, her underpants, sliding them over far-too-sensitive legs and discarding them carelessly, far more interested in the silky hair at the apex of her thighs, in running his hands over that, too and, dear god, his lips, flicking her with his tongue until she was a puddle of lava in the middle of the room.

Just when she didn't think she could bear it a moment longer, he moved his mouth higher, back to her stomach, and his hands returned their exploration, teasing the sensitive flesh between her legs, drawing invisible circles on her thighs at first and then, moving between her sex, parting her lips and feeling her, before one finger pressed inside, and she called his name into the room at the perfect, necessary invasion. He smiled against her shoulder, nipped her there with his teeth, then moved higher.

“You're sure?” He nibbled the flesh at the base of her ear, and she cried out as pleasure ran like spikes through her blood, his finger swirling past clusters of cells that were so sensitive she almost couldn't bear it.

“Yes, yes, a thousand times, yes,” she turned her head so she could claim his mouth, her fervent passion taking over, her hands moving over him hungrily, pushing at his pants now, needing to see and feel more of him, and somewhere along the way, his hand moved from her sex, and she felt the desertion like a wave of ice wind.

But it was temporary. Alessio was echoing Charlotte's movements, stripping his clothes easily, pants first and boxer shorts next, until he was completely naked, standing in her small bedroom, his head nearly touching the ceiling thanks to the old, low roof.

Charlotte could only stare, mouth open, heart racing, as he looked down at her, his erection so proud, so...big. Her mouth went dry and for a second, the basic biology of this escaped her. How would he possibly fit? All of her mad, crazy desire froze, morphing into something more like the panic she'd felt earlier in the night. He reached into his pants and withdrew his wallet, and from it, a string of condoms that spiralled desire back through her. She was all over the place, her emotions

rioting, running from instinct and need, to overthinking panic in the blink of an eye. His weight on her body brought instincts back to the fore, his arousal between her legs making her push her thighs apart, silently inviting him in, never mind the fact that seemed like a physical impossibility.

He tore open a condom, eyes on Charlotte as he pressed it over his length, and something about that moment, the way he looked at her, kept the magic of the spell weaved right around them, so she was no longer worried, she was no longer thinking about the logistics of this, she was simply caught in the moment, and trusting that it would be perfect. Maybe not perfect—because what was in life?—but as good as everything between them had been to this point.

She held her breath as he brought his body over hers, his eyes watchful, waiting, until she gave a small nod, and lifted her hips, needing him more than he could possibly ever understand. Every fibre of her being reverberated with that need, with her all-consuming desire for him.

“Please,” she said again, simply, her fingers lifting to his shoulders, holding on for dear life, as he nudged her legs wider, then tilted himself at her sex, just the tip of him pressed there at first. She held her breath, lips compressed, but rather than pushing into her, he moved his hands to her hips, stroking her there slowly, before moving higher, to her breasts, tracing fine, teasing lines around each nipple until she could no longer focus on his arousal. Pleasure was building inside every cell, her limbs were heavy and elastic, and she was babbling—his name, she thought—over and over.

Then, he took her, moving inside slowly, cautiously, and despite the building pleasure his touch had brought, she froze, eyes flying back to his, babbling stopped, as he inched forward. So big. So hard. She swallowed, dug her nails deeper into his shoulders.

“Okay?”

She groaned, because she still didn't know if he'd fit and he was stretching her in ways that were entirely new, but Charlotte *wanted* all of him. She didn't want him to treat her

like she was a fragile piece of glass, she wanted him to take her with the madness that had exploded in both of their souls.

“Please,” she said, again and again, the words husky. “I want this.”

He expelled a long breath, barely audible, and then brought his body more fully over hers, his mouth on Charlotte’s, his tongue pushing between her lips as he sunk into her fully, all of him, all of his enormous arousal, and he lay there a moment, so she could get used to the way he filled her up, to the parts of her he pressed against, to the sensations of this, and she gasped because it was all so new and wonderful and different.

He pushed up onto his elbows, staring at her face, and she stared back, wondering at the strange stitching sensation in her chest that seemed to almost hurt when they looked right into each other’s eyes like this. It was too intimate. Too much. She blinked away quickly, to clear the thought, and then, she moved her hips, just a little, to reposition herself, and he filled different parts of her, brushed against nerve endings that had already been stimulated to the point of insanity, and so just that small touch, the way he filled her up so completely, made her tip towards the edge of all things, and very nearly over it.

But it was Alessio’s next movement that took her there. Just the smallest shift of his hips and she was exploding completely, wrapping her legs around his waist to hold him right where he was, hitched deep, her head tilted back as every single atom in the world shook and took on a new shape and size.

Her heart rate went crazy, and it took a long time for it to calm again. At least, it felt like a long time, but when she slowly drifted back to reality it was to find Alessio exactly where he was, looking at her with a slightly bemused expression, so she coloured.

“Did I do something wrong?”

That sobered him immediately. “Wrong?” He swore softly. “No, *cara*. That was, I think, the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I want more.”

I want more.

“More what?”

“Of your pleasure.”

“Ohhhhh,” she moaned as he began to move properly now, his cock shifting in all the ways that guaranteed she’d feel pleasure again, and again, before his own release, after more orgasms than Charlotte could count, Alessio had left her unable to form two thoughts together. Her body felt leaden, her mind even more so.

Afterwards, he pulled out of her, and she had to bite down, hard, on her lip, to stop tears from forming in her eyes. It was a totally unwanted reaction, a physical instinct. Because she’d been wrong—that had been perfect. Absolutely perfect. And she wanted to stay suspended in that state forever, just the two of them, their bodies entwined, pleasure a pulsating, ever-present tidal wave which they were completely a part of.

She shifted in the bed as he moved, knowing she had to fix that stitch in her chest, to harden up, and trying desperately to energise her brain to remember all of the things she needed in that moment, the reality that their intimate lovemaking had pushed far, far away.

This was very, very temporary. Not forever. Not even for a full week. Maybe even just for this one night—neither had committed to more than that.

He didn’t want anything more, and she couldn’t have anything more, because there was Dash.

He dated sophisticated supermodels, not inexperienced, normal women like Charlotte. He was just spending time with her because he happened to be here, in the middle of nowhere, and evidently, he had the libido of a prize bull.

He would leave, soon, and Charlotte would have her usual life to step into, a life that included Caleb and Winnie. Winnie aside, Caleb hated this man, and she wasn’t an idiot: he cared for Charlotte. He could never know about what had just happened. He’d find it hard to forgive Charlotte, even though she’d done nothing wrong.

All of those thoughts cycled through her brain, as she watched Alessio move towards the door. “Bathroom?” He asked, a smile tugging at his lips that made her want him all over again. *How?* She wanted to scream at her treacherous body. How could she be so desperately hungry for him?

“*Cara?*”

“Oh, right.” She cringed at her lack of sophistication. “Down the hall, at the end. You can’t miss it.”

He grinned properly now, then disappeared, so she could slump back against the bed and stare at the low, dimpled-by-age ceiling, and replay each torturously delightful moment of what they’d just shared.

PLEASURE HAD A ZAPPING effect and Charlotte slept like the dead. A dreamless, heavy slumber, so immersive that when she woke, it was like pushing through layers and layers of dirt with her bare hands, scraping her way to the surface, and when she emerged, it was with a sense of disorientation that took moments to break. She was in her room, but something was different. She *felt* different. Stretching slightly, her body hummed in a way she wasn’t used to, muscles feeling a little like she’d run a marathon, and a pervasive lightness in her consciousness that she couldn’t explain. Not, at least, until her heel connected with the calf of the man beside her, and everything came rushing back to her. Their night together. The first time, but then, heat flooded her cheeks as she remembered the next, sometime in the small hours, she’d woken with her hands on his body, and his eyes on her, watching, that quirky, sexy smile of his totally taking her breath away, his quick movement to pull her on top of him, barely taking the time to sheathe himself before she took him, and it was so different being on top, her body dictating their pleasure.

There was euphoria in her movements but also in his response to them—he was powerless to control the speed with which they exploded, and she delighted in that, in the way he

responded to her, showing that he was as utterly caught up in this pleasure as she was.

She'd fallen asleep again afterwards, and she wasn't sure why, but if she'd thought about it at all in a way that could be put into words, she might have thought he'd have left by now. That he'd have tiptoed from her flat, back to his own room, but no.

He was right beside her, the big frame of a sleeping man. In her bed. In the light of day.

The light of day! She smothered a squawk as she quickly looked over her shoulder at the alarm clock. It was later than she usually slept, but that wasn't saying much: she always woke early to get a jump on things. There was still time to do her usual prep work. More important was to remove any evidence of Alessio from their home before Dash returned.

Moving incrementally from the bed, quietly and gently, so as not to disturb him, she paused only to grab her robe from the back of the door before tiptoeing into the living room. The heating was on, and the space was cosy—even more so because she'd left the Christmas lights on when they'd gone to bed the night before and the space glowed with the warmth of the tree.

First things first: she began to brew a pot of coffee, before moving to the coffee table and collecting their coffee cups and chocolate wrappers, bringing them into the kitchen and running them through the sink. She was just pouring her first coffee when a noise behind her had her spinning almost guiltily, eyes landing on the mussed, tussled, morning figure of Alessio Cavalcante. Here, in her kitchen. Wearing a pair of boxer shorts and nothing else.

Her heart slammed into her ribs, and she almost spilled her coffee.

“Morning. I made coffee. Would you like some? I always have coffee first thing. Usually in the kitchen downstairs, so I don't wake Dash, but he's not here right now—you know that, obviously—because you were here last night, but um, did you say ‘yes’ to a coffee?”

“I don’t think you gave me a chance?” He teased, moving deeper into the kitchen and putting his arms around her waist. She pulled a face.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Nervous again?”

She bit into her lower lip. “Well, this isn’t exactly normal for me.”

“Would you like me to leave?”

Her chest gave a strange, stretching feeling. “Not right away,” she admitted after a pause. *Not at all*, she silently added. At least, not for the rest of the day. She wanted to explore him some more...but Dash would be back within a couple of hours, and she needed some time to clear her head before having to switch back into mummy-Charlotte mode.

“Coffee first,” he agreed, smiling at her.

She blinked back, her smile natural, and sipped her coffee in the space created between their bodies.

Later, much later than she’d intended, after two cups of coffee apiece and conversation that roamed from world events to favourite bands, Alessio stood by the door, preparing to leave.

“I had fun last night.”

Her heart exploded. “I did too.”

“Can I see you again?”

“You’re staying in the hotel I live in, I think it’s a given.”

His response was a quick quirk of his lips. “You know what I mean.”

“I do,” she agreed, pausing a moment. She wanted, with all her heart, to say yes. But was it wise? And how could she make it work? “The next few days are busy for me—I don’t work Christmas Day, but I do a lot of the preparations. And there’s Dash...”

A frown briefly marred his handsome face. “If you don’t want to see me again, it’s okay.” He pressed a finger to her chin, tilting her face to his. “I’m a big boy, I can handle it.”

I’m a big boy. She had to literally bite down on her tongue to stop from saying, ‘yes, yes you are.’ It didn’t stop the heat from flushing her face, though, and she was sure he read her mind, because he lifted his brows in response.

“I want to see you again,” she said quickly, without bothering to hide her eagerness. “It’s just a question of how.”

“Later tonight?”

If she didn’t hide her eagerness, nor did he, and she was gratified by that.

“After Dash is asleep?”

He nodded. “Text me a time.”

She nodded. “Let’s say nine-ish, to be safe?”

“Text me.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her forehead and her heart did a funny little stitching movement.

“I don’t have your number.”

He reached into his pocket for his wallet—Charlotte couldn’t contain the rush of heat as she remembered the condoms he’d removed the night before. This time, he pulled out a business card—snowy white cardboard with silver lettering. His name and a mobile phone number, nothing more.

She took it, running her fingers over the edges. “I’ll message you later.”

He nodded but still didn’t move and she wondered if he was finding it as annoying as she that they couldn’t spend more of the day together.

But then, he let go, stepped back and opened the door.

“Oh, Alessio?” She said, when he’d crossed the threshold. “There’s one more thing.”

He lifted a brow enquiringly.

“No one can know about this,” she said, breathily. “Not your family,” she clarified, eyes not quite meeting his. “And definitely not Dash. Custody is complicated and things with Caleb...”

“Are also complicated,” he surmised, his voice holding none of the warmth she’d come to admire in it.

Charlotte couldn’t deny his characterisation. Things with Caleb *were* complicated. While technically they were just friends, there was no getting away from the fact Caleb wanted more, and she’d been carefully, gently rebuffing him for well over a year. If he knew Alessio had come to town and managed to seduce Charlotte within forty-eight hours...well, it wouldn’t be great for anyone’s relationship.

“It’s better this way.”

“I have no issues with privacy, *cara*. In fact, it’s my preference also.” He leaned forward and pressed another kiss to her forehead but this time, he kept his lips there and Charlotte tilted her face upwards, so they kissed properly.

It was supposed to be a kiss of farewell, but his hands caught at her back, and he drew her against his hard, strong frame, until she was weak at the knees and every cell in her body wanted so much more than just a kiss.

“Tonight,” he growled against her mouth before stepping backwards, and she carried that promise close to her chest, all the rest of the day.

CHAPTER 6

SOMETIMES HE THOUGHT HE tolerated his mother and Caleb, other times he thought he downright hated them. And sometimes, he felt something else altogether, particularly for his mother. Something a little like pity, or vulnerability, something that made him uncomfortably aware of his feelings and emotions and the desire he had to *not* to feel anything, at least, not for them.

Watching his mother fuss with a flower arrangement was one of those moments. She wasn't aware he was here—quite by accident, he'd parked and walked towards the property without her noticing. She must have been too wrapped up in her thoughts. Despite the cool day, she had the windows to the garden room open, and he caught a perfect glimpse of her persevering with several wayward branches from a holly bush, frowning as she pushed them into place, studying them, then moving them again. Her face was pale, with more lines than he remembered, and she looked...concerned. Worried. Sad.

He'd told himself he'd stopped caring about her a long time ago, but it wasn't possible to switch off completely. For a moment, he looked at her and tried to see her as she was in his mind—the younger woman who'd left him behind. The mother who'd read to him, who'd hugged him so tight, who'd wiped his hair from his brow when he'd been running and was wet with sweat, the woman who'd taught him to swim in the sparkling Aegean, who'd held his hand as they'd jumped off the end of the jetty, who'd stood at his side and shown him how to cook, and to clean, and instead of warmth flooding

him, there was something else now, a bitterness that invaded his entire body.

Because those great memories were all tarnished by her desertion. He couldn't look back and love what she'd once been to him, because she'd chosen to be that to someone else *instead* of him.

All he wanted, suddenly, was to be back at the pub—ironically, his mother's pub—but it wasn't his mother he was thinking of, so much as Charlotte, and the night they'd spent together, the promise they'd given one another for tonight.

She was a balm to the necessary evil of this 'holiday', a relief from the time he was spending with his mother, of the promise he'd made his father.

Just a few more nights and he could be done with this. And if Charlotte was a part of those nights, then so much the better.

"Alex! You're here!" Winona's voice dragged him from his imaginings, right back to the present.

Stiffening unconsciously, he looked towards her, unable to dredge up even the hint of a smile.

"Yes. We had an appointment, didn't we?"

She crinkled her nose. "A lunch, in fact. Come in, darling."

He didn't like it when his mother used terms of endearment, and he felt as though he'd made that abundantly clear, yet she still did it, from time to time, despite the fact he was a man in his thirties and definitely not her 'darling'.

"I hope you haven't gone to too much trouble. I can't stay long." He hadn't planned to say the words—he had nothing else on for the afternoon except catching up on emails—but the moment her face tensed, he realised he'd done it halfway hoping to hurt her. It was a childish instinct. When was he going to get over the past? They didn't have to be close, or friendly, but why bother treating her this way?

"No trouble." Her voice was a little softened by his rebuke, but she rallied quickly. "Caleb can't join us—he's at the pub, placing orders. It's such a busy time of year, and after a

disastrous Christmas five years ago, when we ran clear out of ale between Christmas and New Year, we've learned to always have an excess of things on hand."

We. Mother and son, a team. He nodded curtly and his mother sighed.

"So it's just the two of us, then," she said, and he heard her nervousness and winced. Why did she keep trying so hard, when it was obvious they shared nothing? Surely, they could send a few text messages each year and be done with the whole pretence of being 'family'.

But even as he thought it, he remembered her hand wrapped around his, much smaller then, and the smile she'd offered as they stood on the end of that jetty. He'd been nervous, uncharacteristically uncertain. The water was a long way down, and he couldn't see beneath the depths of it, so didn't know what he was diving into. It didn't matter though. Not when his mother was at his side, encouraging him, reassuring him.

She'd smiled at him, and he'd known he could do *anything*.

Winona led him to the kitchen, where a big brown dog with long hair and floppy ears lay on the floor. He lifted an eyebrow as Alessio and Winona walked in, before flopping back onto the floor with a 'harumph' of disapproval.

"That's Bailey," she said. "Named for the drink. It's a weakness of mine."

He nodded again. In a room of powerful people, Alessio was never intimidated, yet with his mother, he found it almost impossible to know what to say. It wasn't intimidation though, so much as a sense that he didn't *want* to say or give any part of himself to her, that might lead her to believe she was forgiven. How could he fulfil his promise to his father while holding onto the anger that had become a solid part of him?

"I hope you still love cannelloni," she said with a hint of uncertainty, eyes searching his.

Visceral memories pierced his mind. Spinach and nutmeg, goat cheese, Parmesan, a sweet tomato sauce, so gooey and delicious, his little fingers chasing lines around the bottom of the bowl to catch the last of the meal and deliver it to his mouth.

“I haven’t had it in years.”

“Oh.” She looked crestfallen, perhaps mistaking his answer as a lack of enthusiasm. “You always loved it, mine especially. One time, when we ate in a restaurant, you ordered it, thinking it would be the same, but it wasn’t, and you were very cross.”

“Cross?” He repeated, brow lifted.

“Oh, fantastically so. You said you’d like a word with the chef. Your father and I thought it was hilarious. If we’d let you, you would have gone back there and instructed him in exactly how to prepare the cannelloni correctly. It was a Michelin starred restaurant, I might add.”

“I’m glad you didn’t allow me to do anything quite so rude.”

“You were never rude,” she responded, with a mother’s indulgence. “Only earnest. You were determined they should learn from your experience. You always knew best.”

“Don’t all children think that?”

“Oftentimes, you were right. I’d never known a child with such an old soul before.”

Not that old or wise. He’d still had a child’s heart, and she’d broken it completely.

“Anyway,” she murmured, perhaps sensing the change in his mood. “I made it again, for old time’s sake.”

He moved deeper into the kitchen, thinking of Charlotte, out of nowhere, and her abilities in the kitchen.

“The chef at the pub seems very good,” he said, finding it impossible not to bring her into conversation.

“Charlie? She’s wonderful,” Winona relaxed. “We were very lucky to find her.”

“She seems to work hard.”

Winona frowned. “Too hard, do you mean?”

“Long hours.”

“Yes,” Winona sighed. “That’s hospitality, isn’t it?”

“She has a young child?”

“Not her biological son, rather, her nephew.” Alessio knew all this, but he liked hearing about Charlotte as much as he liked talking about her, so he let his mother continue without enlightening her. Besides, he’d promised to keep the more intimate of their relationship private. “But Charlie is his legal guardian, and quite wonderful with him. I’ve often thought —,” she stopped herself abruptly. But Alessio had a way about him, a direct stare, a look, that was compelling. “Well, she’ll make an excellent mother, one day.”

It was a throwaway comment, but it landed strangely inside Alessio. Perhaps because of the way they’d spent the night?

“You’ve met her?” Winona asked with an innocent smile, as she moved to the fridge and took out a bottle of mineral water, pouring two glasses.

“Si.”

Winona’s smile faltered slightly and when she handed Alessio the water, he noticed her fingers weren’t quite steady. It made his stomach tighten in an uncomfortable way.

“She was there the night I arrived,” he elaborated. Not because it was necessary but again, because he found it quite compelling to speak about Charlotte.

“Ah.”

“Her cooking is excellent.”

“We’re very lucky.”

“She talks about you and Caleb as though you’re very close.”

The smallest of frowns crossed Winona’s beautiful face, but she erased it quickly. “Well, we are. From the moment she applied for the job, I had a feeling about her. It was a hard time in her life.”

Alessio’s expression didn’t change—the same powerfully compelling set of features stayed locked in place, and Winona continued to talk, as she removed a baking tray from the oven and set it down on an ancient looking timber chopping board. It’s often said that smells create a direct pathway to the past, and Alessio felt that like a punch in his gut. The fragrance! Nutmeg, Parmesan cheese, spinach, pasta, it hit him hard, and suddenly he was that little boy again. He pressed his palms to the counter, concentrating hard on appearing unmoved.

“Her brother had just died. She’s basically alone on this earth, with the exception of her friends. The baby was left to her—well, not a baby, but to her, that’s how it felt. Her sister-in-law’s parents, Dash’s grandparents, wanted custody, and were prepared to fight for it, so Charlotte, all of twenty-one at the time, had to find a lawyer to argue that the will should be followed.” Winona tsked. “She wanted to leave London, and at the same time, to find a compromise with Dash’s grandparents. Her heart is so big, bless her. Despite what they put her through, she was determined to have them in his life, so she moved out here, nearer to where they live, to make that easier. She works hard, and all for him.” Winona looked across at Dash. “I’m sorry, you’re not interested in the ins and outs of the lives of my staff.” Her laugh was brittle. “I didn’t invite you here to bore you silly.”

“You’re not,” Alessio assured her, his tone obviously genuine. “You’re not at all.”

“Good,” Winona smiled, and for the first time since he’d arrived, she seemed to relax.

“That smells good.” He paid the compliment before he could remember that he was still so angry with his mother, and she beamed back at him. Something shifted in his chest.

“I hope you think it tastes that way too. Let’s eat,” she said with a decisive nod, quickly plating up two serves of the meal. “It’s too cold for outside. Come through here.”

She gestured to a door framed in heavy dark oak. Through it, there was a large, casual lounge and dining room, with a huge Christmas tree by the bay window, and a few presents piled up beneath it.

“Charlie—the chef from the pub—and Dash helped decorate it,” Winona confided, as they moved to the table, which had been set earlier. “She’s Christmas mad. You can probably tell from the way the pub’s decked out.”

He didn’t add that he’d seen evidence of it in her apartment as well, but as he looked to the tree, he imagined Charlotte standing beside it, hanging the ornaments, and felt a funny kick low in his abdomen. As a child, Alessio had loved Christmas, too. Maybe that was because of his mother? His father had certainly never made it a big deal, but he remembered trees like this. He remembered standing beside his mother and watching her hang decorations, the way she’d take a few steps back to regard the tree from a distance before shifting a couple ‘for balance’, she’d murmur. There’d be carols playing and a spiced smell in the air, which he now recognised as gingerbread.

“Anyway,” Winona, perhaps interpreting the silence as disinterest, rushed to fill it. “How are you, Ale—ssio?”

He tilted his head in gratitude for her remembering to use his full name. He’d hated the English shortened version since she’d left.

But Alessio didn’t want to talk about himself. He didn’t know how to answer.

“I’ve been thinking about you. Worrying about you.” She frowned. “I know...you were so close.”

He ground his teeth together. What could he say? That his father had been his only parent? That after Winona had left, Alessio Snr had had to assume the responsibilities of mother

and father, that he'd taken over that heart space for Alessio? Of course, they'd been close.

"He was ninety years old. His death wasn't a surprise."

"No," she agreed softly.

For almost the first time, the age gap between his parents hit Alessio. He *knew* there was an age gap, but his mother was only in her sixties, and so young and vital with it. She would have been only a few years older than he was now, when she walked out on them. Which meant she'd been not quite thirty when he'd been born, and his father...he frowned. Why hadn't it occurred to him before, how much older his father was? Was that part of why she'd left?

"But your father was such a dynamic man. Even at ninety, I'm sure he seemed as though he'd live forever. His death surprised me."

Alessio's eyes narrowed. She spoke fondly. Almost as though she still felt affection for the man. But Alessio knew that couldn't be the case. Not after the callous way she'd left him—and Alessio.

"He was lucky to have you," Winona said, and Alessio heard the hint of bitterness in them, the tightness, but when he looked at his mother, she smiled, a soft, sad smile. "The business," she added, thoughtfully. "He lived for that business. I've watched you go from strength to strength with it, so capable and ready to step into his shoes. It must have eased his mind a lot, towards the end, to know you were there."

Alessio chose to take her words at face value and nodded once. "Nominally, I took over a month or so before he died, but in reality, I've been acting CEO for over a decade. At the time, I thought it was because he was growing tired, but now, I wonder if it wasn't that he was making sure."

"Yes, that sounds like your father."

Alessio frowned. "You speak of him as though you still care."

"I do care," she said quickly, on a rush, her eyes round in her pretty face. "I loved your father very much. We weren't

right together, but that doesn't mean... I cared for him," she finished softly.

Alessio was filled with questions, questions he'd held onto for an awfully long time. If she cared, why had she left? In what ways weren't they right? How could she leave *both* of them. He understood marriages breaking down—hell, he didn't believe in the idea of monogamy at all—but to leave a child?

His grip on the fork tightened. He lifted a piece of pasta to his mouth. If the aroma had reminded him of the past, then the taste had put him on a one-way train there. He closed his eyes and fought the memories, hard.

They ate, mostly, in silence. His mother attempted to make conversation and Alessio replied as necessary, but his conversational abilities and inclinations had deserted him. He was trapped in the past, and in the feelings that had consumed him almost his whole life.

Maybe this had been a mistake, after all.

He should never have made this promise to his father. There was no point in being here. Some things, once damaged, couldn't be repaired.

"Thank you for lunch," he said, afterwards, hardening his heart to his mother's crestfallen expression.

"You're not leaving already?"

Already? Surely lunch had felt like it took a lifetime for her as well?

"I have work to do."

Her lips twisted. "I see."

She had no right to make him feel guilty for that. He owed her nothing. And yet, he felt a strange emotion, something like guilt, as he pushed back his chair and reached for her plate, clearing both of their dishes into the kitchen.

He placed them on the edge of the sink, then turned to face her.

“You won’t even stay for coffee?”

She had no right making him feel bad, but he *did* feel bad. Her gentle features were awash with a mask that looked a lot like anguish and regardless of all that had happened between them, he felt a weakening in his resolve. He opened his mouth to accept at the exact moment the door banged closed.

“Mum?”

The colours of the room faded to black as Alessio processed the sudden arrival of Caleb.

“Oh!” Winona turned towards the door, then back at Alessio, her hands twisting in front of her. “Caleb’s home. He can join us for coffee. You two have barely had a chance to talk and I know he was looking forward to—,”

“I have to get back to work,” Alessio responded curtly, as Caleb walked into the room.

“I smell cannelloni,” Caleb said, wiggling his brows in an unconcerned manner, walking over to Winona and pressing a kiss to her forehead before turning to Alessio. “I didn’t realise you’d be here.”

“I was sure I’d mentioned it,” Winona said with a small frown.

“Maybe. I’ve been so busy, it must have slipped my memory. Mind if I help myself?”

“I’ll get it,” Winona said with a wave of her hand and Alessio’s gut twisted at the scene of domesticity he was now in the centre of. “How’s the pub?”

“The calm before the storm,” he said with a grimace.

“Everything on track?”

“Of course. Charlie’s got it covered.”

Alessio couldn’t help the feeling of irritation that stole through him at his half-brother’s mention of Charlotte. They’d known each other years, but in that moment, Alessio didn’t like the way Caleb invoked Charlotte’s name, with such casual possession and pride.

Winona's smile was knowing. "Did you mention my invitation?"

"Yeah," Caleb grinned back.

Winona turned to Alessio. "I hope you don't mind, but I asked Charlotte—the chef from the pub—to spend Christmas lunch with us. Dash is going to his grandparents', and I hate to think of her at a loose end. Or worse, going down to work because she can't help herself." Winona's smile dropped slightly. "Of course, I should have checked with you first, given it's your first Christmas with us in—years," she finished unevenly, her face flushed. Years? Since she'd left Italy, in fact.

"I don't mind," he said after a beat.

"Good." Winona's voice was rushed. "I'm so glad. The four of us will have such a lovely time together."

X

ALESSIO GLOWERED as he drove back to the pub, replaying the last ten minutes in his mind. From Caleb's arrival to the fact he obviously ate his mother's cannelloni often. It was completely normal, but somehow, Alessio took it as a personal insult, that one of his favourite childhood meals should have gone on to become so important to Caleb. It was just *food*, he thought with a gruff sound of irritation, and yet, it was also somehow more than that. It was just further proof of having been usurped and replaced in his mother's life. She'd been pregnant when she'd left—the baby the catalyst for the divorce. His father might have been able to turn a blind eye to her affair, but the idea of raising another man's baby had been impossible to contemplate. Not that Winona had presented that as an option.

She'd wanted to leave.

Frustration clipped through him, and the closer Alessio came to the pub, the gladder he was—because Charlotte was there, and in Charlotte's arms and bed, he knew he could erase the worst of the day from his mind. His mother and Caleb

would cease to exist, his past, too. With Charlotte, there was only the here and now, the sublime physical. He couldn't wait to see her again.

X

CHARLOTTE STRETCHED HER NECK, tired from a busy lunch service, and checked the clock. Dash would be home from school soon. She had just enough time to check stock for the dinner service, and then she'd go upstairs to spend the afternoon with him. The kitchen door banged open, and she looked up slowly, expecting to see the front of house manager or one of the waitstaff, but it was Alessio instead, walking in as if, well, as if he owned the place.

It was the first she'd seen him since that morning and her heart skidded all over the place.

"Hi." She stood quickly, conscious of how she must look, her apron dirty, her hair a mess, no makeup on her face.

"Hi," he repeated, stalking towards her with obvious intent. She stared, mouth dry, as he drew near, and then, kissed her without preamble, his arms wrapping around her waist and drawing her tightly to his body. He tasted delicious, he smelled even better. Her knees trembled and she groaned into his kiss, losing herself for a moment in the magnificence of this unexpected interaction, before remembering where they were—and the possibility anyone could walk in at any point.

She pulled away quickly, but her whole body complained. "I can't—anyone could see us."

"True," he said, a curt nod showing his agreement. He reached for her hand and pulled her with him, towards the storeroom pantry, and she went, because her body was in flames. Once inside, he pressed her against the door and kissed her once more, his lips strong and demanding, his body creating a barricade as strong and hard as the door: perfect, because Charlotte was limp all over and might have slipped to the ground in a puddle of quivering need if it weren't for the hands she kept clasped behind his neck.

“I loved being with you last night,” he said into her mouth, and she groaned, as memories cut through her

It was definitely mutual.

“The way you scream when you come,” he said, moving his mouth to her ear and sucking her lobe. “I have been thinking about it all day.”

It was so erotic and evocative.

His mouth moved lower, to the base of her jaw, nipping her there with his teeth, while his hand lifted the front of the apron to find the buttons of her jeans and separate them.

Sanity was banging at the edges of her mind, reminding Charlotte that though they were in the storeroom, and the pub was technically closed, other staff members were milling about.

“This is—we can’t—,”

“Shhh,” he pulled away to look at her, a teasing expression on his face. “I want to see if you can come quietly. Think of it as a dress rehearsal for tonight.”

She stared at him, aghast, but logical thought moved completely beyond her skillset as his hand moved inside her underpants and found the seam of her sex, and her most sensitive cluster of nerve endings, and he began to run his fingers over her there, as if he somehow *knew* what that did to her, his eyes on her as he went faster and then paused to slip a finger inside of her, twisting it around until she was moaning into the space.

“Quiet,” he reminded her, but with that sexy, wolfish grin of his, so she bit down on her lip and swallowed her sounds of pleasure, as he moved his fingers hard enough to send her over the edge. She gripped his shirt, holding on for dear life, tilting her head back until it hit the door, her voice panting into the room as pleasure became a blinding light she was unable to outrun.

He slowed and then stopped as the waves hit the crescendo and then began to recede, slowing down, until her breathing

was almost normal and the bright white in her eyes had left, and she could see clearly again.

“Almost silent,” he said with a wink, pulling his hand out of her pants and refastening the buttons.

“Alessio...” She wasn’t sure what she’d been about to say. Logical thought still wasn’t with her.

“Charlotte?” He repeated in the same tone.

“I just—,”

“Mmm?”

“I want—,”

He leaned closer, his mouth tantalisingly close to her. “I know.”

Her eyes lifted to his.

“Tonight,” he promised.

“Yes, tonight.” He passed his thumb over her lips, then stepped back, as if nothing had happened. “You go out first. Let me know when the coast is clear.”

Her heart twisted at his thoughtfulness. She knew instinctively that Alessio wasn’t the kind of man to care if anyone knew what he’d just been doing in the pantry, but he understood why secrecy was important to Charlotte.

She sucked in a deep breath then stepped out into the kitchen, which was blessedly empty.

“You’re fine.”

He strode out and moved towards the door. Her stomach dropped to her toes. She didn’t want him to leave! And not just because he could drive her wild, but because she wanted to speak to him. To ask about his day. To share a coffee with him.

But that was a silly, childish want—as if she could turn what they were doing into something more. They weren’t friends. They weren’t dating. She had to remember that.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said, from the door, and she nodded once, not yet able to speak.

CHAPTER 7

APART FROM HIS NIGHTMARES, which were thankfully a thing of the past, Dash had always slept like the dead. Nonetheless, Charlotte still whispered when she opened the door, a little after nine, to let Alessio in.

He was carrying more brown paper bags and a bottle of wine, a simple gesture but one that touched her heart. Only her heart was way down the list of what she was aware of, as her libido kicked into gear at the sight of him.

Last night, she'd been attracted to him, but now, she'd been possessed by him, and that gave a whole other dimension to the way he made her feel.

“Hungry?”

“I’ve had dinner,” she said apologetically. “With Dash.”

“I thought you might have. But what about dessert?”

She shook her head.

“Good. Because I’m looking forward to watching you eat this.” He lifted the bag higher, and she wondered what was inside.

In the kitchen, he removed a couple of white cardboard boxes, then lifted the lids. Various cakes and tarts were inside, and the fragrance was delicious. “Where are they from?”

“A patisserie in London.”

“You’ve been to London?”

“Not personally, no.”

“You got someone to bring these *from* London?”

He lifted his shoulders. “You’ll love them.”

Her heart skipped a beat. He’d done that, for her?

Or was he such a sweet tooth himself that he’d wanted the desserts enough to send for them?

“So, you just called someone and asked them to do a two-hour trip out into the country because you wanted some sweets?”

“Specific sweets,” he responded with a wink, and her heart twisted. “And not because I wanted them, but because I wanted you to try them.”

Her heart soared. It was not a declaration of love, but somehow, it made her insides flutter with warmth.

“Thank you.”

He uncorked the wine, pouring two glasses. “It’s sweet. Perfect with these.”

“You really know food, don’t you?”

“I’m Italian. It’s in my blood.”

“No, that’s not necessarily true. I get the feeling it’s more with you.”

His eyes met hers for a moment then he looked down at the treats. “Shall I put yours on a plate?”

“Please. Tell me what I have to try.”

“All of it.”

He began to cut the cakes up, placing a piece of each onto a dinner plate, so it was absolutely far too much for Charlotte to imagine eating, then put the plate in the middle of the bench and grabbed a fork.

“Ready?” He pressed into one of the cakes, breaking off a bit and lifting it towards her lips.

Her eyes met his and she nodded, lips parting as he brought the food closer and she tasted it, moaning softly.

“It’s so good,” she said simply.

“Now, try the wine.”

She did, sipping it and again, making a sound of appreciation, because the combination was out of this world. He moved onto another piece of cake, feeding her each time, until she’d sampled her way through the plate.

“Do you have a favourite?” He asked, reaching forward and wiping a crumb from the corner of her lips.

She shook her head. “I couldn’t choose. How did you find this place?”

“It’s around the corner from my office in London. My assistant is obsessed. She asks them to cater whenever I have meetings.”

“You have an office in London?” Her ears pricked up at that, for no reason she could think of.

“And New York, Toronto, Tokyo, Sydney,” he confirmed with a nod. “We’re a global company.”

“Yes, of course,” she agreed. But the idea of him coming to London regularly opened up a possibility she hadn’t wanted to consider. It cracked a tiny little hole in the idea of never seeing him again after this week, because if he came to London for work, surely, he could sometimes drive up into the Cotswolds as well?

She forced herself to look away, to bite her tongue, before the question could slip out: *how often do you come to London?* Because he was too astute. If she asked, he’d know immediately what she was getting at, and Charlotte didn’t want to seem so needy.

What had gotten into her? Besides, Maggie’s parents were waiting for an opportunity to go to a judge and prove that Charlotte was dropping the ball as guardian for Dash. It would be easy for them to paint her as a twenty something single more interested in her love life than raising a child—she wouldn’t give them any ammunition.

“How was your day?” He asked, his voice a little different. Maybe he’d guessed the direction of her thoughts, despite her silence.

She pulled her lips to the side. “Busy. Yours?”

He sipped his wine. “I had lunch with Winona.”

“Did you?” That caught Charlotte’s attention. “How was it?”

“She made cannelloni,” he said, flatly.

Charlotte grinned. “They’re delicious.”

Alessio’s jaw tightened.

“But I meant, how did the lunch go? Not the meal, the being with your mother and talking part?”

“We have little to talk about,” he said after a moment. “We’re like strangers.”

“But why?” Charlotte asked, gently, frustrated by the distance between them now, so she came to his side of the bench and pulled up onto it, sitting right beside him.

He tilted his face, so their eyes met, and a frisson of awareness danced down her spine.

“We rarely see one another.”

“I know that, but I’ve never understood...”

“How could you?”

She frowned. “I know your mum has missed you terribly. She thinks of you often. So why—,”

“How do you know that?” He prompted, voice flat.

“There’s a brokenness about her. As if part of her is missing. I have felt that from our first meeting—I see the same thing in Maggie’s parents. I feel it in here,” she said, pressing a hand to her chest. “It’s a certain weariness that invades people who’ve lost in a profound way.”

“Her husband died,” he pointed out.

“It’s not that. It’s...sadder than death.”

He scanned her face. “I think you’re imagining something that’s not there.”

“Do you?” She sipped her wine, but before she could swallow it, he brought his mouth to hers, stealing half of the liquid and kissing her at the same time.

“I really don’t want to talk about my mother,” he said, moving between the triangle of her legs. “Let’s go to bed.”

X

“WHAT’S THIS?” He gestured to a small tattoo on her ankle, tracing it with his finger, then lifted his eyes to hers so Charlotte’s heart did that now very familiar little skippedy-skip.

“A tattoo.”

“Of...”

“A cat,” she smiled. “I got it forever ago.”

He arched a brow. “When you were, what? Five?”

She laughed. “Fifteen.”

“Is that legal?”

“You need parental consent. My dad wasn’t really in the picture but Michael—my brother—took me and pretended. I don’t think the tattoo guy particularly cared, one way or another.”

Alessio dropped his lips to the cat and kissed it. “Why a cat?”

“When I was a little girl, a friend of Michael’s had a cat, who had a litter. Michael got given one. We had to hide it from dad at first—I’m pretty sure he didn’t even want the kids he’d been lumbered with, let alone a fur baby, but Michael and I adored her. She was so cute and tiny, and trembling—she slept in my bed, curled up just beside my pillow. I was half-terrified of squashing her flat.”

Alessio came higher in the bed until he was lying beside her, one arm casually draped over her naked waist, his fingers tracing invisible patterns on her back.

“She was the darkest black you’ve ever seen, with turquoise eyes. We called her Squiddy, like the ink, you know?”

His lips lifted at the corners, his eyes probing hers, so she felt a humming between them that had nothing to do with the fact they were naked and had been for the last four hours. This was different. More intimate even than sex.

“She was our cat, but really, she was mine. Tiny and precious and I loved her so much. She lived in my room for the first few months.”

“And your dad didn’t know?”

“I don’t think so. He found out eventually but by then, if he’d tried to make us get rid of her, I would have run away,” she said fiercely, tilting her chin, so Alessio leaned forward and kissed her lips in a spontaneous gesture of Charlotte didn’t know what.

“She died right after I turned fifteen. I came home from school, and she was just asleep on the foot of my bed, her chest moving but so laboured.” Charlotte’s whispered voice had a faraway tone to it. “I knew straight away that something was wrong. I went and sat with her, and she made the sweetest little noise, like when she was a kitten and wanted milk. I just stroked her, gently, gently, until she stopped breathing.” Tears filmed Charlotte’s eyes. “I was so sad, Alessio. I couldn’t believe she’d been dying, and I hadn’t realised. Had I missed a sign somewhere? I took her to the vet, so she could be cremated. They said it was just her time.”

Alessio murmured something she couldn’t quite hear.

“We had a funeral for her—Michael and me. I gave the eulogy. We cried, and afterwards, ate far too much cake. It was Michael who suggested we get tattoos.”

He lifted a hand and cupped her cheek gently, drawing her closer.

“I never thought that within a few years, I’d lose him too.” Her lips twisted. “Life really is cruel sometimes.”

He nodded slowly. “It can be.”

“Charlie?”

Charlotte froze, eyes wide, at the little voice outside in the hallway.

“It’s Dash,” she whispered, jolting to life and springing from the bed, grabbing her robe and waving her arms frantically into the holes. “Stay there,” she said, so softly it was almost inaudible, but Alessio had no intention of leaving anyway.

She cinched the belt of her robe at the waist then moved to the door, cracking it open just wide enough to slip through before pulling the door firmly behind her.

Dash was in the hallway.

“Hey, buddy. What’s up?”

“I had a dream. A bad dream.” He looked up at her with a trembling lip. “It was about them.”

“Oh, honey,” she crouched down and wrapped him in a big hug, holding him tight to her body. Not so often anymore, but from time to time, Dash still dreamt of his parents, of their death, or he dreamt that they were in front of him, and he’d couldn’t catch them, couldn’t make them turn around.

Charlotte could feel his little heart racing, his breathing faster than normal.

“Come into the kitchen, I’ll make you some warm milk.”

He padded behind her then climbed up onto a stool. “I hate those dreams.”

“I know.”

She poured some milk into a saucepan and set it over the stove, waiting as it came to the simmer, and while it did, she talked to Dash about his parents, happy memories she never wanted him to forget, recollections they both treasured. The time they took him to the pier at Brighton, and he ate his body

weight in fairy floss, or how they watched every episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with him when he was just a newborn because they wanted him to be ready for first contact. The way Maggie had knitted him sweaters and called them wearable-love, and she'd been obsessed with making sure Dash always had matching socks, so Maggie and Charlotte bought ten pairs, exactly the same, for Dash as a present one year. She reminded him how smart his parents were, how kind, and by the time Dash had finished his milk, his eyes were heavy and his face calm. She took him back to his room and tucked him under the covers. It took no time for him to fall asleep, and she was glad, because in sleep, he looked so much more content.

She expelled a sigh, tiptoed out of his room and closed the door, before returning to her own. Despite the fact she'd told Alessio to stay exactly where he was, she'd half expected him to have disappeared into thin air.

But he was right where she'd left him, except now he was propped against the headboard, with one of her books in hand. She peered at it as she came closer and smiled to see he'd chosen *The Eye of the Needle*.

“Sorry about that.”

He lifted a brow. “About what? I know you have a child, and that he takes priority. You were very clear. Besides, it's as it should be.”

“The timing,” she said with a lift of her shoulders. “He usually sleeps right through. Every now and again though, he has these nightmares.” And she explained about his dreams, and their ritual for helping him through it. Alessio placed the book to his side, and reached for Charlotte's wrist, drawing her to the mattress, sitting in the space next to him.

“You're very good with him,” he said.

Her lips pulled to one side. “I hope so. It's hard, you know?”

“I do know. I can see how good you are—with cats and people.”

He unfastened her robe, eyes scanning her face. “But what I would like to know is if you are tired?”

Her heart sped up. “Oh?”

“Because I can leave now, if you need to sleep.”

“Or?”

His eyes were lightly mocking. “Or, I can stay a little longer.”

She sighed softly. “Yes, please. Stay.”

HE'D MEANT to stay only another hour at most, but somehow, he'd fallen asleep, and he cursed to realise the sun was already up, meaning his ability to hide from her little ward was made far more difficult.

Beside him, Charlotte swore.

“We fell asleep.”

He felt unusually guilty. He'd never dated a woman with a child, he realised. Sex was easy when it was only two people to consider, but the addition of a third, and a child who couldn't know what they were doing, made everything higher stakes and far more complicated.

Besides which, he'd never dated a woman anywhere like this—usually Alessio entertained in his own luxurious home, where he had an army of servants and yet an overarching assumption of complete privacy. Tiptoeing around took him back to his teenage years, when he would sneak women into his bedroom under cover of darkness, to avoid his father finding out.

Not, he later realised, that his father would have particularly cared. He'd always been proud of Alessio's reputation with women.

“I meant to leave,” he said with true remorse. “I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault,” she waved a hand through the air. “But I'm afraid you're trapped here now.”

He arched a brow. “That holds more appeal than you might realise,” he smirked, grabbing her wrist and pulling her down on top of him so she laughed. He lifted a hand and covered her mouth, smothering the sound, and a second later, chose another method, kissing her instead, until her laugh was swallowed up deep inside of him.

He wanted her like he’d never wanted anything in his life.

Internally, he swore, because she was more addictive than he’d known a woman could be. While he liked sex, he’d always been reasonably ‘take it or leave it’ as to the partner. As callous as it sounded, one woman wasn’t more special or desirable than the next. He just liked sex. But sex with Charlotte was...something else, and despite the fact he *knew* she had commitments and had to get up, he wasn’t capable of listening to common sense. He moved quickly, rolling her onto her back and reaching over her for the condoms he’d stashed in her bedside table, putting it on as quickly as he could and then pushing between her legs.

“Charlotte?” He asked sternly, because hell, he wanted her so much he hadn’t even stopped to make sure she felt the same.

Her eyes though were fevered, her cheeks flushed, and she lifted her hips, drawing him inside and exclaiming with relief, as though they hadn’t slept together in eons, not simply hours.

It was quick. Far too quick for a man like Alessio, but they moved as one, passion driving them to new heights, his body taking everything she had to offer, kissing her so she wouldn’t cry out, his hands running over her completely, marking her in some silent, complicated way as his, until he felt her muscles spasm around him, and his own control burst from his grip, his own explosion intense and impossible to curtail.

He collapsed on top of her, heavy and spent, and lay there for the longest possible time—not long at all—before rolling to the side, aware she needed to get to work and the boy who had no idea there was another man in the house.

“I—could get used to waking up like this,” she said with a face that was still flushed by passion, her pale hair forming a

curtain too quickly for him to see anything other than the hint of a smile. And then, she was up, dressing with lightning speed, moving to the door and blowing him a kiss before doubling back, grabbing the mystery he'd been half-reading the night before and tossing it towards him.

“Keep yourself busy. I'll let you know when the coast is clear.”

THE IDEA CAME to him somewhere around page one hundred and seven, and not for any specific reason related to the story. While his eyes were reading the words on the page, his mind was going over the night they'd shared, their bodies' insatiable needs for one another, and more than that, he was thinking about her life here in this tiny town, in his mother's pub, raising her nephew, sacrificing everything for everyone and despite the fact Alessio had been solely focused on himself and his business, for as long as he could remember, he wondered what it would be like to do something for Charlotte. Something really special. Something that she'd remember forever.

And okay, it would be a little something for him too, because whisking her out of this place for a day, and maybe a night if he could make it work with her schedule, would give them the time and freedom to explore this without restraint.

He wanted to hear her scream with pleasure again, like she had on the first night. He wanted to know he was the reason for that.

But first, he had to convince her...

CHAPTER 8

“ARE YOU WORKING TODAY?”

Charlotte sipped her coffee, glad he'd stayed in her room while Dash got ready for school, glad he was still in her apartment now, even though she should have been downstairs already, attacking the kitchen duties.

“I'm doing dinner. Why?”

“Could someone cover your shift?”

Charlotte frowned. “Theoretically. Why?”

“Can you arrange it?”

“At the risk of sounding repetitive, why?”

He reached over and pressed a finger to her lips. “What about Dash? Can he spend the night with a friend?”

Her frown deepened. “It's a school night. I wouldn't usually allow that.”

“But could you arrange it?”

“You're going to have to give me something to work with here.” Curiosity was eating her alive.

“Besides wanting to drag you back to bed and stay there all day and all night?”

Her heart rate accelerated into dangerous territory. “Yes, besides that,” she said, but her voice was throaty; she was pretty sure he wasn't convinced by her attempt at sounding nonchalant.

“I have to go back to Italy today. I thought you might like to come with me.”

Charlotte almost dropped her coffee. “I’m sorry. Did you just say...”

“Italy. More specifically, to the factory in Milan. I thought you might like to come see it.”

“The factory where all the delicious chocolates are made?” She mocked a swoon. “Well, I’d love that, of course, but it’s impossible.”

“You just said theoretically you can make it happen.”

Her heart leaped into her throat. He was right. She *could* move the pieces of her life around to make this work. “It’s crazy,” she murmured, shaking her head. “I have responsibilities here. Commitments. I can’t just flit off to the continent because you’re asking me.”

“Why not?”

She drew a blank.

Sensing his advantage, Alessio reached across the table, weaving their fingers together. “Let us say this: you will see what strings you can pull to make it happen. If you are easily able to arrange a replacement at work, and someone to care for Dash, then we’ll leave here at lunchtime. If you cannot, then it’s okay. No big deal,” he shrugged his shoulders.

“But you’ll be gone tonight?” She asked, and then cringed at how obviously needy that question was.

“Yes.” He dipped his head in confirmation. “And I would much rather have you with me than not.” He stood, carrying his cup to the sink. “The decision is, of course, completely yours.”

SOME DECISION! How could she say no? It was madness to go, but impossible not to. If their entire fling was predicated on Charlotte not wanting to live with regrets, then going to Italy with Alessio was only a furtherance of that original

proposition. She'd always regret not taking him up on this offer. And so she should.

It took three phone calls: one to her closest mum friend, who she trusted implicitly with Dash, to arrange the sleepover. Another to her assistant chef to swap shifts, and finally, a call to Melody.

"I'm going to tell Winona that you've got something on, and that I'm spending tonight with you, okay?"

"Okay, fine, but where will you really be?"

"If I told you, you'd never believe me."

"Try me."

"I'm serious, Mel. It's madness."

"I like madness, and I definitely like the idea of *you* and madness. So? What? A festival? Bungee jumping? An orgy? What?"

Charlotte laughed. "Do you remember the guy, from the kitchen?"

"*Carlotta*? Hell, yeah. What about him?"

Charlotte gave her best friend the cliff's notes version, making sure to underscore how casual their arrangement was, and how committed they both were to keeping things secret.

"So, it's casual, but this billionaire CEO wants to take you *casually* to Italy for the night to *casually* show you his chocolate factory?"

"It is casual," Charlotte insisted.

"Oh, sure, totally sounds it."

"I'm serious," Charlotte said quietly. "He's one hundred per cent not into relationships. He was honest about that from the start. And you know I could never get seriously involved with him, or anyone. Not until Dash is eighteen, anyway."

"How long are you going to let them keep you over a barrel?"

"They're just looking out for Dash's best interests."

“No, they’re trying to bully you into giving him up.”

“Never going to happen.”

“I know that, but do they?”

“I think they’re probably getting a good idea by now.”

“Where in Italy are you going?”

“Milan, I think he said.”

“Pack something warm...”

Charlotte didn’t say what she was thinking: that with Alessio by her side, she’d be plenty warm enough.

SHE HADN’T GIVEN their mode of transportation a minute’s thought because to Charlotte, there was only one way to get from the Cotswolds to Italy—a drive to London, a flight in a commercial jet and then probably a second flight after hours of kicking around in a brightly lit airport.

But when Alessio came to pick her up, he drove her not to London, but to a private airstrip nearby, where a jet was waiting, with the familiar logo of his company emblazoned on the tail. Inside the jet was the last word in luxury, from the uniformed staff who greeted them at the top of the plane to the interior, which was more like a decadent lounge room than recognisably a plane. With wide, beige leather seats and sofas in the front, and behind them, seats that ran along the wall of the plane, with low coffee tables made of what looked to be marble. The ceilings were high—easily eight feet—and Alessio gave Charlotte a quick tour that included the master bedroom, a space bigger than her apartment, with a walk-in wardrobe filled with Alessio’s suits.

The bathroom he casually indicated had a shower and a marble bath and looked as though it would belong perfectly in a six-star hotel.

“This is how you travel?”

His expression gave nothing away.

“It’s...beautiful. It’s just...so much.”

“When I fly, I need to arrive fresh. Oftentimes, I’m only in town for a day or two.”

“And first class wouldn’t cut it?”

“I need to move on my own schedule.”

She nodded, but it was still impossible to get her head around this kind of wealth. In the pub, despite knowing what he did for a living, he’d still felt like a normal person to her. Now, she couldn’t help but be cognisant of their differences. It was an awareness that only increased as they prepared for takeoff, settling into a bank of two chairs, facing each other over a small coffee table, and a flight attendant appeared who had all the organisational skills of an executive assistant, taking notes on what they’d like to eat, drink and confirming dinner reservations and itinerary details with Alessio. They slipped in and out of Italian and English, so Charlotte caught only half the conversation.

When they were alone again, Alessio turned to her. “We’ll be taking off any minute.”

Right on cue, the engines began to whirr, and the plane pushed back.

Charlotte could think of nothing to say. The sense that they were totally different species was taking hold of her, so she gripped the armrest tightly and stared out of the window. The hostess reappeared with two glasses of champagne and a little tray of chocolates, placing them in the centre of the table then leaving the main cabin.

“You’re nervous.”

It was the same thing he’d said on the first night, and she thought perhaps the second too.

Turning to him with a droll expression, she gave him a ‘what do you think?’ expression and he laughed.

“Don’t be.”

“Easier said than done. This,” she gestured to the plane. “Is completely surreal. I don’t remember the last time I flew anywhere. It’s been years. I only have a passport because I

needed it for the custody arrangements. And the last time I *did* fly, was on a budget airline where I became far too intimately acquainted with my neighbour passenger's furry knees and elbows."

Alessio grinned. "But why does this make you nervous?"

"Because it's new and different," she reiterated. "I'm outside of my comfort zone."

"But why should you feel that? I don't understand."

"Of course, you don't," she said with a roll of her eyes as the plane lifted up off the ground. Fearing for their drinks, she reached forward to grab hers at the same moment he did, and their fingers brushed, sending a shockwave of awareness through Charlotte that made her breath snag in her throat. Her eyes skittled to his. Had he felt it too?

"Meaning?" He sipped his champagne and her eyes dropped to his lips, reminding her of the way he tasted when he kissed her, of the way he felt, and her heart lurched and pulled in directions she was sure it wasn't supposed to.

"Meaning," she tried hard to grip reality. "That you were born with all this. It's completely normal to you."

"I still exist in the real world. I'm aware it's unusual. But why should you feel intimidated by it?"

"Because it's different. Don't you feel—never mind. Silly question." Of course, he didn't feel intimidated, by anything ever.

"Ask it anyway."

"I was going to ask if you ever felt nervous, about anything, but I can see that you wouldn't."

"If that's true, it's because I don't let superficial concerns bother me."

She tilted her head to the side. "And you think this is superficial?"

"Yes."

She supposed he was right. They weren't dating, with a view to falling in love and maybe even getting married. This was a fling. What did it matter if their lives and world views were entirely different? What she needed was to be a little bit more like Melody—to be able to sit back and enjoy the ride.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed a serene smile to her face. "Never mind," she said, after a beat. "It doesn't matter." She sipped her champagne to underscore the point, enjoying the feeling of ice-cold bubbles in her mouth and then throat, all the way to her belly, as the plane lifted higher into the sky and the Cotswolds became a tiny speck of green beneath them.

It was a short flight to Milan, and after Charlotte had gotten past her initial tension and enjoyed a glass of bubbles, her nerves dissipating enough to enjoy the experience, the conversation, the delicious lunch that was served, so by the time they landed, she felt totally at ease.

It didn't last long. The discombobulating experience of suddenly existing in a whole other world returned the moment the airplane doors opened, and they stepped out into the frigidly cold winter's afternoon. A four-wheel drive was waiting, as well as two men. One a driver, another, she gathered, an assistant, who began to speak in rapid fire Italian to Alessio, who nodded with a frown and then lifted his hand. "*Basta*, we will discuss it further at the factory. Gianni, this is Charlotte Smith."

Gianni gave her a wide smile. He was a handsome man, in his late twenties or early thirties, dressed in a perfect suit with groomed hair, and yet Charlotte could observe him completely objectively. He didn't make her stomach clutch the way Alessio did when he walked into a room. Attraction and chemistry were strange beasts.

The outskirts of Milan were beautiful. This close to Christmas, the streets were hung with decorations—string lights from one side to the other, and the ground was covered in a dusting of snow that grew thicker as they drove. She stared out of the window, happy to enjoy the view, and every now and again, Alessio would lean over and squeeze her hand,

pointing out some landmark or other. It was all completely mesmerising.

The car pulled away from the city and eventually arrived at a large warehouse with tall gates—the logo for Alessio’s company was clear on the signage. Charlotte held her breath.

The car pulled to a stop, someone else came forward to open the doors but rather than be absorbed into the meeting that was waiting for him, Alessio turned to the waiting people, his executives, she presumed, and said, “I will be ready in twenty minutes. I’ll meet you soon.” Then, he turned to Charlotte with that signature smile, put a hand in the small of her back, and guided her through the secure entrance and towards a lift that took them to a large viewing platform that wrapped around the facility. The chocolates were being made beneath them, and she stared at the workers operating so efficiently, fascinated by the procedures. Alessio explained things as they went, his voice low, his lips close, and her stomach tightened into knots with each passing second, until finally she felt like she might burst.

“You have a meeting, right?” She blurted out. “Don’t feel you have to babysit me.”

“But babysitting you is so fun,” he responded, brushing a hand over her backside and moving his lips to her ear.

Desire lashed her from the inside out.

“Come with me.” He moved his hand to hers, weaved their fingers together and drew her away from the viewing platform towards a room that was instantly familiar and comforting to Charlotte: a kitchen, heavy with the sweet aroma of chocolate.

There was a small team working in here, perhaps ten people, and Alessio guided her towards one in particular. “Maria.” The woman, young with curly blonde hair and big brown eyes, looked up as he approached.

“Signore Cavalcante.” She was instantly formal. “*Buongiorno.*”

He nodded. “I have promised a special friend of mine a tour of the kitchens. Would you be able to show Miss Smith

around?”

“Of course, it would be my pleasure.”

“She is an exceptional chef, and will no doubt have many questions for you.” Then, to Charlotte, he offered a smile that was laced with sensual heat, so she almost forgot they had an audience. “Have fun.” Then, leaning closer, so only she could hear, “But not too much fun. Save that for me, later.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened and she swallowed with great difficulty, past a throat that was constricted by desire and need.

It was an afternoon out of a fantasy. Maria didn’t skip a single part of the trial kitchen, where new recipes were experimented with, and special editions crafted. She showed Charlotte all of the treats they were working on, for next year, and Charlotte tasted each and every one, offering her thoughts and suggestions. The work was incredibly seductive.

As a perfectionist driven by flavour, she could see how incredibly satisfying it would be to be tasked with the creation of a new flavour, of sampling many, many interactions to arrive at just the right palette sensation. It was hard not to feel a wave of envy for these chefs, who’d ended up working in a place like this.

Only a text from Dash had her pulling out of this fairytale—he’d sent a silly selfie with his friend and a note saying to have fun with Melody, so Charlotte felt a hint of guilt at the little white lie. But it was a necessary evil—she hadn’t been prepared to miss this experience.

Maria was lovely, and as they walked, she asked Charlotte about her work and life and Charlotte found herself opening up in a relaxed and informal manner, so that when Alessio returned, she couldn’t believe an hour had flown by.

“It’s wonderful,” she gushed, when they climbed back into his car, this time, alone, with Alessio behind the wheel.

“I thought you’d like it.”

“I really did. Thank you for bringing me here,” she said, with a shake of her head.

Alessio's expression was knowing and while she couldn't fathom why, twenty minutes later, when he turned the car off the main road and headed towards two large, wrought iron gates, her lips parted in an involuntary gesture of surprise. For beyond the gates, marked on three sides by rows of large, snow-covered pine-trees, was the most magnificent castle Charlotte had ever seen.

"Is this where we're staying?" She asked of the hotel—so exclusive it didn't even have signage.

He made a noise of agreement and excitement hummed inside Charlotte's blood.

But as they approached the castle, something twigged in her mind. There was a noticeable lack of staff, of security, of other guests. He drew the car to a stop and a single servant appeared in a thick winter coat and hat, moving towards the car with a polite smile as he opened the doors.

"Signore Cavalcante, welcome home."

"*Grazie, Paolo.*"

"Home," she said with a shake of her head. "I should have known."

He grinned in response, taking her hand in his as they walked away from the car.

By the time he'd shown her a little of the castle—it was enormous and would take days to see properly—Charlotte's mind was spinning. "I can't believe you ever go anywhere else," she remarked. "If this was my home, I don't think I'd be able to leave."

"It gets very cold," he responded lightly. "Sydney holds a certain appeal at this time of year."

She wrinkled her nose. "Not for me. I love the winter, and I particularly love a white Christmas. Surely, there's nowhere on earth more perfect than this?"

Alessio looked at her for several beats and the air seemed to evaporate out of the room. "Are you hungry?"

“I just ate my body weight in chocolate. I don’t know if I’ll ever be hungry again.”

“You haven’t tasted my housekeeper’s cooking.”

Charlotte’s brow lifted and despite the fact she was no longer remotely hungry, it was impossible not to feel a curious sense of interest in what might be on offer.

“But there’s no rush,” he said with a wink. “I want to show you something else first.”

Leading her through the ancient, formal living room, beyond a library, they emerged onto a terrace with a light covering of snow, and a little way over, a burst of steam. She frowned, trying to connect the dots.

“One of my favourite ways to relax,” he explained, pulling her with him towards the edge of the terrace, and the spa. It was large, lined with stone, filled with steaming hot water that looked so perfectly inviting, Charlotte trembled with anticipation.

“Swim with me?” The words were couched as a question but in fact, there was a hint of command in his tone—a command she had no interest in disobeying.

“I don’t have any bathers,” she demurred with disappointment.

He laughed, then drew her into his arms, so her cheeks flamed at her silly, immature modesty.

“Bathing suits are very, very optional.”

“Oh,” she bit down on her lip.

“Underwear is fine, if you’d prefer.”

“I would.” She didn’t meet his eyes. She was embarrassed but Charlotte couldn’t imagine being naked in the spa, not when there was a housekeeper and other staff inside, any of whom could appear at any point.

“Suit yourself.” He began to undress himself, and she could only stare as bit by bit he removed his clothing until he was buck naked and utterly brilliant. She still hadn’t moved.

“Shall I help you?” He asked, reaching for the buttons of her coat, unhooking them one by one, eyes watching her until she nodded a little unsteadily.

Each layer of clothing he removed exposed her to the ice-cold night, so she was a strange mix of boiling hot blood and freezing cold skin, but even her skin was warming under his intense, hungry gaze.

“Do you have any idea how hard it has been to be so close to you all day, and not be able to touch?”

“You’ve touched,” she said on a jagged breath.

“Not as I have wanted to.”

“Oh.” In her underwear, she stood there, vulnerable and excited in equal measure. Alessio took her hand, and stepped into the spa, so she stepped with him, the warm water bliss against her feet first, then her ankles, calves, thighs, and abdomen, until she submerged herself to the neck and groaned at the perfection of the contrast: cold and hot. The snow was still falling, just little drifts of flakes, and she reached for it, watching as tiny particles landed on her fingertips.

“You are so beautiful,” he said with a shake of his head. “I have been imagining you like this.”

She jolted her face back to him.

“Have you?” It was so hard to imagine someone like Alessio imagining her anywhere, but here?

“Since the first night we made love, I wanted to bring you here.”

Her pulse was running dangerously quick.

“Come here,” he crooked his finger, inviting her to where he sat. She was powerless to resist. Her body went to his as if drawn by magnetic force and she surrendered to him with a sigh that spoke of contentment and completion, straddling him in the water and kissing him as she’d been wanting to all day, a kiss that was too incendiary to be shared in public, with witnesses, as it was a kiss that would ignite their entire bloodstreams, and they both knew it.

Seconds later, they exploded, so within the warmth of the spa, they became a frantic tangle of limbs, moving to touch and feel and be closer, closer than they'd ever been. She wore silk underpants, but they were an almost insufficient barrier to his erection, she felt it hard against her sex and ached to pull the fabric aside and welcome him deep into her core, to feel his enormous size fill her and make her whole once more. But they were in a spa, with no condom in sight, and despite the heady rush of this moment, neither was foolish enough to risk those consequences.

But God, how she wanted him.

His hand came between her legs, brushing over her sex until she was panting and writhing on his lap and then he pushed the cups of her bra down, freeing her breasts so they spilled like pale orbs into the spa, lit by the moonlight alone, dusted by sand. He lifted her higher on his lap, high enough that he could take one of her breasts into his mouth, the nipple rolled by his tongue, and she tilted her head back so her hair was wet in the water, and she was at the edge of her mind, the pleasure like lava inside her veins.

She swore softly, and ground down on his hand, because it wasn't enough. It was perfect and it was beautiful, but she *needed* him with a visceral, soul-deep ache.

"Please," she groaned, and then, madness surely overtook her, because she reached between her legs and pushed at the fabric, unable to care for anything in that moment but her desperate need for him. She sunk down, taking him deep inside and he swore, and froze, and when she looked at him, she saw the battle being waged in his eyes, the sheer look of desire at war with common sense.

"No," he grunted, lifting her and holding her off him, as a muscle jerked overtime in his jaw and she was left reeling, trying to get to grips with a fierce sense of rejection. He stood abruptly, his erection huge, his body terse, and moved to the pile of discarded clothes.

Relief flooded her.

This wasn't a rejection. It was a pause.

He was taking the precautions she hadn't been able to.

Sure enough, he returned within moments, unfurling a condom over his length as he went, his eyes fierce and loaded with a warning that made her blood boil.

“I want you,” he said, as if she could be in any doubt. He moved back to where he had been before, eyes challenging her. “Come back.”

She did as he said, her pulse racing at the heated demand in his voice, at the desperation she heard that fully matched her own sense of being unable to resist this. Strange that she'd ever worried about how she could possibly take his length inside, as when she did so now, it felt beyond perfect, like the clicking together of two pieces that were completely made for one another.

She arched her back in exultant relief, crying out in pleasure as he filled her and his strength became a part of her, his movement exactly what she needed so she felt the release of herself, the explosion of pleasure, starting in the balls of her feet and the pit of her stomach, and the very tips of her fingers, and spreading all through her, bit by bit, until she couldn't breathe, she couldn't think, she was simply trembling in the warm water, blood hot, face made cold by the snow that was kissing it, flake by delicate flake, body held together only by the man whose arms were wrapped around her like he daren't let go.

When he came, his guttural cries filled the air, mingling with her own, neither trying to be quiet, to mute the audible proof of their passion, both succumbing completely to this ancient, primal, organic pleasure, neither wondering why a physical act could feel so perfect on every level.

“IT'S JUST PERFECT,” she said, blinking out at the early morning view of the valley beyond his bedroom window—a bedroom that was more like an apartment, she thought, taking in the massive space with his super king bed in the centre, a sofa suite near the window, and shelves and shelves of books.

But beyond the castle, there were those ancient trees and they glistened with snow now, beautiful and white, like something out of a story book.

“I thought you’d like it.”

“This is really where you live?”

He pushed up onto one elbow, his face the study of relaxed ease, but she saw beneath that, to the darkening of his eyes, and held her breath, waiting for him to speak, as if some sixth sense alerted her to the fact he was about to say something important.

“It’s where I grew up,” he corrected after a moment. A slight differentiation. “It’s where my father died.”

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured, matching his posture, pushing up onto her side, propping her head on her palm. “What happened?”

“He was old, and in the end, had cancer. We didn’t know until a few weeks before he passed. That’s the way he would have wanted it.”

“Could he have had any treatment?”

“He didn’t want that. Not at his age. He was tired, I think.”

“It’s hard to lose someone you love.”

“Yes. I was...surprised. My father was the kind of man who seemed as though he could live forever.”

She looked around the room, sighing softly. “Did you live here with him?”

“No. I have a place in Rome.” He paused, scanning her face with his intelligent, dark eyes. “Would you like to see it?”

She blinked at him. “I...yes. I would. But we should get back.”

“What time do you need to be home by?”

She did some quick calculations. “Dash has a rehearsal after school for his Christmas concert, so five at the latest.”

“We have the day then.” He squeezed her hand. “Come with me.”

It was all too easy to be pulled into his vortex, to operate at his speed. She knew it was crazy, but hadn't she already crossed that bridge when she agreed to this whole thing? Not just joining him in Italy, but embarking on a no-strings fling with someone like Alessio Cavalcante?

“Okay,” she smiled, a smile that was happy and relaxed and that changed her face completely so that, unbeknownst to Charlotte, something strange twisted inside Alessio and he leaned forward to kiss Charlotte out of a need for reassurance, and a reminder that they were simply sleeping together, that his desire to please her stemmed from their mind-blowing physical chemistry, and nothing more puzzling whatsoever.

CHAPTER 9

It was mid-morning when they landed, and a perfect, crisp day. They travelled into the city centre for lunch at one of Alessio's favourite restaurants—not some fancy, famous place, but a small family run trattoria in a small laneway, where he was greeted as an old friend and offered a special menu, dishes recited by the waiter.

Alessio made a point of introducing Charlotte and explaining that she was an excellent chef, and the owner of the restaurant offered for her to come into the kitchen and watch their meals being prepared but before Charlotte could respond, Alessio demurred on her behalf.

“I don't feel like sharing you,” he said simply. “I'm sorry.”

This time, when he apologised, it sounded far less than sincere, and she burst out laughing.

His expression grew wary. “What is it?”

“You're just—bossy sometimes.”

He opened his mouth and then compressed his lips. “Would you like me to call Giuseppe back? If you would rather spend your time in the kitchen, I can live with it.”

It was impossible not to feel flattered by his possessive interest.

“Not at all,” she managed to respond, though her voice was lightly croaky and her tummy in knots. “I'm very happy here, thank you.”

The flavours of their meals were delicious, but she could barely taste anything, because it felt so perfect to be with Alessio. Their knees touched beneath the table, their fingers grazed whenever they reached for their wine glasses, and he continued to feed her forkfuls of his own meal, so they were frequently close. It was eating as foreplay and by the time they left, Charlotte's nerves were stretched thin.

“My apartment is around the corner. Would you like to see it?”

She could barely find the words to answer, but that didn't matter. One look into her eyes and he understood.

“*Andiamo.*” They walked hand in hand through the sunlit streets of Rome, much warmer here than it had been in the north, until they reached the stunning stone façade of a large apartment building. Two footmen stood on either side of the door and as Alessio approached, they greeted him formally, by name, and swiped a keycard to open the doors. Inside was just as impressive as outside. Double height ceilings, marble floors, gold detailing, enormous floral bouquets, it was the last word in opulent beauty.

The lift was very old but moved quickly, making a delicate dinging noise as the doors opened on the top floor, where only one door was on display in the entrance foyer.

He unlocked it and held it open for Charlotte. She stepped in and barely bothered with a cursory inspection despite her curiosity, for the simple reason she was already getting an idea as to what she'd find.

Everything in Alessio's world was decadent and expensive. *He only dates supermodels.*

It made sense. She could imagine a beautiful, slim glamazon would just complete the image of elegance, draped over the white leather sofas or perhaps elegantly atop the shiny grand piano in the corner.

Charlotte didn't feel like she belonged in this world at all, until Alessio looked at her and not only did she belong, she was somehow integral.

It was all an illusion of course. Alessio was one of those people with the ability to make you feel as though you were the most important person in the world, when obviously that wasn't the case. He was just killing time with her, while he was visiting family.

But why bring her to Italy then?

Why not spend his time with one of the many women who were no doubt saved in his phone or Tinder account or whatever he did to meet his supermodel harem?

The voice in the back of her mind was unwelcome, because it was pulling her in a direction that was seductive and dangerous, that made her want to wonder if he was enjoying Charlotte's company more than he'd presumed he would, if maybe he didn't want more from her than he'd first thought.

It was a fool's wish, and even if that were true, which she knew it couldn't be, Charlotte had no room in her life for a boyfriend.

A boyfriend!

Alessio was *not* boyfriend material. He was...a lover, at most. Sophisticated, European, magnetic, not the kind of guy you cuddled up on the couch with to watch Netflix. And that kind of thing was beyond her, anyway. She was Dash's carer, the closest thing to a mother he had. That was her sole focus. It was vital that she maintain her perspective on this.

Charlotte moved towards the piano, running her fingers over the glossy timber surface. "Do you play?"

"*Si.*"

She turned to face him. "Would you play something now for me?"

"If you'd like." He dipped his head in agreement then walked towards the piano. "What would you like to hear?"

"Surprise me."

He sat down, and Charlotte's breath caught in her throat because he looked so *right* there. Despite his big, tall frame and overtly masculine bearing, there was something incredibly

perfect about seeing him at this fabulous instrument. He lifted his hands, long fingers, tanned skin, and began to play. Somehow, the inert rectangles had magic and life breathed into them with his touch, so the instrument was singing, a classical song, somber and moving.

Charlotte stood where she was for a moment and then, as if drawn by some invisible magnetic force, moved closer, until her body was right at the side of the piano, her hip connecting to the timber, her eyes watching his fingers as they flew across the keys, before lifting to his face. His eyes were straight ahead, his face even more beautiful as he seemed to channel this music straight from the centre of his soul and out into the world.

Charlotte didn't realise she was holding her breath until he played the very last note and silence fell in the apartment, but not silence as it had been before, a silence that was somehow still humming with the electricity of his performance, infusing her with emotions she'd never experienced before. She exhaled roughly.

"That was beautiful," she said, finally, her voice cracking. "You play so well."

He turned to face her, his eyes assessing, one side of his mouth quirked upwards in a smile that was half amused, half mocking. "I studied for a long time."

"Did you?"

He dipped his head, pressing his fingers to the keys once more and playing a quick scale. "You never learned?"

"Piano?"

"Any instrument."

"No."

"Too busy looking after little kittens?"

She half-smiled. "Something like that."

"Sit down." He moved to the side of the stool. "I'll teach you."

She demurred instinctively. “I can’t play.”

“No one can until they learn.”

But you won’t be around long enough to teach me. “I’d rather hear you again.”

Curiosity sparked in his gaze, but he didn’t argue, instead, his fingers moved over the keys again. This time, he played a Christmas carol, an old favourite, known the world over. She listened to the music as it filled the room, smiling without realising it, loving this even more than the classical piece.

It seemed to be the most natural thing in the world for Charlotte to come to stand behind Alessio, to put her arms over his shoulders and link them in front of his chest as he played, her chin resting on the top of his head, to be close to him. He continued to play and then removed his left hand, his right still crossing the keys and filling the luxurious penthouse with Christmas music while his other hand lifted to hers, his thumb stroking the soft flesh of the back of her hand, so their connection seemed to defy all sense and logic.

When the song finished, he turned his whole body on the stool and she came to stand between his legs, a perfect moment of synchronicity without choreography, that brought them closer. Charlotte couldn’t have said if he kissed her or if she moved first but their lips connected and sparks buzzed and hummed into space, charging the atmosphere with the power of an electrical storm.

He stood, pushing her back a little, lifting her around the waist, drawing her to him, and something clicked inside Charlotte, so she felt as though she’d come home, really come home, in a way she’d never known. If she could think straight, it might have shocked her, but she was incapable of thinking or feeling anything more than this, this perfect, drugging, all-consuming bliss.

She didn’t take in any of the details of his home—she couldn’t—as he carried and kissed her down a wide hallway and into his bedroom. Later, she’d notice the sweeping views of Rome, but for now, she was simply lost to the moment, and for a split second, Charlotte hoped she’d never be found.

HE WANTED to keep her here longer. At least another night. Maybe two. A week?

He wanted to keep her here because it felt so good and right to have Charlotte in his home, because he loved sharing meals with her and found her fascinating to talk to, because he liked playing the piano for her and hearing her soft little breaths behind him, because he liked holding her and touching her and he loved having her in his bed, but even though Alessio had been accused of being selfish by many women, many times, with Charlotte, he was well aware her needs had to come first.

Not her needs, but those of her little ward, a young boy who Alessio wasn't going to disadvantage by using Charlotte's sensuality to make her forget her responsibilities.

He didn't psychoanalyse why this mattered to him so much—he didn't need to. He remembered what it was like to be a young boy, to have the adults in your life put their needs first and would never be a party to causing that kind of sadness to a child.

With regret, he brushed his fingers over Charlotte's face, watching as her eyes flickered to waking.

"I fell asleep," she said, bemused.

"Yes."

Then, she sat bolt upright. "What time is it?"

"It's okay. You're not late. But we should get ready to leave."

"Yes. I have to get back to Dash. I didn't mean to—,"

"I know. That's why I woke you. Come on." He kissed her forehead and then quickly stepped out of bed, before he could change his mind and sweep her into his arms, kissing her deeper, harder, faster, with all the passion and need that were storming through his body.

X

“I DON’T THINK we should walk inside together,” she said slowly, hesitantly, as Alessio’s car idled outside the pub. “Anyone could see us.”

It was a reasonable point, and they’d both agreed to keeping this quiet, for Charlotte’s sake. So why did the suggestion make him experience a surge of irritation? “Sure,” he nodded, with the appearance of nonchalance even when he felt far from it. “I’ll take in your bag; you wait here a few minutes.” He handed her his keys. “Okay?”

Her eyes were hooked to his, a small frown on her lips, but she nodded.

“Thank you.”

“It’s a tiny bag,” he pointed out.

“I meant...for everything. I had a really great time last night, and today. I don’t remember the last time I’ve done something like that. Actually, I’ve *never* done anything like it. I...thank you.”

Her admission, her gratitude, they were so sweet, it was impossible not to feel a kick of something in his gut. He tightened his grip on the wheel then stepped out of the car. “It was my pleasure,” he murmured, through his still-open door, before closing it quietly and moving to the boot to remove their luggage. Two small bags, it took him no time at all. He carried them over one shoulder, making a point of not turning to look back at the car, and more so, at Charlotte. He didn’t need to turn to look, she was burned into his mind’s eye.

“START AGAIN,” she murmured, looking into Dash’s distressed little face. “Tell me the problem slowly.”

“Mrs Roobottom broke her arm and she’s the only person who knows all the songs—we’ve been practicing with her for

months and now they're talking about cancelling the concert. It's bloody annoying, Charlie. Bloody bad luck."

"Dash," she murmured, stroking his head, making only the smallest effort to chide him for his repeated use of a word she considered too grown up for him. "There must be someone else."

"Esteban is away, and he's the only other teacher who can play the piano. They're trying to find someone, but the concert is in two nights. How could anyone learn the songs in time?"

It was impossible for Charlotte not to think immediately of Alessio, and the beautiful, soulful way he'd played the Christmas song for her in his apartment. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as she crouched down to Dash's eye height. "I think I might know someone who can help." She crossed her fingers hopefully behind her back.

Dash's eyes went wide. "Really?"

"Really." She chewed on her lower lip. "Someone I could ask, at least. I'm not sure he'll agree, or that he'll be able to, but he is a very good pianist, and he's in town."

Dash's face relaxed, a smile shifting his features.

"Why don't you get me a list of the songs you're performing, and I'll ask him right away."

"Oh, Charlie, would you really?"

"Of course!"

AN HOUR LATER, with the song list in hand and the echo of the desperate pleading of the choir captain—who'd confirmed the predicament and likely cancellation of the concert—in her head, Charlotte approached Alessio's room with a rush of feelings she couldn't comprehend. She was jittery and excited, nervous too, with how much was riding on his acquiescence.

Most of all, she was excited to see him again, despite the fact they'd only parted ways earlier that afternoon. When he opened the door to his hotel room, her heart dropped to her toes. He'd apparently just showered, going by the towel slung

low on his hips and the delectable, bare chest staring back at her.

“Oh, um, hi,” she mumbled, desperately trying to draw her gaze higher, to meet his eyes. “This isn’t a good time.”

He arched a brow, regarding her thoughtfully. “Isn’t it?” His voice, a husky growl, was an unspoken invitation. She desperately wanted to accept, but she had to work, and Dash was waiting on her answer. As was the choir captain and the whole school now.

“I have a favour to ask you,” she blurted out straight away, her features showing pleading.

“Fascinating.” His eyes roamed her face. “What do you need?”

The answer to that was easy. She needed Alessio. Now. All of him. Alone, in his room, for another night, and a night after that. She needed him to stay in town, so she could get to know him properly, to enjoy more of whatever they were doing, until it ran its course, and they were both ready to walk away. But that answer ran totally contrary to what they’d agreed, so Charlotte kept her lips tightly sealed as she tried to make her brain focus.

“Charlotte? Would you like to come in while you frame your question?”

She stared into his eyes and had the strangest feeling she was drowning.

“Perhaps it’s the kind of favour that’s better indulged in private anyway,” he murmured, reaching out and grabbing her on the hip, drawing her towards him, so their bodies collided and all the air left Charlotte’s lungs in one fierce rush. Desire was a pit of fire, licking the soles of her feet.

He kicked the door closed behind her then stepped forward, backing her against the ancient timber, his mouth finding hers and kissing her as though they’d been separated for days, not hours. She expelled her breath softly, the relief so strong, so fierce, that for a moment, she forgot absolutely everything except this. She wanted only Alessio.

His towel loosened. Not of its own accord, but because her fingers were pushing at the terry material, searching, seeking, touching hungrily and with every expectation of possession, touching him as though she had every right, as though they were designed for this.

She'd come here with a very specific purpose in mind but high on being in his hotel room, on being alone with him again so soon, when she'd thought it might be a whole night, at least, before they could see each other again, what could she do but surrender to him, to this pleasure, to the hungry, insatiable beast of need that had them both in its thrall?

They walked in unison, bodies melded, lips locked, the few feet to the double bed, and fell onto it, a tangle of limbs as Charlotte's clothes were removed from her body and then they were naked, writhing together, seeking, needing, kissing, exploring and finally, he was pushing into her, so huge that he took her breath away and it took her body a moment to remember what it felt like to be so full, so completely possessed by a man, but then he was moving and she was crying out as pleasure saturated her body, his mastery of her so skilful and absolute that she could only feel—the sensations were overpowering but she was prepared to be overpowered.

The way he made her feel was beyond compare. She arched her back and whimpered as her soul seemed to shatter apart and beam with light. Her breathing was rushed, her voice high pitched, his name in her mouth some kind of nirvana, and all she could think—the only thought that was capable of flooding her mind—was how much she loved this. Every single part of it. Being with him, being made love to by him, kissing him, every single part, filled her body with hope and happiness and made her feel alive, really alive, for the first time in years.

She loved this. She loved...everything about him.

The thought shifted through her, causing, briefly, a frown to mar her face, because it was totally incongruous and untrue. She loved sleeping with him, and the fun of conducting a secret affair, but she didn't love anything about Alessio besides his beautiful and very skilful body. Love was

something that came on slowly, that was built over months and years, that came from friendship and trust, from a place of liking first. Love was, in fact, most likely an illusion. If she hadn't seen Michael and Maggie and how happy they were, she'd have thought it all a big lie. In some rare instances, it was everything the fairytales told you, but not in the real world, not for most people.

They lay on the bed, breath hot and rushed, his body heavy on hers, a delightful weight, and she felt everything on an elemental level—the fibres of the duvet, the roughness of the hairs on his chest, the softness of his skin, the smell of his aftershave, the in and out of his breathing, the flex of his toes as he moved his leg a little, the removal of him from her sex, leaving her, momentarily, bereft.

“Was that the favour?” He asked with a slow-spreading grin, pushing up onto his elbows to look into her eyes.

“Not exactly,” she said with a rueful expression. “But I appreciate it nonetheless.”

“That’s mutual.” He ran his hand over her hair then kissed her bare forehead, making her breath hitch in her throat for a completely different reason now. His tenderness reminded her of the strange, discordant thought she’d experienced a moment earlier. It whispered promises and spoke of affection and love and desires for more than the hot and heavy sex stuff.

Her skin flushed and she looked away.

“Okay, I get the feeling this is something big. What is it? Do you need a kidney? A lung? A new job in the world’s best chocolate factory?”

She laughed but her eyes widened as she heard the last question and a sharp pang of regret hit her right in the solar plexus. There would have been a time when that was her absolute dream and fantasy, a time when she would have wanted, more than anything, to live abroad and work in a massive, international role like that. But losing her brother and Maggie had changed everything. Dash was her compass now. Her life was with him, her ambitions curtailed completely.

“Actually, I need you.”

He lifted his brows.

“Or rather, your hands.”

His eyes narrowed and she heard the statement, and how he might interpret it. Heat flushed her cheeks.

“To play piano,” she clarified quickly.

“Far less fun than what I was imagining,” he said with a tsking noise.

“Well, I’m not ruling that out either,” she responded huskily, offering a casual wink to encourage the direction of his thoughts. After all, his hands were very, very talented.

“I don’t have a piano here,” he pointed out the obvious, looking around the neat but small room.

“It’s for a school concert,” she clarified. “The teacher who is supposed to accompany the kids has broken her arm, and the back-up is already on leave, visiting his family. The kids have been working so hard on their songs, practicing all term, and the concert is a really big deal. The whole town usually goes to watch, and it means a lot—to the kids, and the adults. But without a pianist, they’re going to cancel. So, I just thought…”

“You just thought I could step in and save the day?” He asked with a look of exaggerated grimace.

“Yep. The thing is, I’ve heard you play, so you can’t even lie to get out of it.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” he responded, kissing her forehead again.

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” she murmured. “If there was anyone else, *anyone*, who had the slightest musical ability—at least, enough ability to play their way through ten songs in a row, we’d ask them. I guess, worst case scenario, they could try to buy the music online,” she said, thinking fast. “Only the tradition is for the church organ to be played and it just won’t sound the same. I’m sorry to ask.”

“Why? You seem to think this will be like walking over the fires of hell for me?”

“Well, you’re on holiday, for one thing, and for another, you don’t really strike me as the Christmas concert kind of guy. You probably have a million more important things to do. You’re busy and...”

“And you need a favour,” he said with a lift of his shoulders. “Of course, I’ll help.”

Her heart soared and her breath broke from her body, her lungs incapable of re-inflating for a moment.

“You will?” Her voice sounded squeaky to her own ears.

“You sound so surprised,” he laughed, a short, sharp sound. “Did you have me pegged as some kind of scrooge?”

“I—no, it’s not that, I just didn’t—I hoped,” she murmured. “But at the same time, I didn’t expect...”

“It’s no big deal. Ten songs? No problem.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she said on a rushed exhalation. “You are a lifesaver.”

“Oh, I’m not completely altruistic,” he said with a sexy smile in a low voice. “My help will come at a price, of course.”

Her eyes flickered to his, an answering smile spreading on her face. “Naturally. Can we work out a payment plan?”

“Instalments were exactly what I had in mind,” he agreed. “Starting with tonight?”

Her heart was beating far too fast, and her eyes felt suspiciously moist. She blinked quickly. “Tonight sounds perfect. I can let the school know you agree?”

“Yes, *cara*. You can. I will even promise not to break my arm between now and then.”

“You’d better not,” she said with a satisfied nod. “Though the idea of nursing you better does hold some appeal...”

“To you and me both.”

CHAPTER 10

WATCHING HIM REHEARSE WITH the kids did strange things to Charlotte. Things she couldn't explain and hadn't felt before. Her stomach was in loops and her heart was stretching. He was handsome and gruff and unapproachable and at the same time, he was charming and relaxed and evidently a far better player than Mrs Roobottom because the kids were in awe of him. He played a gentle tempo, meaning the little voices could easily keep pace, and he patiently worked through each of the songs, doing as many repeats as was necessary, never mind that he undoubtedly had work of his own to be carrying on with.

At the end of the rehearsal, after the children had been ushered out of the classroom and the choir captain had gushed all over Alessio's shoes, Charlotte and Alessio walked back to his car together.

"It's really very kind of you to give up your time like this."

His face bore a mask, briefly, of irritation, so she was very still, wondering if she'd said something wrong, if she'd offended him in some way. "In fact, rehearsal this morning spared me from a family breakfast, so it's I who should be thanking you for volunteering me."

"Oh no, Alessio, you should have said! I'm sure the school could have rescheduled..."

"You misunderstand me. I was glad to miss breakfast."

Something shifted inside Charlotte's chest. She looked at him across the bonnet of the car. "Family breakfast, as in, with

your mother and brother?”

“Half-brother,” he was quick to correct, then nod once.

“But you’ve come here to spend time with them,” Charlotte pointed out. “Isn’t that the purpose of your trip?”

“The purpose of my trip is to fulfil a promise I made to my father as he lay dying. My mother has little to do with it.”

Charlotte couldn’t help her sharp intake of breath. “You really hate them, don’t you?”

“She is my mother. I can’t say I hate her. But nor can I say I love her.”

“Oh, Alessio.” She opened her car door slowly, lost in thought. “What happened between the two of you?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw as he looked away. “It’s ancient history.”

“Is it?” She compressed her lips. “It doesn’t really seem that way to me.”

“History informs the present,” he said with a shrug that might have had all the appearance of nonchalance if it weren’t for the fact his body was as rigid as stone. “My mother’s choices preclude us having a close relationship. But I’m here, as my father requested. It’s more than I thought I’d ever give her.”

“You understand that I’m very fond of Winona and Caleb?” Charlotte asked softly.

His eyes speared hers. “You don’t have the same history as I do. You’re entitled to feel however you wish about them.”

That was even more bothersome. “I just mean to say...”

“You cannot fix this,” he said quietly, but with a strength that reminded her he was a successful, respected CEO when he wasn’t playing Christmas carols for a bunch of children. “It’s not your place. Besides which, I don’t want it to be fixed. I just want to get through the next few days then get the hell out of here.”

She flinched, the sentiments so completely cold and jarring, so at odds with the wishes that had begun to swirl through Charlotte, that she took a small involuntary step back and dropped her gaze.

“That did not sound how I intended it to. I did not mean—what we are doing—is a part of my trip I am enjoying, Charlotte. But as for my family, I would prefer to spend as little time with them as possible.”

She let the matter drop, because she didn't trust herself to speak without her voice trembling from emotion, and because she was worried she might do something really stupid and tell him how much she wished he was staying longer. What was the point in wishing? Or explaining how she felt? It was obvious that he was counting down the minutes until his departure. Charlotte wasn't going to make a fool of herself by trying to get him to change his mind. Besides, her own situation precluded things from getting more serious between them.

Whatever she was feeling, it was better left unsaid.

ALESSIO FORCED himself to work for the rest of the morning. There was a mountain of emails, a heap of reports, and a few meetings to attend via Zoom, and he was glad for the distraction. His mother, however, had refused to allow him to cancel their breakfast and had, instead, shifted it to dinner. He'd agreed, if only because he considered this a part of honouring his promise to his father, but it was the last thing he felt like doing.

She made garlic langoustines and focaccia, served with crunchy roast potatoes and greens, and Caleb was his usual, obnoxious self, so Alessio found his eyes straying to the clock in the kitchen every few minutes, wondering what the earliest possible time was he could excuse himself.

He wanted to get back to the hotel. More accurately, he wanted to get back to Charlotte.

He thought of her, and a stitch formed in the center of his chest, as he recalled the way she'd looked that morning, when he'd snapped and reminded them both of how temporary his time in town was—and how much he couldn't wait to leave.

It was true.

He wanted to get back to his real world, to a life away from his mother and half-brother and the promise he'd made his dying father. But in some way, he wanted to imagine Charlotte as a part of that world. He wanted to keep seeing her. He wanted to seduce her, to date her properly, as he did any woman he was sleeping with. He wanted to take her around the world in his jet, to show her his homes, to give her the world, in fact, for as long as they were seeing each other. He wanted to make her laugh and smile, to erase all the worries from her life. But it wasn't that simple.

She wasn't some footloose and fancy-free heiress or model he'd picked up at a bar. She was essentially a single, working mother, and he couldn't just whisk her away whenever he had a hankering to take her to bed.

She had a life here.

A family.

He lifted a piece of seafood to his lips and chewed it without tasting the superb flavours.

He could come back to the Cotswolds to see her. Just until they got this out of their system, at least. A few nights a month. She could come to him sometimes—Dash had grandparents who could care for him. But she'd already explained why that wouldn't work. She didn't want the grandparents to know she was in a relationship, because it might jeopardise her right to custody, so they were hardly likely to babysit while she took an international booty call, and that was all he could offer her. All he wanted to offer anyone.

Which meant what?

He toyed with the question, barely paying any attention to his mother and Caleb's conversation.

He could offer her a job! She and Dash could move to Italy. She'd be available to him then, whenever he wanted to see her. Hell, he could offer for her to be his live-in cook. He could pay her to come and stay with him—

He caught the direction of his thoughts and cursed inwardly. Was he so desperate for more time with Charlotte he was actually considering asking her to virtually prostitute herself to him?

He ground his teeth together, shaking his head to dispel that thought.

“I promised Charlie I'd go lock up,” Caleb was saying, standing and wiping his hands on the back of his jeans.

That caught Alessio's attention. His eyes focussed on his brother, and for the first time, he realised he'd gelled his hair back from his face, and that he wore a little more aftershave than usual.

Winona nodded once. “Say hi from me.”

Alessio waited until they were alone. “Does he do that often?”

Winona frowned a little, standing to clear the plates. “What, darling?”

He grimaced at her casual use of a nickname. “Go and lock up the pub.”

“Only when Charlie's working late,” Winona responded with a small, maternal smile that made Alessio's skin crawl.

“He has a crush on her,” Alessio surmised.

“Oh, it's more than a crush,” Winona confirmed. But hadn't Alessio known that all along? He'd seen the photos in the bar, the way his half-brother looked at Charlotte. Heat flooded his body, and a sudden, soul-deep need to possess Charlotte immediately, to make her his completely and utterly, caused every cell in his body to reverberate.

“He's in love with her?”

“I think so.”

“And how does she feel about him?”

“Charlie has her hands full,” Winona said after a pause. “I don’t think she’s looking for a relationship.”

“Have you explained that to Caleb?”

“He knows. They’re friends, first and foremost. But I’m sure there’s a huge part of him that hopes one day she’ll look at him and want more than friendship.”

Alessio ground his teeth together, the idea of his half-brother and Charlotte made him want to punch the nearest wall to pieces.

“There’s a part of me that wants that too,” Winona confided with another of those proud little maternal smiles. “I love Charlotte. She’d be very good for Caleb.”

It was more than Alessio could handle. He scraped back his chair and stood, hands on hips, eyes focussed on the wall opposite as he concentrated on bringing his breathing back into control.

It wasn’t as though he wanted to propose marriage to Charlotte or anything but hearing his mother wax lyrical about the possibility of a relationship between Charlotte and Caleb only drove home to Alessio how much her preference, her thoughts, her maternal interest, would always be squarely focused on her second son.

“I have to go.”

“It’s only early!” She protested immediately.

“I came for dinner, we’ve eaten.”

Winona’s eyes grew round, and she blinked away from him quickly, so it was impossible not to realise that he’d surprised and hurt her. Impossible, despite their relationship, not to feel like a bastard for the angry words he’d thrown at her feet.

“Okay,” she whispered. “If you have to go, go.”

Strangely, he hesitated. He stood, feet planted, unsure of exactly what to say to her. Part of him wanted to apologise, but

then he remembered the little boy he'd been, whose heart had been broken by this woman and her easy rejection of him, her quickness to build a selfish new life for herself here in England, and instead, he squared his shoulders and expelled a slow breath through his nostrils.

“Do you ever feel like we are better served not to try anymore?” He said quietly, the words surprising him, because they were the honest to God truth in his heart, the question that he knew they needed to address.

Winona moved to Alessio, a worried look on her face. She stopped right in front of him then put her hands on his forearms, gripping him tightly.

“I don't ever, for even one moment, think that.”

Her face was pale.

“You are my son. You will always be my son. With my dying breath, I will try to fix this, to heal what I broke when I left you.”

“Some things cannot be healed.”

“That's true,” she said, her voice cracking. “But you were asking about whether we should stop trying, and I'm telling you: I won't. I can't. I refuse. Leaving you was the hardest thing I ever did, and I will never—never—not regret that.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “It's hard to explain what that time was like. I weighed up what I could give you, and what your father could, I weighed up what he would do to get custody and I realised you were better off without me. It made sense at the time, my darling.”

But her explanation only made him angrier. “I was a little boy, and you were my mother. You were the only constant in my life and then suddenly, you weren't. How could that ever have made sense?”

“You idolised him.”

Alessio's nostrils flared. “And I loved you. What's your point?”

She flinched. “He wouldn't let me take you.”

“Then why not stay?”

Winona’s throat moved as she swallowed. “It wasn’t that easy.”

“Because you were pregnant.”

“Partly, yes.”

“You had an affair.”

“I fell in love.”

Alessio knew all this. His father had told him on the day it had happened, and many times since, when he’d had too much to drink and been inclined to wallow in the past. “And so you left. End of story.”

“No! *Not* the end of our story. I wanted you to come with me, but your father—,” she shook her head. “I couldn’t take you from him. It would have destroyed him. It wasn’t fair.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Alessio crossed his arms over his chest.

“I have missed you every day. I have watched you go from strength to strength, growing from your father’s shadow to become the force that you are: respected, brilliant, incredibly successful.”

“You think I am any of those things because you left me?”

Her face paled. “I think you have grown into the man you were destined to be. I wish—I wish I could have been there to see it.”

“You could have been,” he said with cold reserve. “But you chose to be here instead, with your new family, your new husband and son. You replaced us completely, whereas for us, for me, there was only your absence. Always your absence.”

She winced then drew in a deep breath. “I know I hurt you. I know that, to a young boy, it might have appeared that I was turning my back and leaving you, walking out on you because I didn’t love you, instead of leaving you with your father because I loved you too much to take you away. But you are a grown man now, Alessio. Surely you can see, with your adult’s

eyes, that it was far more complicated and nuanced than you perceived as a child?”

He didn't want to examine that, to turn the idea around to see if it had merit. “My perspective has changed as I've grown,” he agreed with a nod. “As a boy, I still had hope. Hope you would come home, that you would change your mind, hope that you would appear, as if by magic, to tuck me into bed again, to read our favourite book together.” His mother drew in a shaking breath. “Then I hoped I would forget you. That he'd forget you. That he'd meet someone else, fall in love, and I would have a new mother. I hoped I would stop missing you, stop hurting.” He stood tall, back ramrod straight as his heart and mind sank back into the past. “And finally, I did. I stopped hurting. It was as though all the warmth I once felt for you turned to ice and I came to like that. There is comfort in a lack of feeling, no?”

“No,” she responded quickly, lifting shaking fingers to her lips. “There is no comfort in that. You're hiding, Alex.”

“Alessio,” he corrected angrily.

She flinched. “Yes, of course. I call you Alex because we decided, your father and I, that it would be a point of difference between the two of you. It's how I think of you in my mind.”

He ignored her explanation.

“But Alessio, you are hiding from yourself, and your feelings. I acknowledge the hurt I caused you. I understand that to a boy, it must have seemed as though I simply flicked a switch and ceased to care about you. Do you think you were the only one who felt as though a part of themselves was missing? You are my son, and I had to leave you behind. I couldn't have taken you, even if I'd wanted to.”

A muscle throbbed in his jaw. “No, you're right. Once you had cheated on him, and become pregnant, you had no choice.”

“I loved your father, Alessio, but we were not well suited. That marriage would have destroyed all of us, if I'd stayed.”

“That’s speculative.”

“It’s what I know to be true, in here,” she pointed to her chest. “Have you ever been in love?”

Alessio responded quickly—far too quickly to give the question any actual thought. “No. Never.”

“Then you don’t know what it’s like,” she said with a sad shake of her head. “When I moved to Italy, I left my heart here. I was young, and charmed by your father, swept up into his world, impressed by his sophistication and wealth. We married within six weeks of meeting—I was still heartbroken over ending my engagement to Grant,” she said softly. “By the time I realised I’d made a mistake, I was pregnant with you. For years, I tried to make it work, but I wasn’t—,” she bit down on her lip, as if to force herself to stop talking.

“You weren’t *what*, mother?”

“I wasn’t...” Her eyes searched Alessio’s beseechingly. “I wasn’t of your father’s world. I felt insufficient. At first, it was just a little self-doubt, a sense that I wasn’t quite good enough, experienced enough, smart enough, a little niggling worry that I could talk myself out of. But with each week that passed, those niggles grew. Your father worked long hours, and I was home with you. But even with you, I felt I couldn’t—nothing I did seemed right, Alessio. Some people are natural parents, but I wasn’t one of them. I came to doubt myself all the time, in all aspects of my life. I came to hate myself,” she admitted with a raw, hoarse voice. “Your father was frustrated by me. He just kept telling me to snap out of it, to look at the life I had and be grateful,” she said with a furrowed brow. “And I suppose he was right. Objectively speaking, I was very charmed.”

Alessio transferred his weight from one foot to the other, trying not to let her words inside, but finding it impossible to ignore the implication. With his limited experience of mental health, it sounded as though his mother had been severely depressed. She’d needed professional help.

“I didn’t plan to see Grant. But at my lowest ebb, we found our way back to each other. It was Grant who encouraged me

to see a psychologist. Grant who would talk to me for hours at a time, while your father worked and you were at school, Grant who helped me remember that at one time, I'd been a young woman with dreams of my own."

Alessio listened in silence.

"I loved him," she said simply. "As much as ever. I loved your father too, but it was different. With Grant, I could be myself, and I liked the person I was with him. I knew that if I stayed with your dad, I would wither into nothing, or worse, that I might do myself harm. Alessio, can you see how desperate I was?" She moved forward, pressing a hand to his chest, needing him to understand. "I was given a second chance and I took it. Selfishly? Probably. But in that moment, I had convinced myself I was bad for you, that I could offer you nothing. I didn't believe I would ever be the kind of mother you deserved. A father like Alessio, so dynamic and smart and charismatic, was better than a mother like me. And so, I left. But don't think, for even one second, it didn't break my soul in half."

Her impassioned plea moved through him like a cyclone, reaching parts of his body that had been closed off for a long time.

"That's why I cannot stop trying, my darling. You are my son. I left because I loved you, I have lost you all these years, but I don't want to live without you in my life any longer. I want this enough to try, for both of us. Okay?"

CHAPTER II

THE KNOCK ON HER door caught Charlotte by surprise. She moved towards it quickly, aware that Dash had just drifted off to sleep, pulling it open and suppressing a gasp at the sight of Alessio there.

“Hi,” she murmured, throat dry.

He lifted one dark brow, his features impossible to read, his large frame stiff as he stood, legs planted wide, hands jammed in pockets.

She looked over her shoulder, scanning the lounge room. “Did you need something?”

When she looked back at Alessio, it was to see his eyes boring into hers, the air between them crackling with unspoken desires.

“Dash has just fallen asleep,” she explained in a stage whisper.

“How about a coffee?”

The truth was, Charlotte was floundering. After their slightly terse exchange at his car that afternoon, her heart and mind had been all over the place. She’d been pulled from one direction to the other in her mind, finding it impossible to discern her complex thoughts and wishes. For years, doing what was right for Dash had been her guiding light, her only true north. This was the first time she’d felt her commitment wane—not to Dash, but to the path she’d set them on, to the slavish observance she gave to her fears of losing custody if she were to do anything that proved Maggie’s parents right,

that justified their reason for worrying about her suitability as a guardian.

“Charlotte?” He frowned, eyes scanning her face with concern now, so she realised she’d been standing there staring into space for the better part of a minute, grappling with the very same thoughts she’d been worrying over all evening.

“Coffee,” she said quickly. “Yes, okay. Coffee is fine. Come in.” She stepped back and waved into the lounge room, feeling a now familiar clenching of her organs as Alessio moved past her, leaving in his wake the faintest trace of his uber masculine cologne.

Aware of each of her limbs, she moved to the kitchen, eyes drifting to him often. She’d been tormented by her mind. Now, though, she realised Alessio too seemed to have something that was bothering him.

“Are you okay?” She asked solicitously, pushing her own thoughts and fears aside.

His brow furrowed. “Why do you ask?”

“You seem...not okay,” she said with a lift of her shoulders, struggling to verbalise what precisely had led her to that conclusion. A sixth sense of sorts, a feeling that she knew what he was feeling, even when he didn’t speak.

“I’m fine,” he disputed, pushing a hand through his hair.

Charlotte began making the coffee, and the silence between them grew thick and heavy, until finally, Alessio broke it. “I had dinner with them tonight.”

She didn’t need ask to whom he was referring.

“And how did it go?”

He sighed angrily, then frowned. “It’s hard to say.” He looked around her apartment, as though searching for something. “Caleb left early.”

Though she had no reason to feel it, a guilty flush darkened her cheeks. “He comes to help close up sometimes,” she said with a shrug that was an imitation of casual.

“So I hear.”

“I’ve told him it’s not necessary. I can take care of myself. But he insists...”

“He’s in love with you.”

Charlotte’s eyes pierced Alessio’s. She contemplated denying that, but to what end? Pouring their coffees, she nodded slowly. “I know.”

“But you don’t feel the same way?”

She spilled a bit of coffee. “How can you even ask me that?”

He didn’t respond.

“Do you think I’d be doing this with you if I was in love with Caleb?”

“Why not?” He pushed, with no idea how his casual volley back of the question hurt her. “This is a very temporary, casual fling. It doesn’t change anything for either of us, in the long term, and Caleb doesn’t even know about it. Why should this preclude you being with him, if you love him?”

Her lips parted and stars flooded her eyes. She felt nauseated and woozy all at once. “That’s disgusting and completely...wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s your half-brother,” she ticked off her fingers. “Because I would never have sex with someone if I was in love with someone else. Because I—,” she shook her head with frustration. “Do you honestly think I’m capable of that?”

“I don’t know you well enough to say.”

“Did you come here to be deliberately insulting?” She demanded, drawing herself up to her full, not particularly impressive height, and staring down her nose at him.

It was bravado. Inside, her heart was hurting.

“No,” he responded quickly. “I came because I needed to see you.”

“Why?” She whispered, conscious of Dash, not wanting him to hear her anger. “To pick a fight? To remind me, yet again, that this is just a casual sex thing? Believe me, I’ve got that message loud and clear.”

“I can’t explain it,” he said with an irritated shake of his head. “But after I have been with my mother and half-brother, what I want most of all is to spend time with you. It’s as though you can push them from my mind. You can make me feel light, where they draw me into the dark. It doesn’t make sense.”

Doesn’t it? She wanted to shout. To Charlotte, it was so obvious why that was: he was starting to feel something for her. Something that went beyond the boundaries they’d both agreed to.

Or maybe he wasn’t. Maybe this was what he was like with any woman he slept with. Maybe he just needed the distraction of desire and lust to clear his mind.

She didn’t know, and she hated the uncertainty.

“My mother wanted to talk, tonight. After Caleb left. She told me things she’d never said before. Justifications for leaving him. For leaving me.”

Charlotte, still smarting, carefully bundled up her own feelings for a moment, forcing herself to listen, to hear his words, and to offer the comfort he needed. She pushed his coffee cup across the counter and lifted her own to her lips. “And did it help?”

“I’m still angry with her,” he shrugged. “But if what she told me is true, I can see that desperation forced her hand. I wish...if my father were alive, I could ask him.”

“You think she’s lying?”

“It’s hard to trust someone who’s walked out on you,” he pointed out.

“What does your gut tell you?”

He frowned. “My instincts are clouded by the situation,” he said, after a moment. “She’s my mother. I’m predisposed to believe her, even after everything.”

Charlotte reached across the bench and linked their fingers together, lifting his hand towards her lips and kissing it. Their eyes met and something else sparked between them. Not desire, though that was there too, like the inevitable beating of a drum. This was different. She felt the pull towards him, heart to heart, mind to mind, and sighed heavily, because she’d never felt closer to someone who was so determined to be far away.

“She loves you,” Charlotte said after a beat.

“So she says.”

“You don’t believe her?”

“I believe actions speak louder than words,” he said immediately. “And love is the ultimate action.”

“Perhaps she showed her love by leaving you,” Charlotte pondered, unknowingly echoing Winona’s sentiments. “Perhaps there was more going on than you realised.”

Alessio’s eyes narrowed. “Has she spoken to you of that time in her life?”

Charlotte shook her head. “Never.”

“Then how do you know—,”

“I don’t *know* anything. But sometimes I deduce...I suspect...when she talks about her life *before*, I feel a frailty in her. An uncertainty. I wonder if your parents’ marriage was happy.”

“It wasn’t, as it turns out,” Alessio said, drinking his coffee. He spoke in short sentences then, explaining what Winona had told him that night, and Charlotte listened, a sympathetic expression on her face. She nodded slowly.

“Do you think she was suicidal?”

“It’s certainly what she was implying.”

Charlotte shivered. It was impossible to imagine anyone as dynamic and confident as Winona ever feeling like that. “She must have been miserable.”

“With my father. With me.”

“Not because of you,” Charlotte made the distinction gently. “She left to save herself. She left you because she didn’t trust herself. Isn’t sacrifice like that proof of a truly great love?”

He finished his coffee and stood, not to leave, but because his body was too tense to stay folded a moment longer. “I don’t know,” he said quietly, after a moment. “Anger, it turns out, is a habit. Once you have felt it for long enough, it becomes impossible to let it go. I can’t imagine not feeling this way towards her.”

“Then don’t. Don’t push it. Just...keep an open mind and see if time changes your heart.”

“My heart?” He said with a sombre expression. “My heart no longer exists, *cara*, remember?”

ALESSIO PUSHED the covers back quietly, one eye on the sleeping form of Charlotte, his gut tight as he stared at her and felt, *felt*, things he hadn’t known before. Reluctance to leave. An appreciation that went beyond her beauty and the way she was such a match for him in bed. It was an appreciation of all that she was: as a woman, a chef, a lover and a mother. She was everything his own mother hadn’t been for him.

And for all that he could now, with the fullness of time, understand that his mother’s situation had been more complex than he’d appreciated, that didn’t change the fact that she’d returned to England, married Grant, given birth to Caleb, and lived a happy, prosperous, busy life, with Alessio having no part in it.

Anger coursed through his veins, worse than ever before, because it had no target. It was a free-floating rage: at his mother, father, at Caleb and Grant.

He needed to leave this place. To leave Charlotte. Because even she made him feel...feel far more than he wanted to.

You're running from yourself.

He ground his teeth together, ignoring his mother's appraisal. She didn't know him. She couldn't understand what made him the way he was. She had no right to weigh in on his personality. She'd abandoned him.

He moved to the door, placed his hand on the knob and held it there, every cell in his body revolting against the idea of leaving her. In the madness of this situation, in the cold, heartless rage that swirled inside of him, Charlotte was his calm. She offered a peace he'd never known. When he was with her, when he held her, looked at her, spoke to her, it was like a part of himself was being forged anew, rewired or rediscovered.

And that scared him half to death.

“DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS?” Winona stage-whispered to Charlotte, who smiled across the seats at her. She nodded slowly.

“Alessio is accompanying the choir?”

“He got them out of a real bind.” Charlotte tried to hide the possessive affection from showing in her voice, the pride—as if she had any right to feel proud of him! But she couldn't help the warm tingling in her body as she watched Alessio on stage, his fingers moving over the keys as the children sang along, their little voices high and proud, excited and lovely. Charlotte and Dash had come to this concert every year since moving, and it never failed to bring a tear to Charlotte's eye. She loved Christmas—everything about it, but even more so now she had Dash to care for.

It was so important to her to make it magical and special, particularly as his grandparents would be meeting her afterwards to take him away.

She hated not having him to wake up with in the morning, but it seemed a fair trade off, for having him all year round. Besides, she'd see him again for Christmas night.

Choosing not to think about that now, she made a point of watching the children, even when her eyes fell to Alessio as though he had his own gravitational pull.

From time to time, he'd look up and his eyes would immediately land on her and the air between them would shimmer so brightly she was sure everyone must be able to see it, to feel it. In fact, as the concert went on, she began to worry that the woman sitting beside her *had* seen it, or something like it.

Winona regarded Charlotte with an appraising look, before passing a glass of Buck's Fizz along that Caleb had procured from the makeshift bar out the front of the church. Charlotte's cheeks flushed as she took several quick gulps, needing something to calm herself down.

But it was impossible to tear her eyes away. She looked from Alessio to Dash, and felt her heart, her soft, aching heart, fill to the brim, so full it could almost have exploded, and she knew then that this was so much more than they'd originally agreed.

Despite the risks, and the futility, she'd fallen in love with Alessio.

She loved him.

As sure as she loved Dash, she knew that Alessio belonged in her heart and soul and always would. He was a part of her, a part of what she wanted in her family.

Family!

She gasped, because it was such a burdensome word, a concept that barely held weight for Charlotte. Michael had been her brother, but that was the beginning and end of her experience with family. With the exception of the brief, happy phase of her life when there'd been Michael, Maggie and Dash to spend time with, and Charlotte had felt their warmth and

love bask her just by being in their presence, she'd never known anything quite so romantic as the idea of family.

But that didn't stop her from wanting, now.

From wanting more.

A Christmas miracle.

With Alessio?

Her heart sped up because it felt almost entirely insurmountable. To think of a time when she could actually say those words to him, tell him that she loved him and that he might say it back? *My heart no longer exists, cara.*

Her smile dropped as she remembered snippets of their conversations. His warning, laced through so many of his statements, about past relationships, his desire for impermanence, his aversion to commitment. The way he'd spoken about his most recent breakup, about his lack of sympathy for the woman who'd come to want more from him. He'd been honest with Lucinda, and therefore expected she'd never do anything so stupid as fall for him. Well, Charlotte had new sympathy for the other woman: being with Alessio and not loving him might just be an impossible task.

He would never want more from her than this casual, sexual relationship.

So why upset the apple cart and risk jeopardising her custody arrangement with Dash?

Alessio wasn't going to commit to her.

He'd defined the parameters for their relationship—and she'd agreed to them. Nothing had changed for Alessio.

But what if it had? A little voice niggled at her. What if he felt differently now? What if those clear-cut barriers they'd erected at the start were too flimsy to constrain them? Was there a chance he might want more from Charlotte, too?

And how could that even work? Another, more realistic voice broke into her dreamy thoughts. He lives in Italy; you live in England. You have Dash to look after. A relationship was one thing, but how could she bring a man into her life,

into Dash's life, unless it was for keeps? And would Alessio ever want to take on that kind of responsibility?

Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach because she knew the answer to that.

With a face that was rather less full of joy than it had been a moment ago, Charlotte sat very still, watching, but refusing to allow herself to dream now, not allowing the Christmas magic that was heavy in the air to weave any more silly, childish spells.

Alessio would leave after Christmas. Charlotte would be alone. That was the way it had to be, and she was a fool to think otherwise.

CHARLOTTE WOKE on Christmas morning to a light dusting of snow beyond her window and a warm, sexy body in her bed.

She smiled, but it was a ghostly smile, because it was impossible not to be aware of the passage of time, of the inevitability of his leaving. Alessio was right beside her, flesh and blood, so she reached out and touched him, trying not to think of the fact that within days, this would all be in the past.

“Good morning,” she murmured, leaning down and pressing a kiss to the flesh beneath his earlobe. His eyes were closed, she presumed he was still sleeping, but then he moved quickly, wrapping an arm around her so she squawked as she toppled onto him, then laughed, their eyes meeting, his charged with awareness, her's amusement, until she felt the strength of his desire for her and shivered, sensual heat overtaking everything else.

“*Buongiorno,*” he responded. “*E buon natale.*”

She smiled. “Merry Christmas.”

He pushed up, kissing her then, and she felt in her heart that it was the happiest Christmas morning she'd ever known. This would end, and she knew it would break a part of her forever, but for now, he was here, and she was happy. She simply had to enjoy it while she could.

“I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU.” Alessio strode across the living room and lifted a small box from beneath her tree.

Charlotte’s expression showed bemusement. “When did you put that there?”

“A couple of days ago.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“I asked Dash to hide it for me.”

“You did?” Her heart picked up a beat. “What did you say to him?”

“Only that I’d bought you a little something to thank you for getting me the piano gig,” he winked, and Charlotte’s heart turned over. “He took it at face value, *cara*, do not look so worried.”

He slid the box across the kitchen counter and Charlotte ran her fingers over it distractedly.

“I didn’t realise you’d really spoken to him.”

“We had some time together at the choir practice,” Alessio shrugged, but there was a small frown on his lips too. “He seems like a great kid.” His voice was different. A little heavier, hoarse. He cleared his throat then smiled, so Charlotte wondered if she’d imagined it. Wishful thinking, perhaps. Dash *was* a great kid, but it wasn’t as though a few idle conversations were going to change Alessio’s mind on a lifetime commitment to being a bachelor.

“He hid it very well,” Charlotte murmured. “I had no idea it was there. Then again, I wasn’t looking for a present for myself.”

“You deserve presents,” Alessio responded, his voice gruff once more. Their eyes met and her heart exploded. She smiled weakly.

“Are you going to open it? Or just feel the wrapping paper?”

She laughed, jolted from the moment, back into reality, as she slid her finger beneath the sticky tape and lifted one side. The box was long and rectangular, like a fountain pen box, perhaps. She peeled the wrapping away until the deep burgundy colour of the box was revealed and gasped to see gold cursive script on the top proclaiming *Cartier*.

“Alessio,” she shook her head a little. “It’s...way too much.”

“You haven’t even opened it.”

Charlotte pulled a face. “I don’t think Cartier sells gag gifts.”

“Open it,” he insisted.

Her eyes chased his, looking for reassurance, for comprehension, then returned to the box. With fingers that were now a little trembly, she cracked the lid, and swallowed back a sound of shock at the necklace that was within. Pressed into a moulded cream base was the most stunning diamond necklace she’d ever seen. Not just a single diamond, floating on a chain, this was a row of perhaps twenty diamonds, starting smaller on the outside, and growing larger towards the middle, where a teardrop diamond hung suspended. She lifted it carefully from the box and draped it over her palm, so she could look at it properly.

“Are these...real?” She whispered, eyes huge.

Alessio’s smile was amused. “As you said, Cartier doesn’t do gag gifts. Nor, I suspect, costume jewellery.”

“Alessio,” she shook her head, totally bewildered. “You know I can’t accept this.”

His nostrils flared. “Why not?”

She gaped at him. “It’s...it’s *way* too expensive, for one thing.”

“I can afford it.”

She shook her head. “Be that as it may, it’s not...it’s too much. For this. For what we are.” She forced herself to say the words, to make him understand. A token like this from a man

like him would have been okay if he'd cared for her, if he'd loved her, but he didn't. Was this what he gave all his lovers, when things were close to ending? A generous parting gift to soften the blow? Haunted, she looked up at him, trying to understand.

"I wanted you to have it," he said after a moment, then frowned. "And I have been obsessing over seeing you wearing it since I bought it. Do you mind?" He reached across, taking the necklace from her, so she shook her head even as he was already coming around behind her to fasten it in place. Charlotte held her breath, almost unable to believe anything quite so beautiful, and precious, was about to be worn by her.

He clasped it in place, and it dropped against her collarbone, cold, and both heavy yet fragile at the same time. She lifted a hand instinctively, feeling the weight of the diamonds, the sharpness of them, then turned to face him.

"Is this what you imagined?" She asked, looking up into his face, wishing, more than she'd ever wished for anything, that she would see love there. That he would smile and pull her close and whisper those words into her ear.

"Almost," he confirmed with a nod, as his fingers sought the belt of her robe, and he loosened it, eyes probing hers, teasing her, challenging her, before he pushed the silk from her body and she stood in the kitchen, naked except for the diamond necklace. "And now, yes. It's more beautiful than I could ever have imagined." He allowed his gaze to rest on the necklace a moment before sweeping lower, his appraisal of her body slow and sensual, stirring fires in her blood, before returning to her eyes. "As are you."

Her throat felt heavy with the threat of unshed tears. It was too much. All of this was too much, but also, not enough. How could she want more? This gift was so generous, but it was the wrong kind of generosity. She didn't want material gifts from him. She wanted his heart.

The thought dropped her back to earth, but not for long. Alessio moved closer, his body pressing to hers, and thought was no longer possible. She surrendered to him, to the

moment, as he lifted and carried her through the apartment, past the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree, and into her room, where he made love to her slowly at first, sensually, tormenting her with desire, before taking her fast, desperately, hungrily, as they needed, and all the while, she was conscious of the necklace she wore, the beauty of the gems, and the hurtful nature of the gift despite its many perfections—because it was a goodbye present, and she wasn't ready for that. She never would be.

CHAPTER 12

“THEY’RE GOING TO KNOW something is going on,” she said, nervously, eyeing Winona’s beautiful home with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Why?”

“Because I just feel like they will.”

“If you think I am incapable of keeping my hands off you for a few hours, then you are half right,” he said, wiggling his brows, leaning closer, and nibbling on her earlobe. “We will just have to make sure we find a broom closet or deserted boot room somewhere along the way.”

Charlotte sighed softly, because she liked the sound of that, a lot. But this was all so complicated. Complicated by his relationship with these people, his obvious enmity for them when Charlotte adored both. Complicated by the fact she was in love with Alessio, but he was leaving the following day. There was no sense allowing anyone to learn the truth of what they’d been doing. It would only hurt Caleb and make her working situation awkward.

“I’m serious, Alessio,” she said, quietly. “We had a deal, remember?”

He pulled back, looking at her with his dark, assessing eyes, giving nothing away now. She stared up at him and for a moment had the disconcerting thought that he could almost be a stranger.

“Yes, we had a deal,” he agreed.

Her heart stammered and she knew this was the moment, the time she'd been unknowingly waiting for. "And nothing's changed, has it?"

She held her breath, hoping, with all of her heart. His gaze roamed her face and then he lifted his broad shoulders in a gesture of casual nonchalance, so that awful, unwanted hope mangled beyond recognition. There was no hope here. She had known loneliness and loss many times in her life—this would be no different.

"So, we have to keep this secret," she said with a nod. "You gave me a lift here, that's it. Don't say or do anything to let them know the truth of...us. Please."

A muscle throbbed low in his jaw, and he was silent for several beats before nodding. "If that's what you want."

She didn't tell him it was the last thing she wanted; instead, she simply nodded.

"It is. Thank you."

FULL OF TURKEY AND DUCK, gravy, crispy potatoes and greens, Alessio sat back in his seat, watching.

Watching as he often did, when assessing a situation to comprehend different people. Assessing because he wanted to understand all the moving parts of this situation. Watching because he couldn't help it.

It was obvious to him that Charlotte was adored by his mother and half-brother. She was a part of their family, and that realisation caused a stitch in the centre of his chest. Strange that he could resent something he'd never particularly wanted. It wasn't as though he'd welcomed his mother's overtures, her obvious wish to draw him back into her world, her family, and yet, seeing Charlotte enjoy such easy belonging and acceptance made him wonder what his life would have been like if he'd been able to let go of his anger towards Winona.

If he'd forgiven her.

If he'd allowed the past to remain buried and opened himself up to a future that included his mother, and even Caleb who, when Alessio thought about it, had done nothing more sinister than be conceived.

Alessio reached for the fine crystal glass that was half full of red wine and took a sip, his eyes resting on Charlotte's face without his realisation. They clung to her, in fact, as she recounted a story animatedly, her eyes glowing, her lips quirked with laughter, Caleb obviously a very appreciative audience.

"Alessio, would you help me to clear these dishes?" His mother's voice cut through his musings, so Alessio jolted back to the table, to the present, and looked away, feeling like a schoolboy who'd been caught doing something illicit.

He'd promised Charlotte he'd keep their secret and he had every intention of maintaining his word. "*Certo.*" He stood, aware that Charlotte didn't turn to look at him for even one moment. She was evidently doing a far better job at concealing their connection than he was.

His eyes flicked to her again, just as her hand lifted to her throat, and though she wore a black turtleneck, he saw her fingers move over the fabric, tracing a line, and he smiled, because he knew she was feeling the necklace, remembering it, knowing it was a gift from him, and the knowledge that she was wearing it filled him with gladness. As though it was a silent, invisible proclamation: she was his. All his. Not Caleb's. No one else's.

The thought terrified him.

Not once in his entire life had he ever felt such a possessive desire of anyone.

That wasn't how he functioned. He was a loner. Independent, and fiercely protective of that.

What did it mean that he couldn't get Charlotte out of his head?

"I'm so glad you stayed for Christmas," Winona murmured as they entered the kitchen, which despite the meal

she'd produced, was tidy and clean. "It's nice to have the extra time together. I know Caleb has enjoyed the opportunity."

Alessio snorted and Winona grimaced. "Well, maybe not, but you have to start somewhere."

He didn't bother telling his mother that he had no intention of 'starting' to build a relationship with his half-brother, ever.

"And there are other benefits to being in town. Meeting new people, for example," she prompted, studying his face.

Alessio lifted a brow, waiting for her to elaborate, even though he could guess where she was going.

"Charlotte, for example," his mother expanded, reaching across to flick the kettle to life.

Alessio was silent.

"She's very nice, isn't she?" Winona prodded.

Alessio crossed his arms over his chest. "What is it you are trying to say, mother?"

Winona grimaced again. "I'm not imagining it, am I?"

And despite the fact he was a grown man capable of conducting his own affairs in life, Alessio's heart sped up in his chest. "Imagining what?"

"You can't stop looking at her," Winona said with a small smile. "She's very beautiful, I know. But it's more than that. You seem...smitten."

Alessio stood very still, but his insides were in a state of panic.

"I am not, nor have I ever been, smitten," he denied with a slow drawl, to convey the ridiculousness of the idea.

Winona lifted her hands in a gesture of surrender. "I know I gave up any right to have an interest in who you date a long time ago," she said with a twist of her lips. "But Charlotte is..."

He waited, wondering at the tightness in his gut.

“She’s very special to me. To us.” Her brows drew together. “You know how your brother feels about her. I would hope...” the words trailed off into nothing, as Winona sought the right words, and Alessio, though he had an idea what was coming, did nothing to help her out.

Winona sighed. “Please, don’t do anything stupid, darling.”

“Such as?”

Winona waved her hands around, as if she could pluck the right words from thin air.

“Such as seducing her to hurt my half-brother?” Alessio prompted after a few moments had passed.

Winona’s skin paled. “I’m sure you’d never dream—,”

“It occurred to me,” Alessio contradicted with a lift of his shoulders, his temper rising. “But in the end, Charlotte’s appeal goes way beyond Caleb’s delusional fantasies.”

Winona closed her eyes and drew in a breath, taking a moment to steady her nerves.

“So, you *are* seeing her?”

It was as though Alessio was being detached from himself, one part pulled from the other, so he saw and heard the conversation but almost from across the room. He knew he should deny it, but the lie felt beneath him somehow, beneath what he and Charlotte were, even when he had promised her discretion.

At best, he could say nothing. “That’s personal,” he supplied, finally, aware it might as well have been a confession.

“Alessio, listen to me,” she said, moving closer, talking in a soft voice, but with a degree of urgency. “Charlotte isn’t—I know you’re—,”

“Yes, mother?” He asked when she floundered once more.

“Charlotte isn’t like you. She isn’t like the women you usually date. She’s gentle and innocent and sweet and

inexperienced. She's..."

"Too good for me?" He prompted with a strange ache in the pit of his gut.

"Of course, that's not what I mean!" Winona insisted quickly. "She's not right for you, and you're not—I don't think you're right for her," she said, finally.

"But Caleb is?"

Winona's eyes scrunched closed, her hands clasping in front of her stomach. "Don't do that," she said with a shake of her head. "Don't make this a competition between him and you."

"Isn't everything?" Alessio pushed.

"This is about Charlotte," Winona quietly returned to the topic at hand. "I know she seems very confident and in control, but she's had a lot of things happen in her life, difficult events that she's had to work past to get over. She's pulled herself up by her bootstraps; I admire her hugely. She's smart, incredibly hard-working, and her dedication to Dash is second to none. I don't want her to get hurt, that's all."

"And you presume that not only are we seeing each other, I'm bound to hurt her?" He said, the ache in his gut spreading through his body.

"You aren't looking for any kind of permanence, especially, I think, with someone like Charlotte."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Am I wrong?"

Years of conditioning, of training, of hard wiring his brain to avoid commitment, love and the inevitable hurt that came from surrendering yourself to another, came to the fore now.

"No," he said, wondering why the word tasted bitter in his mouth.

"You're seeing him?" The voice from behind them belonged to Caleb, who stood looking from mother to brother, and then to Charlotte, who was a few feet away and as pale as

a sheet of paper. Accusation clouded her eyes when they met Alessio's.

He swore inwardly, feeling the betrayal, feeling how badly he'd stuffed up by being led into this conversation when she'd specifically asked him not to.

"Charlie?" Caleb's voice was incredulous, unmistakably hurt. Alessio saw with clarity, for the first time, that Caleb and Charlotte had a relationship that well and truly predated whatever claim he felt he had on her. They had a friendship, and it meant a lot to Charlotte. So much so, she'd wanted to avoid hurting Caleb at all costs.

It was Caleb she went to now, Caleb she sought to comfort. Never mind that Alessio still had his mother's veiled criticisms swirling through his mind. But Alessio didn't need comforting. He was too strong for that, too independent. He held himself still and tall, refusing to show any emotion on his face, refusing to admit, even to himself, that he felt a damned thing.

"Is it true?" Caleb asked, his voice cold.

Charlotte stared at him beseechingly. "It's...nothing," she said with a shake of her head, lifting her hand to the necklace she wore, touching it through the fabric of her sweater. "It doesn't mean anything."

Alessio had the strangest sensation. He was no longer separated from his body, but his body was in a strange sort of pain, the kind of pain he hadn't felt in a very long time. Not since he was a boy and the world had been pulled out from under him.

It doesn't mean anything.

He was usually the one saying, or at least thinking, those words. But not with Charlotte. Despite the deal they'd made, she'd come to mean a lot more than 'nothing' to him. Still, he kept his features taut, his expression a mask of cold disinterest.

"Oh, Charlie," Caleb put a hand on her arm, shaking his head. "How could you? With *him*? Do you have any idea what

he's like? I get that he just has to click his fingers and women fall at his feet. But *you*?"

Charlotte stared at Caleb, and Alessio stared at her, waiting for her to say something that justified the feelings he was only now starting to recognise, but instead, she flicked a guilty seeming glance from Winona to Caleb, completely ignoring Alessio.

"It wasn't planned," she said softly. "It just happened." Now she looked at Alessio, her eyes haunted when they locked to his, her throat moving as if trying to combat tears. "It doesn't mean anything to either of us," she said again, as if no one had heard it the first time. Or was she daring him to contradict her? She left a long enough pause, silence crackled in the room. He could have interjected, but what would he have said? He never made promises he couldn't keep, and he knew what this was. Or what it should have been. What it *needed* to be. Sex. To pass the time while he was in town. Whatever else he was feeling—feeling, for God's sake, which he avoided so successfully—was just proof that he needed to get the hell out of here.

He wasn't the kind of man who got into deep, emotional relationships. He would never be like his father, destroyed by a woman. He'd never let anyone have the chance to hurt him like that. The fact Charlotte was capable of stirring things up inside him, of making him think maybe he did have a heart after all, was all the reason he needed to run, to run fast and far.

Charlotte closed her eyes a moment, drew in a breath as if for strength, then turned back to Caleb. "He's leaving tomorrow, and we'll never see each other again."

Her voice caught a little, but Alessio couldn't know if that was because she didn't like the idea of never seeing him again, or if she was devastated about Caleb finding out the truth. He told himself he didn't care. He *couldn't* care.

"Do you have any idea what this guy is like?" Caleb jerked his thumb in Alessio's direction. "He's had more *girlfriends*,"

Caleb put air-quotes around the word, “than you have had hot meals.”

“I know that” she said with a quiet defiance. It was true, but Alessio found he was holding his breath, half waiting for her to defend him in some way. To tell Caleb that Alessio wasn’t really like he was portrayed. That he had a soft side, that he was a nice guy. Hell, he cared so much more than he wanted to. But Charlotte was silent, and the heart he’d denied possessing for many years twisted painfully.

“Listen,” Winona’s voice interrupted, clear and resonant. “This is not something we need to discuss now. Charlotte and Alessio are adults, capable of making their own decisions, Caleb. Even if we don’t agree with them, it’s not our place—,”

Alessio felt his mother’s betrayal like a knife in the gut, made all the worse because it was coming hot on the heels of Charlotte’s dismissal of everything they’d shared. She and Caleb were a team, the sensible, rational ones, who saw things the same way. He was the outsider. The one who’d come in and ruined everything. The same sense of hurt that had closed off his heart all those years ago slammed into him now. He turned to his mother with eyes like ice chips.

“And yet, you were happy to interrogate me about this situation, even after I told you it was a personal matter?”

“I was looking out for Charlotte,” she defended, her voice shaking. “However, I can see Charlotte has walked into this, whatever it is, with eyes wide open.”

“I did,” Charlotte said, her eyelids fluttering, so Alessio realised she was trying to blink back tears. His stomach rolled for another reason now. Everything was completely out of control—that was not a feeling Alessio was familiar with. In fact, being back here, in his mother’s home, was changing the fabric of his being, making Alessio lose sight of who he was in the world.

He wanted to leave. He wanted to escape, forever, and never see any of them again. Even Charlotte. Charlotte, perhaps, most of all, because she made him feel things he hated, feelings he didn’t want.

“And it is, as I said, a personal matter. Perhaps Charlotte and I should leave to discuss this. In private.”

“You don’t have to—,” Winona said, at the same time Charlotte said,

“I’d like to go home, but I don’t think we have anything further to discuss.” Her features were drawn, her lips compressed. “In private, or otherwise.” She tilted her chin, not quite meeting his eyes.

Frustration rolled through Alessio. “Then we can drive back to the pub without talking, if that’s your preference.”

“It is.” Her words were clipped, her voice cool, and then she turned, disappearing from the room, presumably to collect her handbag and Christmas gifts—small tokens from Winona and Caleb.

Alessio tried not to think about how the day had started, the beauty of the morning, the perfection of giving her such a beautiful piece of jewellery, of her wearing it, and only it, of making love to her, of how much he’d been looking forward to doing so again, before the day was out.

It felt a million miles away from where they were now.

“You are such a dick,” Caleb muttered, rounding on Alessio, pacing towards him. They were not evenly matched in height or size, but in that moment, Alessio believed Caleb would be more than stupid enough to take a swing regardless.

Alessio, naturally large-framed and strong, had learned from a young age to control his impulses, because a man of his size could easily inflict damage if they had a violent temperament. He pushed his hands into his pockets, showing that he wasn’t interested in any kind of physical altercation.

“I know you have feelings for her,” he said after a moment, surprising himself with a genuine sense of sympathy. “I’m sorry you had to find out about this.”

“But not that it happened?” Caleb challenged angrily.

Alessio considered that, he contemplated lying, but he couldn’t. “No.”

“You’re such a jackass.”

Alessio considered that. Was he? Probably.

“You think women are just...expendable, meaningless objects for your enjoyment. You think Charlie was here just for you to pluck out of the bar and into your bed...”

“Enough,” Alessio growled, anger bursting through him. His hands fidgeted in his pockets. The brothers stood toe to toe, anger swirling between them. It was Alessio who got a handle on his rage first, expelling fire through his nostrils before speaking more calmly. “That is enough. Whatever you think you know about me, you don’t.”

“Yeah? What’s that supposed to mean? That you’re secretly a good guy? Planning to do the right thing by Charlie?”

“The right thing? Are we in a Jane Austen novel, Caleb?” He demanded, as his heart rate exploded.

“Screw you,” Caleb grunted. “You should have known better than this. You’re an unmitigated pig.”

Alessio didn’t argue back. He wasn’t sure he could. He’d taken what he wanted—Charlotte—even knowing how difficult that might make her life, and he’d been right. She was the one who’d have to live with these people, this town, once he’d left. But he would still leave, just as soon as he could. There was nothing else for this. They’d all be better off without him.

THE CAR WAS FILLED with a stony silence, and each moment that passed only made it feel worse. Charlotte’s heart was splitting apart. She couldn’t understand how they’d gone from enjoying such a lovely Christmas, to this. What had happened to keeping their relationship a secret?

He’d said Winona had interrogated him. Was that true? And if so, why? How had she known? Charlotte stared out of the side window resolutely, wishing she weren’t so aware of every move he made.

“My mother insisted on knowing,” he said, as they passed the sign for the town, and fields gave way to ancient stone houses, all built hugging each other.

“And you couldn’t have just lied?” Charlotte muttered under her breath.

“I attempted to close down the conversation. She was adamant. Apparently, the idea of someone like me with someone like you was anathema to her. She had to protect your virtue.”

She turned towards him on autopilot, frowning, and saw that he was gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

“Anyway,” he said, after a beat. “There’s no harm done. As you pointed out, I’m leaving—,”

“No harm done?” She interrupted. “Did you not witness that awful scene back there?” She and Caleb had stood just outside the kitchen for a few beats, the conversation reaching them like a freight train, and Charlotte had been too shocked, her impulses slightly dulled by the lovely champagne she’d drunk, so her reactions hadn’t been swift enough. She’d heard Winona ask if Alessio wanted anything permanent, heard his quick and easy dismissal. *No*. The word had cut her like a blade. She’d felt as though a part of herself was dying in that moment. Her hopes had been stupid and childish, but they’d been real, nonetheless. “Caleb is...”

Alessio’s fingers tightened around the wheel. “He’s a big boy. He’ll live.”

“You don’t get it. He’s my friend. He’s a part of my life, of Dash’s life. I would never want to do anything to hurt him.”

Alessio’s jaw moved as he ground his teeth. “You’re entitled to live your life. He’s not your boyfriend, not your husband. Who you date in your own time is your personal business.”

“Yes, but I would have liked to keep it that way. You *knew* that.”

“Yes.”

“So? How could you have let this happen?”

Silence filled the car, an angry, tense lack of noise that made every cell in Charlotte’s body reverberate.

“As I said, my mother kept pushing. While I had no intention of volunteering the information, I did not particularly wish to lie to her.”

Charlotte closed her eyes, trying to work out if that was admirably moralistic or stupidly naïve. “This is going to change everything,” she said with a shake of her head. “My whole life. My work. Everything.”

He turned to her quickly, eyes assessing. “Your work should not be impacted by this.”

“In theory, sure.”

“Is this why you stay single? Because you’re afraid your job and accommodation will be in jeopardy? Because that’s not exactly a sign of a true friendship, you know.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I know they’d never fire me. I just meant, the pleasurable, friendly arrangement we have. I like my job, my home, my life. And you’ve come in, for one week, thrown a grenade into the middle of everything, and tomorrow morning, you’re going to get on a flight and leave.”

“Do you want me to stay and help pick up the pieces?” He asked, but in a tone that was flat, devoid of feeling, so she knew it wasn’t a genuine offer.

“I think I’ll do a better job of that myself.”

He pulled the car into the parking lot of the pub, finding a space near the door despite the fact it was almost full.

“I’m leaving this afternoon,” he said, quietly, staring straight ahead, a frown etching into his handsome features.

Charlotte couldn’t quite conceal the little gasping sound. She stared at him as her heart caught fire and began to meltdown. “Since when?”

His throat shifted as he swallowed. “Does it matter?” He turned to face her, eyes almost mocking as they met hers. She

shivered, trying to find a hint of the man she'd come to know, the man she'd fallen in love with. "Does any of this matter?"

Charlotte's lips parted on a whoosh of hurt surprise. She knew it didn't matter to him, but that didn't make it easy to hear.

"I guess not," she responded with a small shake of her head, but it was horrible to say that, let alone to believe he felt it. Yet, she'd said as much to Caleb. She'd told him this didn't mean anything, because for Alessio, that was true, and therefore, it had to be a universal truth: how could a relationship have meaning if one party didn't allow it to?

"Then we'll leave it at that."

Charlotte turned away from him again, but this time, she didn't look out the window. She kept her eyes closed, and focussed on her breathing, and on doing everything she could not to cry.

CHAPTER 13

THE PUB WAS A LIVELY, jolly swirl of people when they walked through the doors, in total contrast to the shellshocked mood that had stolen through Charlotte. Nonetheless, everyone in town knew her, and she had no choice but to paste a smile on her face and greet all the locals and respond to their well-wishes in kind.

Alessio didn't wait for her. A quick glance showed him striding through the pub, towards the door that led to the guest accommodations.

Her heart shattered.

She'd presumed he would find her to say goodbye. She'd presumed he'd...do something, to fix the awfulness of what had happened over lunch, but as the afternoon progressed towards night, Charlotte realised he was going to leave without another word.

It hit her like a cannon being aimed square at her gut.

She collapsed onto the sofa and dropped her head into her hands, and sobbed with all the grief in her heart, because she'd fallen so hard in love with him, and the day had turned out to be so awful, destroying her relationships with three people who mattered an awful lot to her. She felt lonely, alone and completely without hope, in a way she hadn't known since Maggie and Michael had died.

Her sobs grew louder as she indulged in a brief, rare fit of self-pity. She sacrificed so much of her life to be a good mother to Dash, but just this once, she'd thought she might be

able to have her cake and eat it too. To enjoy a no-strings fling with someone like Alessio.

She lay back on the sofa and stared at the ceiling as tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, down her cheeks, to the fabric beneath her, and she replayed the details of their time together like a highlight reel of a movie. One after the other, she remembered the way it had felt to be with him, to look forward to being with him, to touching him, to kissing him, to travelling with him.

Her heart was in stitches, her body made heavy by a strange sense that she recognised, belatedly, as grief. A grief as real as any she'd ever known, it was just becoming clear to Charlotte that she'd never see Alessio again. Never.

And Charlotte didn't know how she could live with that reality.

AS HE BOARDED THE FLIGHT, he told himself he was relieved. Relieved to be leaving his mother, brother and even Charlotte behind. Everything about the trip had been a disaster and he couldn't wait to get back to Italy and his normal life. To feel like himself again, instead of the strange man he'd been morphing into thanks to Winona's confessions and Charlotte's...

Charlotte's what?

Influence?

The way she made him question his long-held beliefs about almost everything?

It was only when the plane took off that he felt the slightest niggles of doubt.

You're running, Alessio. Not from himself this time, but from the mess he'd unwittingly made.

Unwittingly? Hardly.

Charlotte had told him from the outset why the relationship was complicated for her. He'd ignored that. He'd wanted her, so he'd made sure it happened.

And what about the wreckage of her life now? Her friendship with Caleb, a man who adored her, and Dash, and was an important part of their lives? Had Alessio destroyed that?

He closed his eyes as the plane pitched a little in the wintry weather, as if he could so easily blank his thoughts. But they pursued him relentlessly, the blame, the self-recriminations, the accusations, that he'd taken what he wanted from Charlotte, what suited him, what made him feel better during a week he'd have preferred to avoid, and then left her to clean up the mess, just as she'd said.

That would undoubtedly be easier without him around, but at the same time, shouldn't he have at least tried? To explain to Caleb, to his mother, to tell them...

Alessio's eyes flew open, clearly showing his frustration.

What could he possibly say to explain any of it? He'd suspected Caleb's feelings for Charlotte from the very beginning, and even without that, he'd known they were friends, that sleeping with Charlotte would put her in the middle of their decades-old dislike. He'd known it would make her work life difficult. But he hadn't cared. Not enough to do the right thing and walk away.

It never felt as though he could, though.

It doesn't mean anything.

Something like nausea rose in his chest. A thousand times with dozens of women, Alessio had thought exactly that. Even with Lucinda, who he'd dated for three months, and respected the hell out of, he'd been comfortable and confident in their relationship because he'd known, at every step of the way, that it didn't mean anything to him. And, he'd hoped, to her, but he'd been wrong about that.

When she'd said it didn't mean anything, Charlotte had only been verbalising what they'd agreed to, she'd simply explained their agreement, but it had left Alessio with the strangest feeling, and he hadn't been able to shake it all afternoon.

It was like he'd stepped off a six-month cruise and didn't have his land legs yet. He was wobbly and unclear.

He stared out of the window, looking at the bleak, dark sky.

It didn't matter. He'd be home soon, and then everything would start to make sense. He'd feel like himself again.

But even the idea of home was complicated by the threat of memories of Charlotte, of the single perfect night they'd spent there, of his desire for her—not just physically, but in every sense.

He sat bolt upright in the seat, his heart going into overdrive.

You're not right for her.

His mother had said that and, in that moment, Alessio had accepted it as fact. But what did his mother really know about him? Their relationship had fractured long ago, and he'd worked very hard to keep his true self separate from her. He'd shown her only one facet of his personality, for many, many years. It was Charlotte who knew him best of all. Charlotte who he'd let in—the first person in his adult life, really.

And you mean nothing to her.

But there was something jarring about those words. About the sentiment. It took leaving England to finally obtain the clarity he needed, the birds eye view of their situation to understand it clearly.

She'd said it meant nothing but that was a lie.

He only had to remember the moments they'd shared, the way being with her had changed something fundamental inside of him, to know that their relationship had meant something. More than something.

It meant everything.

Somehow, without his consent or awareness, in a shorter space of time than he would have thought possible, Charlotte had become as vital to Alessio as the air he breathed. She was his reason: for being, for smiling, for thinking, for living. She

had become a part of him, the very best part, and he could no longer ignore that.

Standing with a muffled oath, cursing his stupidity and slowness to understand why he'd felt so different since meeting Charlotte, he moved towards the cockpit, his brain working at lightning speed now, as everything fell into place, and he saw the way forward—the only way forward.

What bothered him wasn't that his mother had implied he didn't deserve Charlotte. It was that in leaving like this, he was proving her right.

Alessio was ready to stop running. At least, to stop running in the wrong direction. For the first time in his life, Alessio was prepared to risk everything, for love.

THE COTSWOLDS COUNTRYSIDE was blanketed in white, like something out of a fairytale, so he remembered flashes of past conversations with Charlotte, reminding him how often he'd disavowed a belief in any such thing. The ground was white everywhere, so as his car cut through the country roads, he saw only clean slates and fresh starts, the newness of everything, the hope he held, deep in his heart, that such things were possible.

Perhaps they were, he thought with a small frown, if everything was done just right. He thought of Charlotte, and his yearning to see her, but there was something else he had to attend to first. Something important he had to fix before he could go to Charlotte and explain what a monumental fool he'd been.

CHARLOTTE STARED at the tree and exhaled for the first time in hours—since Dash had come home, and she'd had to put aside the tangle of her emotions and focus on him, on being the best version of herself for him, on making their Christmas together magical despite the bomb that had just detonated in the middle of her life.

But whenever Dash stopped talking, whenever he gave Charlotte even a minute's breathing space, her mind went to Alessio, to the morning they'd had—absolute heaven on earth—to the argument at Winona's and in the car afterwards, and she felt numb, and simultaneously overcome with emotions.

Fortunately, Dash was rarely still, meaning Charlotte was able to remain distracted for much of the time, but now, with the little boy fast asleep, visions of sugar plums and brightly wrapped presents dancing in his head, Charlotte was alone, at last, to contemplate the wreckage of her life.

She thought about calling Melody—the only person on earth who'd ever been able to pull her out of a funk—but shied away from that. It was still too raw. Too hard to talk about.

There was nothing for it but to experience these feelings and hope that one day, she'd grow from them.

“ALESSIO?” At least this time, his mother used the correct version of his name.

Alessio's eyes swept over her, wondering if his desire for a clean slate could extend to her too? Carrying the anger he had for all these years had very nearly cost him everything—maybe it had? He wasn't so sure anymore that it served the protective purpose he'd envisaged.

“May I come in?”

Her lips parted in surprise before she stepped backwards and waved a slender hand to the entrance hall of her home. He stepped in, looking around without really seeing, then turned his focus to his mother.

“I need to speak to you.”

“I thought you'd left?”

“I did. I came back.”

Winona's eyes widened. “I see.” She moved deeper into her home, calling, over her shoulder, “Come and tell me what's going on.”

In the kitchen, Winona flicked the kettle, standing beside it while it boiled, eyes resting on Alessio's face.

Now that he'd arrived, he was uncharacteristically stuck for words. "Is Caleb here?"

Winona frowned. "He's gone home. Do you need to speak to him? What's going on?"

"At some point," he confirmed thoughtfully. Now that he understood his own feelings for Charlotte, he felt only pity for the other man. Loving her and knowing she didn't love you as anything more than a friend was a difficult fate indeed. It may still be a fate that awaited Alessio, however. He didn't know yet.

"How long are you here for?"

An excellent question. "I don't know." He frowned, considering that. While he'd come here half-cocked, he hadn't considered the practicalities of how they'd make this work. Charlotte was heavily entrenched in her life in Morincester. She had a child at school, that child had grandparents, she loved her job, she had friends. But his life was in Italy, and the idea of leaving his responsibilities felt like a direct betrayal of his father.

He pushed those considerations aside for now. They didn't require an immediate solution.

"A little while," he said with a lift of his shoulders. "I came to see Charlotte."

"Charlotte," Winona repeated with a nod, but an expression that showed confusion. "Why?"

"I don't think she was honest with you today."

Winona frowned.

"What Charlotte and I are to each other—it's not nothing. It means something." He grimaced, frustrated by his inability to verbalise the feelings of his heart. "It matters."

Comprehension seemed to dawn for Winona. "You care about her," she said gently, frown turning to a smile as she

pulled out two mugs and added tea bags then water to each, followed by a splash of milk.

“Yes.” His answer was firm and decisive.

“And she cares about you.”

“I hope so.”

Winona’s face turned to his. “But you’re not sure?”

“We haven’t discussed it,” he said after a beat. “Prior to today, I believed we would be able to keep things between us casual. I was wrong.”

“You fell in love.” Winona slid the teacup across the counter to him, eyes meeting his probingly, happily, now.

Alessio hesitated. Not because he doubted the truth of his mother’s words, but because he hadn’t even admitted as much to Charlotte yet, he wasn’t sure it was right to speak that truth to his mother first.

“I have to speak to Charlotte,” he repeated. “But it felt important for you to know that this was more than just...”

“Convenient sex?” Winona supplied with arched brows.

“A casual relationship,” Alessio said with a small nod. “I appreciate that Caleb will find it hard to adjust, but I imagine the blow will be lessened by the knowledge that I’m not just...”

“Using Charlotte to hurt him,” Winona supplied once more.

“Or using her, at all,” Alessio finished. “I care about her, very much. I didn’t come here expecting to meet someone like her, nor to feel...” He tapered off, gesturing with his hand to his chest, so tears sparkled on Winona’s lashes.

“Love catches you by surprise sometimes, darling. I’m glad you acted on it. I’m glad you found her.”

Alessio didn’t smile. He couldn’t. Until he’d spoken to Charlotte, and learned how she felt, he simply couldn’t, wouldn’t, relax.

SHE WAS VERY TEMPTED to ignore the knocking at her door.

After all, it was ten o'clock on Christmas night and she was bushed. But there were only three people on earth it could reasonably be, and Charlotte didn't plan to ignore any of them. If Winona, Caleb or Melody had come to see her, then Charlotte would answer, even though she wasn't ready to debrief with Caleb yet.

She placed her sherry glass on the corner of the table and brushed some errant fruit mince pie crumbs off her sweater as she walked to the door, pulling it inwards without checking to see who it was.

A gasp escaped her lips, because standing on the other side was the very last person she'd expected to see—now or ever.

“Alessio,” she said on a rough exhalation. “What are you doing here?”

She was too surprised to remember that she was angry with him, too glad to see him to immediately recall that he'd left without properly preparing her, that he'd dropped the bombshell about their relationship in Caleb and Winona's laps then left her to clean up the pieces.

“You left. Didn't you?” Maybe he hadn't. Maybe he'd stayed in his room? But no. She'd gone down after dinner to check on the kitchen and seen his room keys—both sets—hanging in the lockbox. He'd checked out.

“I got halfway to Italy,” he confirmed with a nod, arms crossed over his broad chest, expression impossible to read. If she knew him less well, she might have found him intimidating, but this was Alessio, and for all his big, imposing frame, she'd never feel that way about him.

“And?” She prompted, belatedly recalling their parting, their argument, her broken heart. It was just what she needed: to summon anger rather than sadness. She stiffened her spine and stayed where she was, one hand on the door.

“And I realised I was flying in completely the wrong direction. I thought I was going home, but home isn’t really a place, it’s a feeling, and this last week, with you, I have felt truly at home, at peace, truly happy, for the first time in almost my whole life.” He moved then, surprising her with his words but also his hands, lifting to cup her face, to hold her right where she was. “I love you, Charlotte. The idea of going back to Italy, of leaving without telling you, of walking away without fighting for the future I now realise I want, with all of myself, was just another form of running away. I don’t want to run anymore; I want to live.” He cleared his throat. “I want to live *with you*.”

Charlotte was glad she was holding the door because she truly felt as though she might drop to the floor. Her knees were too wobbly to support her properly.

“Did you...are you being serious?”

His lips flattened. “Of course.”

It was too much. Charlotte blinked up at him, the perfection of that moment impossible to ignore. But reality was right there, throwing every impediment possible in the way of true joy, because this surely had to be an impossible relationship, an impossible future.

“Alessio,” she said with a small shake of her head, dislodging his hands and putting a little space between them. “I’m...grateful you came back. I didn’t want things to end the way they did, after everything with us had been so, so indescribably wonderful.” She lifted a hand then, pressing it to his chest. “But how could this ever work?” Her features were pinched. “You’re *you*, and I’m *me*,” she lifted her shoulders. “There’s a reason we set ground rules with this from the outset. To hope for more is...impossible.”

“Why?” He demanded, arrogance in the single syllable, determination in every etched line of his face. “Why would this be impossible?”

“I can give you a thousand reasons, but only one of them is truly insurmountable,” she said quietly. “When Michael and Maggie died, I swore Dash would always come first. He is my

sun, my moon, my true north, my guiding light. I can never walk away from him, and what I owe him.”

“Do you think I would come here to tell you I love you and then ask you to abandon a boy you care for as if he were your own son?”

Charlotte bit down on her lip.

“No, *cara*. No.” He was emphatic. “I don’t have all the answers yet,” he said with that same quiet determination. “I admit, there are some practical matters to consider, and these will take time to resolve. But one thing is not up for negotiation: in loving you, I ask to be a part of your family with Dash, not to take you away from him. I have known the pain of being a child who was abandoned; I would never inflict that hurt onto another.”

A single tear rolled down Charlotte’s cheek. All the hope that had been growing inside her started to burst, to have full reign of her body, but reality was there too, the reality of the last few years which had left her jaded and uncertain, and too quick to believe in worst case scenarios.

“This is impossible,” she said slowly, another tear rolling down her cheek. “You live in Italy, I live here.”

“I have had that same thought. We can fix that.”

She shook her head. “Dash’s grandparents—I can’t—,”

He regarded Charlotte, waiting for her to continue.

She expelled a breath, then spoke with a voice that was husky with emotion. “They’ve always made it very clear that if I get involved with someone, and Dash is no longer my priority, they’ll fight me for custody. I can’t risk that, Alessio.”

“Just let them try,” he responded with a voice that was flooded with strength and resolve. “You will have all my resources at your disposal, *cara*. There is no fight they can pick with you that they would win.”

Charlotte was in awe of his confidence. Then again, this was not a mere mortal.

“But you’re—Alessio, listen. This last week has been amazing,” she said with sincerity. “Truly one of the best of my life.”

He waited, one brow lifted.

“But what if you don’t feel like this in a week’s time. Or a week after that? I can’t...the way I feel...if I open myself up to this, and you, I’m so scared of what will happen if you change your mind.”

“And why would I change my mind?”

“Because you don’t do long term relationships,” she said, simply. “You told me that.”

“That’s true,” he agreed with a nod. “Then again, I have never met anyone like you before, *cara*.”

She smiled but still, her heart was uncertain. She knew what she wanted, but the future was so impossible to see, and the leap of faith so large.

“I am asking too much,” he said, with a single nod, showing that he understood. “Instead of asking what I really want, let me say this: what are you doing for New Year’s Eve?”

Her eyes sparkled as she lifted her gaze to his face, this question far easier to answer. “I’m working.”

“And afterwards?”

She didn’t tell him that she’d be exhausted. It was too pragmatic and sensible.

“You will be tired,” he said, understanding anyway. “So, what if I run you a bath and pour you a champagne, and we have a quiet toast together, to ring in the year ahead?”

It all sounded so simple, when he put it like that.

“We will take this week by week, *mia amore*. Step by step,” he moved closer, “for all the steps we take together, side by side,” she blinked up at him, “for the rest of our lives.”

Charlotte’s heart skipped a beat because, as he said the words, she heard the truth of them and *knew*, beyond any hint

of doubt, that he was right.

They would walk, side by side, partners, lovers, friends, family, for as long as they both shall live. There were details to resolve, but details were neither here nor there when two hearts were in lockstep, as theirs had been from the first moment they met.

EPILOGUE

CHARLOTTE DIDN'T KNOW IF promises made at Christmas were more likely to be unbroken than those made at other times of the year, but something weaved around herself and Alessio that night that became an indefinable part of her soul. She felt it in her breath, her body, her heart, her core. She saw it with her own eyes, the very next morning, when he took over the kitchen to make chocolate chip pancakes for Dash's breakfast and entertained the little boy with stories of his own childhood—tobogganing down steep, snow-covered hills and feasting on hot chocolates and marshmallows.

Charlotte watched, bemused by this turn of events, and so full of love she couldn't believe it.

Her relationship with Caleb suffered initially. The development was difficult for him in multiple ways. That Charlotte had fallen in love with any other man would have been hard enough for Caleb, but that it was his own half-brother, a man he professed to hate, made it very difficult for Caleb to be around the two of them initially. Harder still was the sight of Alessio with Dash. As the weeks turned to months and the weather grew warm, it was obvious that Alessio was an excellent addition to the boy's life. He didn't push the relationship, nor did he expect Dash to be comfortable with him straight away, but rather, he was just himself around Dash, and as time passed, Alessio became an indispensable part of Dash's life too.

Charlotte had lived in fear of Dash's grandparents suing for custody, and while she didn't doubt that Alessio would

have done whatever he could to protect her from that reality, she hadn't banked on the charm offensive he launched. Rather than doing anything that might turn the relationship combative, Alessio—who quickly bought a large home only two miles from the pub—insisted on inviting Dash's grandparents to stay with him one weekend in the spring. The visit was a success, and Charlotte was able to exhale for the first time in years, without the ever-present spectre of a custody dispute on the horizon.

She never doubted Alessio's sincerity or intentions.

They felt like a family from that very first moment. It was somewhat inevitable, though never formally discussed, that she and Dash would move into his home. It happened gradually and organically, a night here and there, and then a weekend, until it made more sense to be there than not, because none of them wanted to spend a night apart, anyway.

Alessio spoke to Charlotte and Dash in Italian, delighting in teaching them his native language, and Charlotte continued to speak to Dash, and now Alessio, about Maggie and Michael, making sure they were still an important and present part of the family.

Winona was, from the start, overcome with delight at this turn of events. Though mindful of how the developments would affect Caleb, she was a mother, and could not sacrifice one son's happiness for the other's. Besides which, it was obvious to anyone who was in the same vicinity as Alessio and Charlotte that they were so utterly in love, it would be pointless to question their commitment.

The year moved on, month by month, season by season. Winona, in consultation with Charlotte, and perhaps sensing that priorities were shifting, hired an assistant chef midway through the year, someone who was keen to learn everything they could from Charlotte. Charlotte and Grace worked well together, and it was obvious to Charlotte within weeks that Grace would be a perfect replacement, if Charlotte ever wanted a future away from the pub. Of course, it was impossible to think of such a thing...

Until it wasn't.

While her heart was still in this beautiful village that had been such a perfect safe-haven and bolthole for her after the shock of losing her brother, Alessio had become the wind at her back, a source of strength and courage, so gradually, over the course of that year, as their relationship grew roots deep in her soul, and Dash became comfortable with the new shape of their family, Charlotte began to yearn to see more of the world, with her two favourite people. They travelled in the term breaks, spending most of the summer in Italy, which Dash fell in love with—and not just because he had liberal access to the chocolate factory!

But the village was where they spent the next Christmas, with Christmas eve at Winona's house for dinner, and the event was in such stark contrast to the year before, which had been so tense. That seemed like a lifetime ago! Now, they sat with genuine happiness and affection around the table: Winona, Caleb, Alessio, Charlotte, Dash and Dash's grandparents, the relaxed, convivial atmosphere making it easy to enjoy every moment.

The following morning, when Charlotte woke, it was to find both Alessio and Dash humming in the kitchen, preparing a special breakfast. She watched them for a moment, her heart in her throat, emotional at the sight of the two of them, so perfect together.

It was an emotion that only strengthened when she sat down to breakfast to see Dash and Alessio exchanging cheeky looks—explained when she sliced into a pancake to hit something hard. And metallic. And bejewelled. With a look of confusion, she continued to cut around it, then gasped, because an enormous solitaire diamond ring had been baked right into the middle of her pancake.

“Oh my goodness,” she exclaimed. “I could easily have choked on that.”

“You always cut right through the middle,” Dash pointed out with a grin.

Charlotte's eyes filled with happy tears. "That's true, darling, I do."

She stared at the ring, then from Dash to Alessio. The former was grinning from ear to ear and the latter was looking serious and, she realised, a little nervous.

"Alessio," Dash elbowed the Italian. "You're meant to ask the question now."

Charlotte bit into her lower lip to hold back her smile.

In that moment, she loved him more than ever before. How could he possibly doubt her answer?

"Last Christmas, I realised the truth of my heart and I came here, hoping you would feel as I did. I wanted to marry you then, Charlotte. I think I've felt that way from the first moment we met. But in the year we've spent together, I've only become more and more convinced that this here, with you and Dash, is where I belong—where I'll always belong. I ask you to marry me with a heart and soul that are, and always will be, regardless of your answer, yours."

Charlotte stared at him, her heart in her throat, tears in her eyes, and then she scraped back her chair, moving towards him at the same time he stood and reached for her, so they embraced, a mix of arms and happy sobs, a relieved groan from Alessio, and a beaming expression from Dash who watched on.

Their wedding, held that spring, because neither wanted to wait for anything more than a hint of sunshine, only confirmed what they already knew: they belonged together, the three of them. They were a family. A year later, when Charlotte gave birth to twin girls, Dash became a big brother, and he adored his little sisters, proudly watching over them, protecting them, and as the girls grew, teaching them everything he knew about life.

For Charlotte, she could never have imagined, after the grief she'd endured, that she would find such happiness and completion, but she had. With every day that passed, she counted her blessings, which were many. Most of all, she

recognised how wrong she'd been: fairytales not only existed, but she was also living one, and like all good fairytales, she knew they'd live Happily Ever After.

THE END

THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CINDERELLA CAPTIVE

XENAKIS I

All the characters in this book are fictitious and have no existence outside the author's very-vivid, non-stop imagination. They have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names and are pure invention (mwah-ha-ha).

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The illustration on the cover of this book features smokin' hot model/s and, as gorgeous as they are, bears no relation to the characters described within.

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PROLOGUE

ANYONE OBSERVING ANASTASIOS XENAKIS from a distance would have thought him the same as always—impenetrable, ruthless, unmoving and unmoved—but that assessment would be wrong. Anastasios was, in that moment, deeply moved. The death of his father had shocked him to the core.

At eighty four, Konstantinos Xenakis had been in robust good health, more energetic and astute than men half his age, and yet, his body had failed him. In the whirlwind week since his father's massive heart attack, there'd been a thousand tasks demanding Anastasios' attention, from taking over the reins of the family's trillion-dollar empire, to calming shareholders' jitters, to supporting, along with his brothers, their mother, who had lost, without warning, the love of her life.

He had also been dealing with the bombs that were detonating around him, as secrets—long hidden—were dragged into the light. So far, those secrets rested solely on Anastasios' shoulders—the decision of whether to tell his brothers and cousins, and if so, how much, was for him alone.

There was no space to grieve. Not now. Even when he knew the absence of his father would be profound, there were more immediate concerns.

Anastasios stood a little away from his family, and the small group of mourners who'd been included as guests at the intimate burial. Their darkly clothed forms were huddled together on this warm, mid-summer's day, where the sun made a mockery of their moods, his mother at the center, even now

graceful and stunning, her pale hair pinned into a bun at her nape, her fair skin unmarked by the bright Greek sun, always betraying her English roots.

“Tasso.”

The only sign he’d heard the diminutive of his name was the slight shift of his head. His shoulders remained squared, his body as still as if made of stone.

He recognized the familiar tone of their family solicitor and despite a long-held affection for the man, his lips formed a grim line. He was plummeted three days into the past, when he’d met with Georgios and his world had come crashing down.

“I believe it was an ongoing situation.” Georgios had struggled to hold Anastasios’ gaze.

“For how long?” He asked with icy calm, when inside, his mind was shouting, an affair? His father?

“Their daughter is twenty four.”

Icy calm had disappeared. Anastasios, known for his steadfast reactions, practically leaped out of the chair and prowled across the solicitor’s office, towards the highly-polished oak desk. “Did you just say their daughter?” He asked, when he could trust his voice to speak.

Georgios nodded.

“Twenty four,” Anastasios repeated, lifting a hand and rubbing it across the back of his neck. The reality of this—of his father’s lovechild—was almost impossible to grapple with. “Surely it was a brief affair, at the time,” he murmured, doing some quick calculations. “We had just buried Valentina. Perhaps in his grief—,”

“Perhaps at first,” Georgios nodded. “But it continued beyond that.”

“How do you know?”

The older man’s expression showed obvious discomfort.

“Damn it, do not obfuscate. I need to know everything you do, now.”

Georgios winced at the tone in Anastasios’ voice. “Up until a year ago, they were in his will.”

Anastasios closed his eyes on a wave of shock. “I see.”

“A year ago, he insisted that they be removed. He was adamant about it. I gather something happened between them.”

Anastasios wracked his brain, trying to think of what might have changed one year earlier. His father had begun travelling more frequently to their office in London, which was run by Anastasios’ younger brother Dimitrios. But that wasn’t necessarily unusual.

“I don’t understand,” he said with frustration.

“She has a penthouse in New York. Your father purchased it twenty four years ago, and put it in her name.”

Georgios was speaking in a matter-of-fact tone, as though it were the only way to get the information across.

“An account was set up, also in her name, and a regular amount deposited into it. Five years later, payments began to a private school in Manhattan.”

Anastasios’ eyes swept shut, his chiseled face bearing a mask of utter disgust. “At least he had the decency to take care of his responsibilities.”

“There is more,” Georgios said gently. “But the rest of your family will be here soon. I asked you to come early so I could raise this matter delicately. It is, naturally, up to you to decide how you’d like to proceed.”

Anastasios stared at Georgios, but he was lost in thought. If his mother learned the truth of this, she’d be devastated. That didn’t necessarily mean he shouldn’t tell her, only that nothing was served by doing so now.

“She is grieving the loss of my father. At this point in time, this stays between us. But Georgios? I want to hear everything, to know everything.”

On the afternoon of the funeral, Georgios took the space at Anastasios' right, his demeanour tense. "I need to speak with you."

Anastasios turned slowly, regarding the other man carefully. "And from your body language, I gather I'm not going to like what you have to say."

"A wise assessment."

Anastasios returned his gaze to his family, crossing his arms over his chest. "Then tell me whatever it is quickly. I can't say how long we'll have before being disturbed."

"Your father's estate is complex," Georgios began. "There are the business assets, but also many personal accounts and properties, and he was very specific in how they were to be distributed. As you'll learn, at the reading of the will this afternoon, most everything is split equally between you and your brothers. Your mother's fortune was set up independently a long time ago."

Anastasios was familiar with these provisions.

"There are two more things you should know."

Anastasios gave no hint of the sense of trepidation that was stealing through him.

"I have received a letter from the solicitor of Annie Westbourne."

Anastasios lifted a brow, the name meaning nothing to him.

"The woman we discussed in my office, last week?"

A single breath hissed between Anastasios' lips. Somehow, having her name made it all the more real.

"She is seeking a share of your father's wealth, an amount that she says was promised to her."

"Is this the...mother? Or the daughter?"

"The mother," Georgios said with delicacy.

So she was a fortune hunter, then? What excellent judgement his father had, he thought with sarcasm, before a sense of disloyalty chewed through him. Whatever else Konstantinos had been—and it was becoming clear he'd lived a secret life all these years—he was still Antastasios's father, and he loved him.

“I see.”

“While the letter does not carry a threat, *per se*, I get the distinct impression the matter is at risk of becoming public, unless payment is made quickly.”

Dislike coated his insides. He had grown up with money at his fingertips, but was still capable of understanding how it motivated people. He knew that wealth had a habit of bringing out the worst in just about everybody, particularly those who craved it.

“Email me a copy of the letter. Do it yourself—no secretaries. This cannot leak out from our end.”

“Of course not.” Georgios was miffed. His firm dealt with only the upper echelon of Europe's elite and was renowned for its discretion. “What will you do?”

“Whatever it takes to ensure her silence. For now.”

Georgios tilted his head thoughtfully. “You intend to tell your mother.”

“We will forever be over a barrel unless I do—and I do not particularly relish the idea of being in a position of weakness. Yes, I'll tell her, but when the time is right. Not now. It would devastate her if the news were to break.”

“So you'll pay Miss Westbourne?”

“No. I'll enter a dialogue with her—through you. Allow me to read the letter before I advise you further.”

Georgios nodded.

“You said there was a second matter?” Anastasios asked quickly, as the group began to separate a little, preparing to move towards the house.

Georgios looked from Maggie Xenakis, the grieving widow, back to Anastasios. “There is something else in his will. A sealed envelope, in fact, that even I was not privy to until after he passed.”

Anastasios’ attention was caught. “And? Are you going to tell me what it contains?”

Georgios also kept his eyes on the family. Though the huddle had broken up, they continued to stand close to the grave, solemn, somber, a group. At that moment, Anastasios’ youngest brother Leonidas looked in their direction, a single dark brow raised quizzically. Despite how much time had passed, it was difficult to look at Leo and not see his twin, Valentina, who hadn’t been lucky enough to see her sixth birthday. Her absence was palpable today, for all of them, but perhaps Leo most of all.

Anastasios shook his head, once: both a reassurance and a command. *Don’t come here. We’re fine.*

“The matter is delicate.”

Anastasios would have laughed if it weren’t so devastating to their mother. “Even more than the threat of a secret affair and twenty-four-year-old love child going public?”

“Yes.”

Anticipation ran down Anastasios’ spine like ice water. What the hell had his father exposed them to?

“There is someone else.”

Anastasios cursed in his mother tongue, the word searing the air around them. “Who?”

“A young woman, in London.”

“London.” Anastasios took an involuntary step back, as their conversation from three days earlier chimed in his mind. His father had been going to London a lot in the past year. It was inexplicable. Weekly trips made little sense. He knew from his investigations that he hadn’t been spending extra time with Dimitrios.

“Her name is Phoebe Whittaker, and in his estate, he’s left her a large sum.”

Anastasios closed his eyes as the reality punched him hard in the gut. “I see.”

“That’s not all.”

His laugh lacked humour. “No? I’m sure it’s enough for now.”

“She is also twenty four years old.”

Anastasios’ head whipped around, his eyes hitting the older man with the force of a speeding car. “You have to be kidding?”

“I’m sorry, Tasso. I’m as surprised as you.”

“Wait a moment. Are you suggesting this is another daughter, or his lover?”

“A mistress.” Anastasios compressed his lips. Georgios continued, “I have looked into the matter as thoroughly as I could, without raising suspicion. It’s not possible.”

“How can you know that?”

“She is Australian, for one, and I found records of her parents, photographs of her at school. Until eighteen months ago, she hadn’t left Australia.”

“And now she lives in London.”

Georgios nodded.

“That doesn’t prove she isn’t, somehow, connected to him.”

“I also had her DNA tested.”

Anastasios might have been surprised, but given the delicate nature of things, Georgios’s thoroughness was simply appreciated. “How?”

“A discarded coffee cup,” Georgios waved his hand to show that the details didn’t matter. “She is not a blood relative of yours.”

Anastasios tried to wrap his head around this revelation. “My father was eighty-four when he died. You’re saying he was involved with a woman sixty years his junior?”

Georgios lifted his hands in a gesture of appeasement. “I’ll admit, I too was surprised. But Konstantinos always seemed younger than he was, and, as you know, his wealth and power would be very attractive traits, to certain women. Particularly young waitresses living in dirt-cheap bedsits. Her finances are, I’m afraid, in terrible straits. To a woman like that, a man such as your father, his generosity...”

Maggie looked over at that moment, a small frown marring her delicate features as her eyes went from Anastasios to Georgios, then, she began to move, her steps slow in the wake of the terrible body blow she’d endured this past week. His mother, always a pillar of strength, looked weak and broken. He hadn’t seen her like this since Valentina. Anastasios shifted, turning to block Georgios from view, ensuring privacy.

The idea of his father having fallen prey to a fortune hunter was difficult to contemplate, and yet Georgios was not a man to throw accusations without merit.

“How sure are you?”

Georgios looked uncomfortable for a moment. “I knew your father well, Tasso. I loved him like a brother. His affair with Annie is something I turned a blind eye to, I’ll admit. I didn’t approve, but after your sister, he wasn’t the same.” None of them had been. “He never mentioned Phoebe to me, perhaps because he understood I wouldn’t take his side in the matter. And yet—,”

“Yes?”

“I knew him, very well. For Konstantinos to have left this amount of money to this woman, she meant something very special to him. Having absolutely ruled out a family connection, it leaves only one conclusion.”

Anastasios closed his eyes, trying to think of anything else that might explain this. He drew a blank.

“There is also this.”

Anastasios opened his eyes to find Georgios lifting his phone from his pocket and pressing a few buttons, then passing it to him. A woman stared from the screen and his breath hissed from his lips. The first thing he noticed was her beauty. It was impossible not to consider her one of the most attractive women he'd ever seen—far more so than any supermodel or actress. From her svelte yet curvaceous figure, generous, rounded breasts, to full lips and dimpled cheeks, glossy chestnut hair and an air that was just incredibly sensual. “How did you get this?”

“I told you, I've looked into matters.”

Anastasios knew what that meant. He'd had a detective trail her. “Someone trustworthy?”

“Of course.”

Anastasios handed the phone back with a tight grimace. His father might have been eighty four, but he was a still red-blooded male, and it was difficult to imagine him resisting this woman's charms, if she'd decided to focus them on the octogenarian.

“This must stay between us. I need any information you have, but then, not another word. I'll handle it.”

“And the payment your father has specified, for the young lady in London?”

Anastasios' expression was grim. “Do nothing until you hear from me. I need to look into this further.”

CHAPTER I

WEARY DIDN'T BEGIN TO describe how Phoebe was feeling. At the end of her third double shift in as many days, she was practically asleep on her feet. Unfortunately for Phoebe, the classy restaurant on the Kings Road in Chelsea was still half full, meaning there was more than enough to keep her busy, no matter how badly she wished she could click her heels together and be back in the little bedsit she'd called home, ever since arriving in London eighteen months earlier. Just the thought of the crisp sheets Mrs Langham laundered for her each week made her stifle another yawn.

She angled her face away, to hide the telltale gesture from the diners, then moved with innate elegance to one of the tables by the window. A couple sat there, very much in love, if the way they'd held hands all evening was anything to go by. Even when their meals were served, they didn't break apart, each awkwardly using just a fork to eat with. "Would you like to see the dessert menu?"

The woman smiled at her lover, then shook her head. "We want to get home now, please."

"Just the bill," the man agreed.

Phoebe turned and weaved back to the register, pulling out the docket for their table and double checking the meals and wine—her employer was known to fly off the handle if any table was undercharged, and had docked waitstaff's wages compensatingly—then carried it back to the couple on a platter. The man removed his credit card and paid straight away, a moment later they had stood and were leaving, arms

around each other's waists, eyes unable to be torn from each other's faces. Phoebe watched them go, imagining for a moment what that kind of love must feel like, imagining the basking sensation of warmth they must enjoy, knowing that each existed for the other.

Clearing their table quickly, she was focused on the kitchen doors so didn't notice when a man stepped into the restaurant. Instead, she noticed the effect his arrival had, as several heads angled towards the door, so she turned on autopilot and almost dropped the load of plates she was carrying.

Holy guacamole.

This guy was, without a doubt, the most beautiful specimen of masculinity she'd ever seen in her life. Easily six and a half feet and leanly muscled, he wore a charcoal black suit with a crisp white shirt unbuttoned at the throat, no tie. His face was angular and symmetrical, his features stone like, his eyes the colour of burnt butter, his hair thick and dark and a little long at the nape, so it brushed the collar of his jacket.

She didn't want to stop looking at him but the plates were heavy. Besides which, the longer she looked, the more she became aware of something disconcerting in his appearance, something almost too handsome, something unnervingly beautiful.

With a small shiver, she turned away, walking with quiet efficiency through the restaurant, oblivious to the caramel eyes that followed her, to the appraising look they gave as she went.

In the kitchen, she scraped the plates and placed them on the side of the sink, for the attention of Jason, their dishwasher.

They were short staffed that night, but things had slowed down enough, so it didn't make sense that Mr Ridiculously Handsome was waiting at the register when she emerged. Looking around, strangely hopeful someone else would seat him, his eyes landed on hers and a frisson of danger ran down her spine. She had no option but to help him.

With a pulse that was strangely thready and a tummy turning itself inside out, she moved to stand behind the register, pasting a bright smile on her face, completely unaware of the way it transformed her from a woman of beauty to someone almost magical seeming. Her eyes glittered and two dimples scored deep grooves in her cheeks.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“I’d like a table.”

“For one?”

“As you see.” There was something derisive in his response so she almost startled, but years of enduring her father’s verbal abuse had left her toughened—or at least with the appearance of it.

“This way.” She gestured towards the table that had just been vacated, by the window, but the man stood his ground.

“No. I’d prefer to sit there.” He nodded towards a different table, across the restaurant. It was more private, less on display.

“Fine,” she smiled again but this time, it failed to reach her eyes, then took a menu from besides the register. “If you’ll follow me,” she invited, a strange sensation settling between her shoulder blades as she guided him to the table he’d requested.

“Would you like to look at our wine list?”

“Yes.” No word of thanks. Somehow, that suited him.

She handed the wine list to him and without sitting down, he opened it, took a cursory inspection then ordered a glass of the most expensive wine.

“I’ll let you have a look at the menu and be back in a moment to take your order.”

She left because standing close to him was somewhat unpalatable, or perhaps, more correctly, unnerving, and yet, even when she was no longer within his physical proximity, she felt him following her as she continued to work. His eyes lingered on her when she placed the wine glass on his table,

and as she served other guests, then, when she came to take his dinner order, which he placed in a matter-of-fact fashion.

There was something about him that called to her, too, so even when distracted by work, she found her eyes flicking towards his table, only to jerk away again quickly when she realized he was watching her.

Being flirted with by customers was nothing new, but this was different. He wasn't flirting. If anything, he was looking at her as though she were a puzzle he wanted to figure out, or — her breath caught. Or as though he didn't like her. There was enmity in the depths of his fascinating eyes, and she had no idea why.

You're being silly, Phoebe, she counselled herself. After all, they didn't know each other—why should he look at her with anything akin to dislike? Nonetheless, she let out a small sigh of relief when one of her colleagues cleared his dinner plate and offered dessert and coffee, so Phoebe didn't have to be up close and personal with him again.

To her chagrin, he ordered a scotch, and reclined back in the chair, eyes fixed on her. The restaurant thinned of diners, and she looked to closing time with relief.

Despite the fact she told herself she was unnerved by him, Phoebe's eyes moved to the stranger on repeat and against her will, as though she couldn't control herself. Every time she looked at him, their eyes would meet and a buzz of excitement and anticipation would spread through her.

Phoebe fumbled as she carried a tray of coffee cups into the kitchen, almost dropping them, her cheeks flaming as she disappeared from view. Would this day never end?

X

IT WAS ALL TOO easy to recognize what his father had seen in her. As he'd seen from the photograph, she was not simply beautiful. There were, after all, many beautiful women in the world, so much so they were a dime a dozen. To tempt a man

like Konstantinos, there had to be something more, and now, Anastasios saw it.

She was compellingly desirable, with her shimmering dark hair and pouting lips, eyes that were almost black, with thick, long lashes and high cheekbones and dimples deep in either cheek when she smiled at customers. Her build was slim and athletic, and she couldn't have been taller than five and a half feet, her diminutive presence only adding to her physical appeal because it inspired a sort of protector vibe, an ancient, primal caveman urge.

Yes, he could imagine his father being captivated by her. But what had Phoebe Whittaker seen in an eighty four year old man?

The answer to that was all too easy to comprehend. For though Konstantinos had been fiercely intelligent and astute, he was also wealthy beyond most people's imaginings. It was the kind of wealth that would stop most people in their tracks to contemplate. Several private jets, islands, mansions around the world, entrée to any palace in the world as an esteemed guest—it was a whole other way of living. Tempting? Undoubtedly, for anyone. And for a young waitress with chipped nails, from the Australian outback?

Face grim, Anastasios reached for his scotch, taking a deep sip and letting it assault him as it travelled, his eyes closed for a moment against the tide of pain Konstantinos's betrayal had wrought.

The only saving grace was that Maggie was not aware of Konstantinos's betrayals. His infidelity would have killed her. She'd been so loyal to him, and loved him so completely. To know that her husband had made a habit of sleeping with other women? Of even fathering children with them? Was that why he'd left Phoebe Whittaker such a sum? He knew that Konstantinos had paid for his daughter with Annie Westbourne to attend school, and her general living expenses. Had he wanted to furnish Phoebe Whittaker's child with the same luxuries? Had a child been born to his father and Phoebe?

His grip tightened on the scotch and the full force of his anger barreled towards the woman across the restaurant. It wasn't fair. She hadn't owed their family anything, but given that his father was no longer here to feel the wrath of Anastasios, Phoebe Whittaker was the next best thing.

Soon, he was the only customer in the restaurant, and she the last waitress. He leaned forward with interest, watching as she smothered another yawn. It was easy to imagine why she was so tired. If she made a habit out of seducing older men, it was also likely she'd been kept busy all night. Was that why she worked here? To meet wealthy clients and seduce them in the hope of landing some kind of payoff?

A muscle ticked in his cheek, the thought of his father with this woman unpalatable on many levels, not least because he couldn't look at her without feeling the stirring of interest, a wave of arousal that was pure biological instinct, in defiance of his judgement. If he hadn't come here for this purpose, if he'd simply walked into the restaurant and met her, would he have wanted to make her his?

Undoubtedly.

What man wouldn't?

Shifting a little in his seat, he felt the evidence of his desire straining against his pants and if anything, it made him angrier with her.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?"

Sir: It only compounded his problem.

"Another." He lifted his glass into the air, eyes narrowing as he saw the flicker of disappointment in her gaze. Had she been hoping he'd say something else? "And one for you, if you'll join me."

The invitation surprised them both, but he was far more adept at concealing his reactions.

"Oh." Her teeth pressed into her soft lower lip, drawing his fascinated gaze lower. "That's very kind, but I can't. I have to pack up."

“Ten minutes won’t kill you.” He leaned back, crossing his arms. “Join me.” The last was uttered as a command and her eyes flew wide.

“I—,”

“You won’t regret it.”

Her eyes darkened, somehow, so they were as dark as the essence of the night sky.

“I’m not in the habit of drinking with customers,” she said softly.

It was an objection he presumed she made as part of her routine. After all, he had evidence to the contrary.

“Make an exception.”

Her throat shifted delicately as she swallowed and then cast a glance over her shoulder.

“A coffee,” she said after a pause. “I don’t drink.”

He lifted his shoulders to conceal a familiar sense of triumph. After all, Anastasios Xenakis was used to winning, at all things.

She moved back into the bar, pouring him another measure of scotch and making herself a short shot of coffee, before coming back to the table. He couldn’t take his eyes off her, and his desire for her was, frankly, disgusting. He wasn’t someone to fetishize his father’s mistress.

When she sat, it was a little uncertainly. She wore her wariness like a cloak. With him? Or in general? That didn’t seem right, for a woman who was intent on seducing her way to wealth. He frowned as a flicker of doubt ignited in his gut—a doubt which he ignored. His father had bequeathed her over a million pounds. That wasn’t a gift you left a waitress as a tip.

He had planned to confront Phoebe ever since learning of her existence, but a simple conversation now seemed difficult to construct. Uncertainty was utterly foreign to Anastasios; he pushed it aside.

“What is your name?”

He found his breath held. Even though he'd seen a photo of her, he found himself hoping there'd been a mistake.

“Phoebe.” There was a hesitation. “And yours?”

Thinking quickly, he offered the diminutive of his name. His father had only ever referred to him as Anastasios, so there was no risk of her having heard of him. “Tasso.”

She lifted a brow, repeating the name, igniting little flames in his bloodstream as her tongue encircled the syllables. “That’s unusual.”

His lips curled in derision at the obvious conversation opener. Is that how she flirted her way into men’s beds?

“You’re Australian?”

“My accent’s a giveaway, huh?”

He sipped his scotch without taking his eyes from her face. “How long have you been in London?”

“A year and a half.”

“What brought you here?”

She tilted her face away, looking towards the windows just as a red, double-decker bus went past, lights making orange lines, but he barely noticed. He was transfixed by what he could see of her expression in profile, her lips twitching downwards, her fingers gripping the coffee cup more tightly.

“I’d never been anywhere,” she said, so softly he had to concentrate to hear it. Then, she turned to face him, pinpointing him with a steady look. “I wanted to see the world and London seemed like a good place to start.”

“And?” He lifted a hand along the back of the neighbouring chair, in an approximation of casual. “How is your plan working out?”

“I’ve seen some of it,” a small smile tilted her lips. “A couple of months ago, I went to a tiny island in the Aegean, and the water was so clear I could see schools of fish weaving around my ankles.”

He almost choked on a breath. His father had taken her to *Prásina*, one of the private islands their family owned around the world?

“Anywhere else?” He asked, giving very little away.

“No,” a wistful expression. “I’ve not travelled as much as I thought I would.”

“Why not?”

“You have a lot of questions.”

“I’m inquisitive by nature. Is that a problem?”

She tilted her head, contemplating that. “Not particularly.” She finished her coffee. “Anyway, I should finish up. I’m beat.” She threw back her coffee then lifted her hand to cover a yawn, as she stood, lithe grace in every movement.

“You’re not going to answer?”

She let out a small sigh, her breath brushing over him so his gut twisted with an unmistakable surge of longing.

“I’ve had commitments here.”

Like his father?

“A boyfriend?”

Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed. “That’s far too personal.” Standing, she offered him a tart smile. “If you’ll excuse me, *sir*, I’ll get your bill.”

His heart thundered as he watched her leave. Desiring her was a very unwelcome complication, but he wouldn’t let it rule his behaviour. He’d come here for one reason, and one reason only. That he found her attractive didn’t change a thing.

“Actually, there’s something specific I wanted to discuss with you.”

Her face tilted to his, and she paused, midway through printing an invoice. She pressed it onto the tray and slid it across at him, then crossed her arms over her chest, drawing his gaze involuntarily lower, to linger on the swell of her cleavage as longing shifted through him.

“Okay,” her voice was uncertain. “What is it?”

“Are you acquainted with a man named Konstantinos Xenakis?”

Her hand lifted to a necklace at her throat and she pulled the pendant from one side to the other, immediately raising Anastasios’ suspicions. Had his father given her this trinket?

“I—yes. Why?”

“How do you know him?”

She bristled visibly, just as she had when he’d asked about her boyfriend. A coincidence? Anastasios didn’t believe in them.

“I—met him through work,” she gestured to the restaurant. “What business is it of yours?”

His eyes bore into hers, assessing her, reading her, deriding her. She might be sexier than sin, but he couldn’t feel anything but disgust for a woman who’d sleep with an old man just for money.

“I came to inform you of his death.”

Her gasp was given extra impact by the silence of the restaurant. She reached forward, bracing her weight on the kitchen counter. “He can’t be,” she murmured, tears stinging her eyes. It was further evidence of their relationship; grief made her features wretched. She lifted her face to his. “When?” A hollow whisper almost made him pity her. Did she have any idea about them? About Konstantinos’s family, his wife, children? His other mistress and daughter?

“A little over a week ago.”

She lifted a trembling hand to her lips, covering a gasp, as she moved backwards to prop herself against the wall. “I can’t believe it. I wondered why I hadn’t seen him. Usually, on Mondays, we—,” her voice trailed off into nothing as emotions wrapped around her. A single tear rolled down one cheek. So she might have been using Konstantinos for money, but it was clear she genuinely cared about him. The realization brought no relief.

“You?” He prompted, aware that she’d been about to confess to their sordid affair.

“Spend time together.” Her eyes closed, blocking him out. “But not this Monday. And he didn’t call to explain. I tried, but—oh, I can’t believe it.”

Another tear fell, and though he hated her, he also felt sorry for her. How could he not?

“What happened?”

She’d moved closer to him again, as though she needed all the details.

“He had a heart attack. He was alone, and it was massive. Perhaps if he’d been with someone, but it was hours before a maid discovered him.”

She let out a soft cry. “But he was so young.” Her head tipped back as she stared at the ceiling, apparently trying to contain her emotions. “I mean, I know he wasn’t, but he *seemed* so young. Age barely touched him.”

Anastasios stood taller. “Yes.”

Phoebe wrapped her arms around her chest. “Thank you for coming to tell me. When is the funeral?”

“It’s happened. Your attendance wouldn’t have been appropriate.”

Her lips formed a perfect ‘o’. “Why not?”

“His wife wouldn’t approve.”

She frowned. “His wife?”

“Yes. Did he fail to mention his longstanding marriage?”

“No, of course not. He’d spoken to me of Maggie.”

The betrayal of that was searing.

“Did he indeed?”

“Just in passing,” she whispered, and then, as if only just putting two and two together, she focused on him with renewed intent. “Who are you?”

“I’m his oldest son. So far as we know.”

Her eyes widened at that revelation. “Anastasios?”

“I see he mentioned me, too.”

“He was very proud of you,” she confirmed, her lips twisting in a smile. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I can’t imagine how you’re coping. Your father was the most incredible man.”

Disgust rolled inside him. “You can say that, even when presented with evidence of why he wasn’t?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think you’re the first woman outside of his marriage that he stumbled into bed with? Tell me, Phoebe, how long was the affair going on?”

She lifted her hand to the necklace again, tugging it from side to side.

“Affair?” She mumbled, eyes dropping to the bench in front of her. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Do I look as though I’m joking?”

“You’re completely mistaken. We weren’t involved,” she denied hotly, but the tears falling down her cheeks belied that. “Not in a sexual way,” she conceded, so he leaned forward, outraged and frustrated all at once. “It really wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like?”

But she was defensive now, angry, too. “I don’t think it’s any of your business.”

“He was my father.”

“So? If he didn’t mention me to you, then he clearly didn’t think you needed to know about us.”

“Then there was an ‘us’ to know about?”

Her face paled. “Oh, stop being so sick. I didn’t mean that. Only our *friendship*,” she stressed, in a way that made it impossible to believe her.

“If this is true,” he said, after a beat, “then tell me why he’d leave you money in his will.”

She groaned, dropping her head forward. “He didn’t.”

“In fact, quite a lot of money.”

She lifted a hand to her mouth. “I can’t believe it. Why would he do such a thing?”

“I suppose he thought you’d earned it?”

She slapped him instantly, so fast that he didn’t have time to react and she clearly hadn’t had time to think it through. Her hand connected with his cheek and then she jumped back, shaking all over.

“How dare you?” She demanded fiercely. “Get out of here.”

He glared right back, lifting a hand to his cheek absentmindedly, running a hand over the flesh which would surely show a heat mark from where she’d touched him. He’d dealt with worse, but hadn’t expected such a response from her.

“Get out. I mean it. Leave *now*.”

He studied her thoughtfully. She was at least a foot shorter than him; there was no contest between them physically, but he’d clearly pushed her too far. Even he was surprised by the approach he’d taken.

There was time to get to the bottom of this, time to get her to confess and admit she’d made a mistake. He’d done enough for tonight.

“This isn’t over,” he promised, ominously, as he threw some fifty pound notes on the counter then turned and left.

CHAPTER 2

HE WAS TURNING HER into the focal point of all his rage. He fully conceded that, as he stared out at London from his city apartment, eyes gliding over the well-lit city, the buzz and hum of activity despite the fact it was the small hours of the morning.

She wasn't the woman Konstantinos had been in a long running affair with, nor was she the mother of a secret lovechild. God, at least, he prayed she wasn't. But it was quite clear that they'd had a relationship. His father had visited her often—on Mondays, by the sound of it—which explained why he'd suddenly started spending so much time in London. Had those frequent visits even contributed to his heart attack? Had he pushed himself too hard, in an attempt to keep up with his nubile young lover?

It was impossible to contemplate, but then again, Phoebe was a very particular type of beauty. It was easy to understand how Konstantinos had fallen under her spell. Far easier to believe that than to imagine any man could be close to Phoebe Whittaker without wanting it to become physical.

All that was left to get her to admit it. And he had a fair idea of how to do exactly that.

X

HAVING WORKED three enormous shifts straight, Phoebe was glad to finally have a day off. Her feet were killing her, and

her cheeks hurt from smiling at customers. Not to mention the man from last night. Tasso. Anastasios.

Her heart picked up a notch as she remembered the way he'd watched her all evening, the sensation of butterflies beating inside her belly, of a strange anticipation beating like a drum beneath her skin, as her stomach swirled with unfamiliar and unwanted desire. That had been before she'd known his connection to Kon. Now she did?

She moaned softly as fresh waves of grief assaulted her, and she could barely stand. Leaning her hip against her kitchen counter, she allowed the tears to fall, dropping with fat splashes against her breasts as she gave into the sadness. He was eighty four, but so fit and sharp, hardly a suspect for a heart attack.

“Oh, Kon,” she whispered, shaking her head, moving unsteadily to the gift he'd given her a month or so ago—a small bronze ballerina after she'd told him of her first ever experience of seeing a ballet show. She'd been so excited, recounting the music and movements, the theatrics of it all, and he'd smiled indulgently and nodded, agreeing that live ballet was a true gift. The following week, he'd arrived with this little statue. *A memento.*

She'd cherished it because he'd given it to her, placing it in middle of the small shelf in the bedsit's lounge area. She lifted it now, running her fingers over the edges, feeling grateful, more than anything else, that she'd had a chance to know this man, that they'd struck up a conversation on her first shift, when he'd taken pity on her after she'd spilled a bowl of soup across his table. He'd insisted to the *maître de* that it had been his fault, saving her from termination, for sure. After that, he'd come in often, always sitting at the same table, always making conversation with her. A few weeks after his first visit, she'd finished her shift at the same time he'd paid his bill. They'd walked out together, and without discussing it, had continued walking, all the way to the edge of Kensington garden, where they'd found a bench seat and continued talking.

It was months before she opened up to him about her life before London, and a month after that before he did the same,

but after that, there was no stopping their friendship. They were truly kindred spirits, and his interest in her life was heartwarming for many reasons, and one in particular: besides her brother Dale, Kon had been the first person to ever show any kind of interest in Phoebe, to care what happened to her, to want to listen to her speak and encourage her in her dreams.

Anastasios was right—they were in a relationship, but not like the one he was suggesting. This was a deep, special friendship. Somehow, Konstantinos had become a father figure to Phoebe. She loved him, and she knew she'd miss him forever.

But the idea of sleeping with him?

Despite the fact he was a very handsome older man, it made her skin crawl, simply because their relationship was so deep, so important to her.

No, sexual relationships were something Phoebe had given a wide berth. Not intentionally, but her adolescence had really precluded the opportunity to date, and after she'd run away from home, she'd been more concerned with finding food and safe shelter for the night than she had been a boyfriend. In fact, the examples of 'relationships' she witnessed on the streets of Melbourne were so much like her parents' awful domestic situation that she'd done everything she could to avoid making friendships with anyone.

She'd been a loner for so long.

Kon had changed that.

Another sob wrenched from her gut, and then, there was the knocking at her door.

She suspected it would be Mrs Langham and despite the fact she'd grown fond of the pensioner who rented out this miniscule flat to supplement her grocery expenses, Phoebe really didn't want to be disturbed.

Nonetheless, she wrenched in the door, an approximation of a smile on her face as she looked out, only to be confronted by a wall of abdominals encased in a black t-shirt. Higher she looked, her eyes landing on his face and that same drum

beating was back, rushing now, fast, urgent, desperate, so she held her breath and gripped the door much more tightly.

“Anastasios.” His name was so addictive. When she said it, her knees went weak.

“Phoebe.” His expression hadn’t softened at all.

“I take it you’ve come to apologise?” She couldn’t help goading him. After all, he’d behaved like a right jackass the night before.

“For what? Calling a spade a spade?”

“Or a whore a whore?” She challenged, anger firing through her. That was another thing! She’d slapped him! She who had always, always sworn to never give in to physical violence. She’d witnessed too much of it. Been on the receiving end as well. Yet this man had made her feel—too many things.

“Your words, not mine.”

“What do you want?”

“To finish our conversation. I told you, this isn’t over.”

The sun shifted through a storm cloud, casting his thick, dark hair with light, making it shimmer. Her eyes lifted to it of their own accord and her breath was a cyclone inside her windpipe.

“How did you find out where I live?” She asked over a knotted, swallowing action.

“It wasn’t difficult.” He brushed aside the question. “We need to talk.”

“I can’t see that we do.”

“You don’t think you owe me some kind of explanation?”

“I owe you nothing,” she said with a bravado she didn’t feel. Years of living with her father had taught her to bluff well.

“You say you were *friends* with my father?” He layered the word with a hint of disgust. “Then surely you owe *him* the

courtesy of treating his son with respect?”

“Because you’ve been such a peach to me?” She demanded, nonetheless stepping back and opening the door to allow him to enter.

Konstantinos had spoken about his family. She knew each of his son’s habits and yes, she even knew about his great guilt, the affair with Annie that he’d concealed from those he loved most, because he didn’t know how to split them in half with the truth. She knew about Valentina, the little girl who’d passed away twenty five years earlier.

And she knew about Anastasios and how hard he worked, how determined he’d been, since birth, to prove himself to his father. She knew Kon regretted his hard style of parenting, how much he’d expected from the boys, and the fact he’d pushed them to achieve their best. They’d all strived to meet the impossibly high bar, every time, but Anastasios particularly so.

For Kon, for her love for the older man, she allowed Anastasios to enter the bedsit.

His eyes flicked around the room, but the judgement she’d expected to see in his face was noticeably absent. Instead, there were simply questions.

“I presume the restaurant pays you?”

She dipped her head.

“Surely you can afford better than this?”

She squared her shoulders. “London is expensive,” she said tightly. “Besides, I like my landlady. She’s elderly and kind and I help her when I can.”

His eyes narrowed speculatively, and she couldn’t resist snapping at him.

“No, I’m not waiting for her to pass away so I can stake some devious claim on her money,” she muttered.

“Can you blame me for wondering?”

“Blame is irrelevant. I’ve never met anyone like you,” she shivered. “We just met and you think the absolute worst of me.”

“My father has been coming for secret rendezvous with you, and has left a small fortune to you in his will. What else should I think?”

She gaped, then shook her head. “He was a generous man.”

Anastasios frowned. “That’s not my experience.”

“I guess we knew different sides of him.”

“I think that goes without saying.”

“I just mean...”

“Yes?” He crossed his arms over his chest, staring at her straight down the length of his patrician nose. He reminded her so much of Kon, the same arrogant confidence, only she’d seen beneath Kon’s. She’d seen his heart, his kind, good, soft, hurt heart and it had so perfectly matched her own. She blinked past the veil of tears.

“Forget it. You’re clearly not going to listen to a word I say, so let’s get down to why you’re here. What can I do for you, Anastasios?” Again, the name rolled in her mouth and she suppressed a shiver, but not before he saw it, judging by the knowing speculation that lit his gaze.

“I want to understand,” he said quietly. “My father was clearly living a secret life behind our backs. You’re a part of that.”

Something like guilt tightened as a band around her chest, even when she didn’t have anything to feel guilty about. Only, she’d never imagined how their friendship might be perceived by those Kon loved.

“We were just *friends*,” she said with a shake of her head.

“My father didn’t have friends. He worked, and he had family, and that’s it. He didn’t even have a hobby.”

Her eyes swept shut on a wave of fresh grief now, but not for Kon's death, so much as what he'd lost in life. How could his oldest son know so little about him? And why had he chosen to open up to her so much?

But Phoebe knew the answer to that. She'd ignored it for a long time, but it was no longer something she could push aside. She reminded him of the daughter he'd lost, Valentina. He'd taken pity on her at first, but that pity had morphed into something else—a genuine connection that had sustained them both.

“Actually, your father liked to paint,” she said, quietly.

Anastasios' face paled beneath his tan. “What?”

“Landscapes. They weren't particularly good,” she said with a soft laugh. “But that didn't stop him. Would you like to see one?”

His lips formed a gash in his face. “By all means.”

If she'd known Anastasios any better, she might have heard the dark danger lurking in the words, but she was too caught up in pleasant memories of Kon, too filled with reminiscences to take heed.

“Here,” she padded through the small entrance way and into the tiny living room, gesturing to the painting that hung beside the window.

His eyes flew to it, tracing the over-bright shapes—almost bordering on abstract—before dropping lower, to the statue on the shelves.

The noise that erupted from his throat was barely human. “How the hell did you get this?”

Phoebe began to shake all over, and all she could do was watch, as Anastasios moved to the bronze statue and lifted it in his palm, staring at it in shock.

“Did he *give* this to you?”

Goosebumps lifted across her skin, but she wasn't afraid. Her father had taught her about violence and abuse, and she could tell the difference between anger and violent rage.

“Yes,” because, why lie?

“This was my sister’s.”

The words were raw. Sympathy swallowed Phoebe. “I know.”

He swore under his breath. “He told you about her?”

“Yes.”

He cursed then, in Greek. “He loved you.”

Phoebe’s heart soared, because she really, really hoped that was true. But she wisely said nothing of that to this man.

“I told you, we were friends.”

“My father didn’t speak about Val. Ever. It was as though she’d been erased from the family for him.”

“I think he felt—,”

“Don’t.”

And now Anastasios was moving closer to her, closing the distance between them, staring down at her with a wild mix of emotions tangling in his eyes. “Don’t tell me how my father felt. I knew him. All my life. I’m his oldest son and you’re—,”

“His friend,” she supplied, meeting his gaze head on, refusing to be cowered by his proximity and obvious physical strength.

“Damn you,” he groaned, but he stayed where he was, so close, and something sparked in the air around them, so Phoebe’s senses kicked into overdrive and the anger she’d been feeling, the frustration, changed gear, and unfamiliar sensations throttled her, rolling her, making it hard to breathe, impossible to think.

“Anastasios,” she said helplessly, needing him to rescue her, to help her at least, to control this situation that was threatening to burn wildly out of control.

“You are far too beautiful,” he said with condemnation, but he didn’t pull back, and nor did she. In fact, she leaned closer, or perhaps he did, because a moment later, their bodies were

cleaved together and each ragged breath she drew forced them together.

Hell.

“How can this be happening?” He asked, fiercely, angrily, but an anger that was directed all at himself.

“What?” She looked up, losing herself in the depths of his eyes.

His answer was to swoop down and kiss her, claiming her mouth with the desperate hunger of a starving man, his lips parting hers, his tongue pushing into her mouth, punishing her at first then slowing, deepening into addictive inspection, understanding, need.

She groaned, because it was the kind of kiss stories were written about, filled with everything a person was capable of feeling. They were both grieving and hurt, both angry and frustrated, and somehow that had bubbled over to form the most compelling, urgent sense of need Phoebe had ever experienced.

She tangled her hands in his shirtfront, needing—something. More. Everything.

“Damn you,” he groaned into her mouth, as he pushed her back against the wall, propping one thigh between her legs, and she cried out at how *good* that felt. Her pulse was going crazy, her mind in overdrive. Pleasure spun through her, but it wasn't enough.

Common sense was demanding that she stop, that she take a moment to think about what was happening but Phoebe couldn't listen to that voice. She could do nothing but feel.

Even when his hand skimmed her sides, lifting the t-shirt she wore, to reveal her naked torso, she did nothing but shiver, because some strange compulsion was driving her, and when he lifted her around the waist, holding her to him, she said nothing. He carried her into the only other room—where a narrow single bed was pressed up against a window.

“It'll do,” he muttered, dropping her unceremoniously onto the bed and bringing his body over hers immediately, seeking

her lips, so the fires in her veins exploded into lava streams and her hands were pushing wildly at his clothes, some ancient, feral rhythm driving her every movement. This defied sense and logic, but she didn't care.

His chest bare, she stared at him for as long as she dared, unable to process the perfection of his ridged abdomen.

She moaned, needing him, so much of him, but how could she do this, given her lack of experience?

The question died before she could voice it, as his body pressed down on hers and she felt his arousal between her legs and craved the sensation of taking him deep inside.

"Anastasios," she cried out, aware now of the madness consuming them, trying to summon the hateful things he'd said to her, the accusations he'd thrown at her feet in the past twenty four hours, but damn it, she was driven by other needs now.

His lips shifted, from her mouth to her throat, then lower to her breast, and when he took one nipple in his mouth, flicked it with her tongue, she cried out, the sensation so unlike anything she'd ever known, she could barely breathe. Stars filled her eyes and she arched her back as an ancient feminine drive powered her movements.

"Please," she whimpered, twisting her hips in a wordless invitation.

He swore softly and then louder, pulling up and staring at her, his expression dazed.

"What the hell?" He jerked to standing, hands on hips, arousal brilliantly on display through his cotton shorts, so her mouth was dry and her heart palpitating.

"Anastasios?" Hope died in the word.

He was stepping back as far as the narrow bedroom allowed.

"You were my father's lover. No way is this going to happen." He dragged a hand through his hair though, his eyes

devouring her naked breasts with obvious remorse, so she knew he wanted her still, as desperately as she did him.

“It wasn’t like that; you have to believe me.”

“Then what was it like?”

“I told you,” she pushed up to sitting, her heart still pounding against her ribs with the force of a grenade. “We were—,”

“Friends. The problem is, I’ve been lied to before, and it’s impossible to think you’re not lying now.”

“I’ve never lied to you before.”

“But he has.” He growled. “He lied every damned day for the last twenty five years; to me, my mother, my brothers, to all of us. And you’re a part of that. You’re a goddamned part of that.”

She flinched.

“He gave you something that was incredibly precious to my sister. His art has pride of place on your walls, and he left money to you in his will, a will he updated over a year ago. And let’s not ignore the fact you are clearly an incredibly desirable, and willing, woman.”

She flinched at that, seeing red, because he was taking a beautiful, innocent, *healing* friendship and turning it into something cynical and *wrong*. He was also implying something else, but it took her a moment to comprehend. Had he kissed her just now to prove a point? To show them both how easily she would succumb to him? Bile rose in her throat.

“Perhaps you see things through the veil of your experiences,” she said with quiet pride, wriggling until she was on the edge of the bed and then standing, turning away from him to pull on a loose shirt. When she turned to face him, she wasn’t expecting the expression on his face—one of loss.

It softened parts of her she wanted to keep flint hard.

“This is pointless.” He raked his gaze over her, from the top of her head to her feet, then turned his back, stalking into the small lounge. He pulled on his jeans and shirt, then

reached into the pocket of his pants to remove his wallet. He slid out a piece a paper and discarded it on the narrow bench. “Don’t contact my family. There’s nothing more for you.”

She flinched when he left, then moved to the bench, curious to see what he’d discarded.

It was only after unfolding it completely that she realized it was a cheque, not from Konstantinos but Anastasios, and for a truly obscene amount.

Her stomach dropped to her toes and she sobbed, but not for Konstantinos, so much as for how Anastasios had made her feel. For as long as she lived, she wouldn’t give him another thought. He didn’t deserve that.

Despite her mountain of debts, she tore the cheque in half in a wild burst of anger, the cathartic act almost convincing her she could actually succeed in forgetting this whole unpleasant business.

X

ANASTASIOS PRESSED his back against the stone wall of the townhouse, eyes closed, breath coming in hard spurts as he reckoned with what had just happened, mind going into overdrive.

He was no inexperienced teenager.

He’d had plenty of experience controlling his baser urges, but this was something else. He couldn’t explain it. There were no words to do justice to the level of need he’d felt for Phoebe bloody Whittaker. He knew only that she’d looked at him and something had exploded in his gut, propelling him across the room, making him kiss her, drag her to her bed. Hell, how close had he come to actually having sex with the woman?

And why was he now racked with a sense of remorse for stepping away from that?

Was this what it had been like for his father?

Disgust wrapped around him, filling his mouth with acid.

How had he allowed this to happen?

Straightening, he forced himself to focus on the world beyond him, on the street, the cars, the facts at hand. They'd kissed, that was all. It wasn't a big deal. And now he was going to push her from his mind. He'd paid off his father's responsibilities, and the matter would never be spoken of again.

CHAPTER 3

AT FIRST, HE'D THOUGHT she was responsible. The call from a friend of his, Tommy Hardin, who happened to own a tabloid paper in the UK, had a sleazy story about Kon and a young Australian woman being in a secret relationship. There was even some speculation about a baby.

As far as he knew, that part was, at least, false. There had been no evidence of a child in that bedsit, so unless she'd given it up for adoption...

Had Phoebe sold the story to the paper? But to what end? He'd double the amount Kon had wanted her to have, simply to get her out of their lives for good. Perhaps for revenge, against Anastasios?

"Mate, I don't want to run it, but I don't know if I can sit on it forever. The source will just go to another paper. Can you deny it? Give me some proof it's not true?"

Anastasios ground his teeth. "Who is the source?"

"I don't know. Honest to God. They went to one of my photographers."

"What kind of evidence do they have?"

Tommy let out a low whistle. "It's true?"

"I didn't say that."

"I think it's just a report at this stage. Idle gossip."

"Then that's all it is."

“I’ve always liked your mum, Tasso. I don’t want her seeing this. The timing is particularly bad.”

Anastasios’ expression was grim.

“There’s more.”

“What?”

“The source reckons he might be able to get your father’s alleged mistress to talk. If the money’s right. Reckons she’s in a real mess, financially speaking. I’m not telling you this because I’m going to buy her story, but someone else might...”

Anastasios swore under his breath.

In the three weeks since London, he’d used every ounce of his focus to push Phoebe from his thoughts, but that didn’t change the fact she was there, all the time, those huge, liquid eyes staring up at him, her silky hair falling over those perfect, rounded breasts with their creamy skin and pale pink nipples.

“It’s just a heads up. You can do what you want with the information.”

“But you’ll kill it?”

“For now. Just—see if you can get me a proper denial, then legal won’t let us run it.”

“The fewer people involved in this the better.”

“It might not be a bad idea to brace Maggie for the gossip. If this woman decides to talk...”

“She won’t.” Anastasios scraped back his chair, taking one last look at the Acropolis before storming from his office, his face wearing dark thunderclouds.

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m going to make sure of it. Thanks for the tip off, Tommy.”

“No worries—,”

Anastasios had already disconnected the call.

X

WHEN PHOEBE ARRIVED for her shift, he was the first person she saw, occupying the same table as last time, his eyes fixed on the room, brooding, mysterious. Delicious.

She shuddered, but not with fear so much as need. It tore through her instantly, flooding every cell in her body, so she had to force her feet to stay planted to the ground, rather than allowing them to propel her forwards, towards him, into his arms, his lap.

She sucked in a sharp breath and turned, looking desperately for her manager. He was in the bar.

“Edward, any chance someone can cover my shift?”

He let out a laugh. “You’re kidding, right? Fiona’s kid’s sick—again—so she’s out, Raul is getting his teeth looked at,” Edward winced, “And Clare’s in Barcelona, remember? Why? What’s going on?”

“I—nothing. It doesn’t matter.” This job paid above the minimum and the tips were excellent. God knows she needed the money. “Forget I said anything.”

“Atta girl. Table two needs their order taken.”

Table two just happened to be right beside Anastasios. Steeling herself for the inevitable interaction, she grabbed a notepad and pen from next to the cash register and moved with cold determination through the packed restaurant. As she neared his table, his eyes flicked to her and the second they collided with hers, energy sparked between them and her steps faltered.

She forced herself to look away, staring at table two instead.

“Hi,” she smiled overbrightly, trying to tune out the beautiful man who was still watching her intently, trying not to remember how good it had felt when he’d touched her, kissed her, taken her nipple in his mouth... “Are you ready to order?”

She wrote down everything the four diners said, word for word, offered another smile, took the menus, then moved away, but after only two steps, he beckoned her.

“Waitress?”

She ground her teeth.

“My name is Phoebe,” she hissed, when she’d drawn level with him. A hint of his masculine fragrance assailed her and her knees knocked together. “As you’re well aware. What do you want?” It was too late for civility. Her insides were squirming painfully at the sight of him, as so many things came rushing back to her. That he’d given her money after what had happened between them! That he no doubt still believed she was capable of sleeping with his father! The very idea made her skin crawl.

“To speak with you.”

A shiver ran the length of her spine. “I’m working.”

“Until when?”

She gripped the notepad more tightly. “I don’t know. It’s busy. And besides that, I have nothing I want to speak to you about.”

“That’s not the way I see it.”

“Yeah, well, you must be looking at something completely different to me then.” She paused, gathering her senses. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to—,”

He reached out, curling his fingers around her wrist, so a thousand arrows of need shattered her equilibrium.

“Someone’s been speaking to the tabloids about you and my father. The story’s going to run.”

She stared at him in a state of total disorientation. Nothing about what he’d just said made any kind of sense. “There is *no* story,” she denied hotly. “I’ve told you a thousand times, we were just friends.”

Anger sparked in the depths of his eyes but he didn’t argue with her. “I’ve managed to get them to hold off on running it

—for now. But they’re going to contact you for a quote. It won’t be long.”

She stared at him, all the colour and warmth draining from her face. “I can’t believe it. How—why—it’s not true.”

His skepticism was clear. “How? Someone called a paparazzi photographer. Why? Money, Phoebe. As you well know, it’s a powerful motivator. In fact, I hear you might even be interested in supplementing the story, for the right price.”

It was all too much. She saw red, a haze of mist in front of her eyes, and then, she felt nausea rising inside of her like a tidal wave, so she gripped the empty seat across from him until her fingers hurt. “I—,” Indignant anger fired her but so too did grief and confusion and hurt. “This is unbelievable. It’s not true.”

“Even if that were so, it wouldn’t matter. Tabloids make their bread and butter from speculation. You and my father met regularly for at least the last eighteen months of his life. There is even talk of a lovechild.”

She gasped, lifting a hand to her mouth. “That’s not possible. I’m—,” but she clammed up, before revealing the truth of her sexual experience—or lack thereof—to this man. “You’ve seen where I live,” she amended. “Where could I possibly hide a baby?”

“That did occur to me. However, true or not, the paper will run the story unless you do exactly what I say.”

She groaned, pressing a palm to her forehead then looking around, as if only just remembering where she was. “I have to work,” she whispered, trying to resume an ordinary stance, pulling at her arm as if only just realizing his hand was still clamped around her wrist. He let her go and she felt immediately cold, right to the center of her being.

“I cannot allow the story to run.”

“Then stop it,” she pleaded. “Not for me, but for your father. He loved your mother very much, Anastasios. He would hate this. It’s not fair.”

His eyes narrowed. “Very little in life is fair, Phoebe.”

As if anyone needed to tell her that. She tilted her chin at a defiant angle. “You have to stop it.”

“I intend to, but my plan hinges on you doing exactly as I say.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“Meet me this evening to discuss it.”

She wanted to decline. To tell him to go to hell. But love for Konstantinos had her hesitating.

“I wasn’t in a romantic relationship with your father,” she said firmly, unwilling to say or do anything that might seem like a concession on that score. “But I agree, any hint of gossip has to be managed.”

“I’ll pick you up at eight.”

She stared at him. “I can meet you somewhere.”

His look was mocking. “As I said, the only way to avert this is if you do everything I say. Understood?”

X

HE’D HALF-EXPECTED her not to show, so was relieved when, just before eight, Phoebe emerged onto the landing of the little townhouse she was renting modest rooms in. A shadow appeared at the window behind her and Phoebe turned, offered a small wave, then looked up and down the street.

He watched her for a moment, trying to reconcile the cacophony of feelings that were exploding through him. Anger, for the role she’d played in his father’s infidelity, frustration for the fact a paper had gotten hold of the story and also, worst of all, desire. He’d been with enough women to recognize the sensation that gripped him tightly, and yet, this was different. Even in the throes of passion, Anastasios was always in control. Seduction was a game to him, a game that he played within defined rules, and always, always played to win.

Phoebe changed the rules.

She changed everything.

Even her relationship with his father didn't seem to impact the desire he personally felt for her, which was a troubling development. Not ever, in his entire life, had he imagined he'd be lusting after the same woman his father had bedded.

The sooner he got this squared away, the better.

She crossed the street as though it were a stage and she a prima ballerina, so his eyes were glued to her against his will. As she drew near, he stepped out of the car, willing himself to ignore the fierce explosion of need that was already turning him hard.

"Phoebe." He greeted with a cool dip of his head. "I'm glad you came."

"I wasn't aware I had much of a choice."

"Nonetheless, this is better than the alternative."

"Which is?" She challenged, her dark hair caught up in a bun high on her head, with pretty little tendrils escaping down either side of her neck.

"Carrying you kicking and screaming over my shoulder like a recalcitrant child."

Her lips parted, so delectably, pillowy soft and sweet. He couldn't help but stare at them. "You wouldn't dare." Her tongue darted out, licking the outline of her mouth. Did she have any idea what that small gesture was doing to him?

"Want to bet?"

He saw the way she shivered and hardened a little more. Suddenly, he wanted her to challenge him. He wanted an excuse to reach for her, to grab her, to hold her body to his. It galvanized him into action. He walked around to the front passenger door, opening it without looking at her.

"Inside."

She made a small sound of disapproval. "Barking commands at me? How very civilized. It's quite clear you didn't get your manners from your father."

“Oh, I’m sure he went out of his way to flatter and charm you, Phoebe. Don’t expect the same from me.”

“I only meant that he was a gentleman at all times, in every way. And you, well, you’re—,”

“Go on.” He stared at her now, goading her with his body language.

“You’re hateful,” she snapped, stamping her foot before stomping around to the side of the car. “I mean that. You’re absolutely hateful.”

“And it would be best if you remembered that.”

The words held a warning; he could only hope they would both heed them.

X

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES, she was capable only of focusing on his extraordinary skill and power as a driver. The thrum of the sleek black sports car—flash without being ostentatious—was palpable, but that wasn’t why she felt heat radiating from low down in her abdomen. No, that came down to her awareness of the man at her side, and the way he flicked the gear stick as he maneuvered the streets, his fingers on the wheel catching her eye and capturing her imagination, making her all too vividly aware of what it had been like to be touched by him.

So focused was she on the minute details of Anastasios’ driving that it was several blocks before Phoebe spun in her chair to question him. “Where are you taking me?”

His fingers gripped the wheel tighter, his knuckles showing white.

“Somewhere that we can speak freely.”

“My apartment wouldn’t suffice?”

He cocked her a look of mockery. “I barely fit into your apartment.” He gave his attention back to the road, turning left then pulling up at lights. “Besides which, we should avoid any situation that puts us within six feet of a bed.”

She couldn't stop the small gasp that escaped as he confronted the desire sparking between them head on.

“Then where?”

He turned to her once more, before accelerating the car as the lights turned green. “Does it matter?”

“I guess I like to know where I'm going, yes. Call me crazy, but I'm used to a degree of control over my life.”

“Desperate times,” he said with a careless lift of his shoulders.

“Wow. You really are an arrogant son of a bitch.”

He made no effort to deny it and despite the fizz in the air, she didn't want to argue. Pressing back against the seat, she lifted a hand to her temple and surrendered, for a moment, to his control. It was strange, given the combative nature of their interactions, but he was Konstantinos's son, and it was, therefore, impossible not to trust him, at least on some level.

Twenty minutes later, they crossed Connaught bridge, rousing Phoebe out of her state of quiet acceptance. She sat up straighter, eyes moving from the Thames, to an airport, far smaller than Heathrow.

“Anastasios...” her voice held both a warning and a question.

He pulled the car to a stop and a man in a suit approached, but Anastasios didn't immediately move. “I cannot allow this story go to print.”

“I told you, I have nothing to do with it. And there is no story.”

“Nonetheless,” he leaned closer, his face paralyzingly near hers. “Your cooperation is appreciated.”

“And if I don't want to cooperate?”

“Better not to ask, for both our sakes.”

She was tempted to push him, to ask just how far he was willing to go to ensure this article didn't get publicized but until she forgot her loyalty to Konstantinos, she couldn't

ignore Anastasios' request. At least until she had a little more information. She knew the guilt that had plagued Kon for decades over his extra-marital affair, the pain that had come from genuinely loving two women. She also knew how important it had been to him to protect Maggie from what he viewed as his great failure. He'd have moved heaven and earth to protect her. The idea of a newspaper running a gossip piece about his alleged infidelity with *her*, even when it didn't hold a shred of truth, was enough to galvanize Phoebe into action.

"I'll give you one hour," she said grudgingly, pushing out of the car as another suited man approached to open her door.

Anastasios didn't respond.

A valet took his car keys and then, they were walking across the tarmac. She frowned, looking around.

The idea that he might be leading her to an airplane was so preposterous it didn't enter her head as a credible possibility at all, until he gestured to a jet with a huge golden X emblazoned across the tail.

She stopped walking and crossed her arms. "Absolutely not."

"We need to talk." His voice gave nothing away.

She let out a sharp laugh. "Yeah? Well, we can talk here. Or there. Or anywhere that's not a private jet, for crying out loud. You must be delusional to think I'd get on that thing with you. For all I know, you're planning to throw me out a hatch when we reach cruising altitude."

"Tempting," he growled. "But I think that would only draw more media attention, not less."

"Then where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere we can talk privately," he muttered, looking around as if to remind her there were staff milling. "Get in the plane."

She gaped at him. "I cannot believe *anyone* can be as arrogant as you are! Do you really think you have the right to boss me around like this?"

He leaned closer, dangerously close, and spoke into her ear, so her pulse trembled. “Sleeping with my father changed the ballgame considerably.”

“How many times do I have to tell you—,”

He pulled back, lifting a finger and pressing it to her lips. “This is not the place.”

Her eyes flared wide as warring emotions clashed in her belly, desire chief amongst them.

“Be that as it may, I respectfully decline your ‘invitation’.”

“To hell with that,” he ground out, lifting her to cradle against his chest, just as he’d threatened to earlier, so she was stunned into silence. His long strides carried them both across the tarmac, the inclement sky casting him grey shadow.

“Damn it,” she whispered, as he drew closer to the plane—and airline staff. “Put me down.”

“Will you walk onboard yourself?”

Her lips flattened into a mutinous line, denial obvious in her expression, and to her surprise, he tilted his head back on a laugh.

“In that case, what option do I have?”

“Not kidnapping me?”

“You agree you don’t want this story to hit the tabloids?” He asked, drawing to a stop. “You must have some family of your own you want to protect from this? The idea of you having a relationship with a man almost four times your age...”

“I don’t have any family,” she said quietly, then, realizing she’d admitted more than she wanted, focused back on the point at hand. “In any event, there is no story here.”

“The tabloid thinks there is.”

“They’re wrong.”

“So what do you want to do about it?”

She stared up at him, searching for an answer to that, but the truth was, she had no personal experience with this, and no concept of how to handle the media.

“I can’t think when you’re carrying me like this,” she muttered. “Don’t you care what people think?”

“No,” was his immediate, cynical reply. “And they will *think* I’m bringing a lover onboard for the purpose of pleasure. I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept.”

Her cheeks flamed red hot and she looked away quickly, aware her expression would betray her if she wasn’t careful. If only he knew how utterly not true that was!

“I suppose you do this all the time?”

“Often enough to understand that no one will be scandalized by the mode of our arrival.”

Taking her agreement for granted, he began to walk once more, navigating the metallic steps with ease, then turning sideways to enter the plane. As he’d said, no one batted an eyelid when he carried her onboard, and from the minute they entered the plane she was no longer conscious of the formally dressed staff.

“Oh, wow.” She shifted a little, which brought her closer to him, and her whole body glowed warm. “This is...like something out of a movie.”

Halfway down the aisle, he stopped walking. “If I put you down, do you promise not to run?”

She pretended to consider it, when something inside of her was keeping her right where she was, come what may. Loyalty to Kon, she chose to believe.

“I’m not going to be the source of pain to your mother,” she said stiffly.

“How noble of you,” he drawled. “I wonder if you were thinking of her when you skipped away to *Prásina* with my father.”

She stared at him, aghast. “*With* your father? How do you make that sound so sordid? I went there on my own,

Anastasios. He knew how much I wanted to travel, but how little I could afford to do so, and he offered me a holiday.”

“Heaven forbid you should refuse the offer?”

“I did refuse, at first,” she snapped, but emotions were overpowering her, most notably gratitude for Kon’s kindness. “Put me down,” she said icily, her face pale.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he complied, and the ice in her veins only grew colder.

“He was being a friend, when I badly needed one. That’s all.”

“If you say so.”

She turned to face him, sadness on her beautiful features, so he stilled, his eyes resting heavily on her face.

“What’s the point in me saying *anything* to you, if you’re determined not to believe me?”

“How can I believe you?” He asked after a pause, his eyes probing hers as if hoping she’d have some magical way of proving her innocence. “I have literally just discovered this side of him—a man I thought I knew better than anyone else. That he’s had one affair is beyond doubt. And the evidence, in these circumstances, is compelling.”

“If you’re a naturally suspicious person.”

“If that were true, I would have worked out something was going on much sooner.”

She sighed heavily, lifting fingertips to her brow. “So what’s your plan? Where are you taking me?”

The heavy doors slid shut and a stewardess appeared. “We’ll be pushing back within ten minutes, sir. May I bring you some refreshments before take-off?”

He looked at Phoebe then turned back to the attendant. “A beer, and, for my guest?”

She shot him daggers but offered a polite smile to the woman with the striking red hair. “Just a water, please.”

The woman turned and left; they were alone again.

“Sit down,” he gestured to the wide, armchairs that formed a row up each side of the aisle.

“Where are you sitting?”

“Does it matter?”

“I just wanted to be sure I’m as far away as is humanly possible.”

“But not out of an airlock at cruising altitude,” he responded drily and to her chagrin, a smile teased the corners of Phoebe’s mouth.

“Not on this occasion, no.”

“And why do you want to sit so far away from me? Is it perhaps that you can’t trust yourself to be across the aisle without wanting to reach out and touch me?”

Her lips parted at his brazen observation. “Or might it be that I don’t want to so much as breathe the same air as you?” She responded acerbically.

He took a step closer. “You must take care not to throw such obvious challenges at my feet, *agape mou*.”

“Oh? I’d say it’s more of a warning.”

“Is that so?”

He was right up against her now, his own challenge passed back to her. Her breath was ragged, her chest hurting with the force of regular exhalations.

“Because to me, it sounded as though you were goading me to touch you again.”

“But we both know that’s not the case.”

“Do we?” His eyes probed hers, mocking, showing her he knew she was lying. Damn him to hell. Was she so easy to read?

“I wonder if you’ve been thinking about me since that night?” He asked, leaning closer still, lifting a hand now and pressing his fingers into her hair, loosening it at the nape at the

same time he shifted her face closer to his, holding her tightly, just beneath his face. “Have you been wondering what would have happened if we hadn’t stopped? Have you been wishing we didn’t?”

His last words were uttered right against the flesh beneath her ear and a moment later, his tongue darted out, teasing her, so she trembled against him, a moan parting her lips involuntarily.

She hated this man. *Hated* him. She was here by necessity alone, out of loyalty to Kon and an affection for Maggie, whom she’d never met but felt she knew so well courtesy of Kon’s stories.

“Don’t pretend you don’t desire me, Phoebe, or I’ll show that for the lie it is.”

CHAPTER 4

UNLIKE COMMERCIAL AIRLINES, THERE was no announcement as they came into land, proclaiming their location, and Phoebe was too filled with stubborn pride to demean herself by asking. Instead, she kept her gaze resolutely averted, eyes focused on the sparkling, glistening water that shimmered from every angle as they descended, and then, on the blast of heat that entered the plane the moment the doors were opened.

“The car’s waiting, sir,” the hostess said, from the top of the stairs.

Anastasios put a hand in the small of Phoebe’s back, as if to propel her forward, and she shot him a warning glance then moved quickly, cutting off the need for any further physical contact between them.

The heat only intensified as she stepped onto the landing, then moved down the metallic stairs, onto the tarmac. A man in an official uniform stood at the bottom, aviator sunglasses reflecting a harried looking Phoebe right back at her.

She lifted a hand and brushed back her hair.

“Documents?”

A buzz of triumph flared to life. Uh huh! She was going to be sent back to England, given that she didn’t have her passport.

“Here you are.”

Anastasios, from right behind her, handed two passports over—she recognized the navy blue of her own and spun, gaping at him in shock.

“How did you...?”

His attention remained focused on the guard, who scanned a handheld device over both then returned them. “Welcome to Monaco.”

Monaco!

A few paces away there was a four-wheel drive, but Phoebe didn't move towards it. She watched the passport official leave then jerked her face back towards Anastasios.

“Are you freaking kidding me? You broke into my flat?”

“Your landlady let me in,” he said with a shrug. “She was delighted to think you were being whisked away on a secret, romantic weekend.”

Phoebe's lips moved like a fish's. “You are *unbelievable*. That's seriously unethical.”

“You're actually going to stand there and lecture me about ethics?”

She was stunned into silence.

“I didn't think so. Now stop arguing. It's hot and you're going to burn.”

“I don't care.” She pouted petulantly, glaring up at him.

“If that's the way you want it.” He said with a shrug, lifting her up and hoisting her over one shoulder, a hand resting on the curve of her rear as he strode towards the Range Rover and someone—Phoebe couldn't see from her vantage point—opened the rear door, so Anastasios, with considerable skill and athleticism, maneuvered them both into the car, Phoebe essentially on his lap.

She squirmed, intending to break free, but every movement simply brought their bodies closer together, charging the static electricity that was arcing between them. His arm brushed her chest, his leg shifted against her bottom,

and sparks flew, so her breathing grew hard and forced, and the air in the backseat of the car was thick with awareness even before it started to accelerate away from the airport.

“Stop fighting,” he grunted, but she shifted and felt his arousal and bit back a moan. It was confirmation that they were both equally affected by the other, but that was a terrifying reality to contemplate. She wanted to hate him in *every* way, for how he’d treated her.

“Stop manhandling me then,” she said thickly.

He studied her face then moved, this time, to shift her sideways, onto the seat across from him, regarding her with a face that gave nothing away.

“Is that better?”

She didn’t want to tell him that, in fact, it was not better at all. Instead, she crossed her arms and stared out of the window, resuming the stance she’d held for most of the flight over, so she didn’t see the way his lips curled in a cynical, knowing smile.

Despite the fact she was simmering with fury and other, trickier emotions, she was also fascinated by the view from her window, and before long, she forgot to be angry, and let curiosity overtake everything else. She uncrossed her arms and relaxed them in her lap, and she leaned forward, just a little, so she could catch every detail as they passed. On one side of the car, there were mountain ranges and lower set houses with terracotta tiled rooves, but they quickly gave way, on both sides, to larger apartment blocks and then high rises, until the car swept down and onto a beachfront street, pulling up at the mouth of a marina, with dozens of pearly white boats lined up, side by side. Golden hued cliff faces formed a phenomenally beautiful wall on one side of the bay, sparsely covered with fluffy green trees and more striking, modern skyscrapers.

Her door opened and she stepped out without another thought, eager to see more, to taste the salty air.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, to herself, shaking her head a little, thinking how much her brother would have loved this

place. He'd always adored boats.

Out of nowhere, emotions welled in her chest. It was amazing how grief had a way of striking at any moment, out of nowhere, but fierce and debilitating. Kon had understood that, better than anyone.

"You can come back when this matter is resolved. Come."

She spun to him, and finally, doubts won over pride. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere the press can't find you," he muttered grimly, the words an indictment.

"Look, you don't know me," she said, moving to keep up with his longer stride.

"Don't I?"

She ignored his barb. "But I have no intention of talking to anyone in the media about your dad and me. That was *never* my intention."

He cast a glance over his shoulder. "So you admit you were involved with him."

She let out a frustrated sound. "Not at all. We were friends. But I can see how easy it would be to take that innocent friendship and turn it into something dirty and I don't want to disgrace his memory in that way. Nor should you."

"I *don't*," he pointed out sharply. "Why else would I be going to these lengths to conceal you?"

She closed her eyes on a wave of frustration and hurt. It was obvious that he viewed her as a problem to be solved but hearing him say as much didn't make it any less hurtful.

"I don't need to be concealed."

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm not going to discuss my friendship with your father with anyone."

"Regardless, you and he were careless. People at the restaurant saw you together. They saw him coming in weekly,

to meet with you.”

“The fact we were so careless should give you a clue as to how innocent this all was.”

“Who knows? My father is a man who seems to have lost his head when it comes to the women he was having sex with on the side.”

She gasped, hating him in that moment. “How dare you speak of him like that? And to me? However you might feel about your father, I valued him an extraordinary amount, and I’d appreciate it if you’d use respectful language in my company.”

His eyes glittered with unconcealed rage. “My father was worth an extraordinary amount. I wonder if that helped you value him?”

She gasped then lifted her hand, halfway to striking his cheek before he caught her wrist easily, using it to draw her closer to him, jerking her against his chest so she gasped at the urgency of the movement, and the thrill that spun wildly through her.

She felt the hard beating of his heart through his ribs and it echoed the frantic tattoo of her own.

“Money was never a part of it,” she ground out.

His eyes bore into hers and something inside of her snapped—common sense, rational thought, all of the above. She met his eyes but a part of her was spinning wildly out of control.

“Damn it, Anastasios. Why don’t you believe me? What have I ever done to you?”

“Nothing. This isn’t really about you, but my father, and his habit for philandering.”

She drew in a sharp breath.

“Though in this instance, I have to say, I can understand the temptation.”

And then he was kissing her, a kiss that caught her completely by surprise and simultaneously compounded every hope and dream she'd cherished, so she tilted her face and surrendered to it, wondering at the woman she'd become, who could swing so violently from outright hatred to these delicious, licking feelings of need and heat?

She desperately tried to grab hold of self-control, savouring the kiss for one more moment before wrenching free, her heart screaming at her for the denial, her body quivering with the feelings he'd stirred to life.

"Damn you," she groaned. "Don't do that."

"Why not, when you like it so much?"

"Because we're not animals. You're—you're..."

"Yes, *agape mou*? What am I?"

"Just—awful," she said, her voice cracking a little as emotions threatened to overwhelm her. "I can't believe you share even a hint of DNA with your father."

"Believe it," he drawled sarcastically. "Does it bother you, to go from his arms to mine?"

She pulled a face. "That's disgusting."

"It should be," he agreed, spinning away from her then and bracing his hands on his hips, staring straight ahead. His back moved as he sucked in several breaths, and all she could do was stare at him, glad for that moment, when he was distracted and she could indulge her hunger without being seen.

"Come on," he barked, without looking back. "Let's go."

She was tempted to stay where she was, but having come this far, found her feet falling into step behind his, one, then the other, until they were down on a wide, paved platform, level with the splendid boats. Until he paused at the gangplank of one particularly large superyacht, it hadn't occurred to her that he was expecting her to board one, and a little tremor of excitement spiralled through her.

"After you."

“So chivalrous,” she muttered sarcastically, eyeing the boat for a moment longer, taking in the details of the glossy white sides, darkly tinted glass, and the sheer size of the thing. There looked to be four distinct levels to the yacht, and sparkling water was reflected on the ceiling of one balcony, suggesting a swimming pool or spa. At the back of the boat, there was a sleek, black helicopter, with the same ‘X’ emblazoned on its side as she’d seen on the plane.

“I’m a perfect gentleman.”

“Yeah, right,” she rolled her eyes, stomping past him onto the gangplank, doing her best to hide the awe she felt at boarding such a luxurious craft.

At the top of the gangplank, he held out a hand to her, which she willfully ignored. Touching him was dangerous, there was no denying that.

“How long do you expect to keep me here?” She asked, flicking a glance around the yacht. To her relief, she saw a woman in a crisp white uniform walking efficiently along the decks, so knew that at least there’d be staff to keep her occupied.

“I don’t know.” A frown flickered across his face. “As long as it takes to kill the story.”

“There is no—,”

He lifted a finger, pressing it to her lips. “Someone at your restaurant thinks there is.”

Her eyes flared wide, partly because of the way his touch seared her lips, and partly because of his revelation. “Someone at the restaurant?”

“That’s who sold the story. And apparently, they’ve volunteered you to share your side, for the right price.”

She gasped. “I can’t believe it.”

“Can’t you?” He asked with sarcasm. “Come. I’ll show you to your room.”

She formed her hands into fists, contemplating how ridiculous this was. Everything was spinning so completely

out of control, but didn't she owe it to Konstantinos to do everything she could to make sure this falsehood didn't end up in the newspapers? It wasn't just the newspapers, either. A day or two of publicity was okay, but stories that went online had a way of living forever. Anytime someone googled Konstantinos in the future, his sordid 'fling' with her would come up.

They'd been friends—good friends. The last thing she wanted was to be a part of his memory being sullied, particularly when he wasn't around to redeem himself.

It was for that reason, and that reason only, that she followed Anastasios, past two shiny black jet-skis then up a wide set of stairs, through glass doors that led to a sitting area with white leather and beige accents, and enormous windows that showed views on either side of the lines of yachts bobbing alongside them and the glistening Mediterranean.

A casual lounge room gave way to a formal dining room, large enough to accommodate at least twenty people, then a bar that wouldn't have looked out of place in any luxury hotel, past a circular staircase on one side and another sitting room with a grand piano and then, finally, to a wide, timber door.

"Your room." He gestured through the door. "There's a bathroom, and some clothes in the wardrobe."

She arched a brow. "How thoughtful. No one can fault your kidnapping etiquette."

"Good to know. I trust you'll leave a five-star review for me?"

She blinked. A joke? From Anastasios? He looked as surprised as she was.

"My room is next door. Try not to get lost."

That sobered her. "You mean you're staying too?"

"Did you think I'd leave you to jump ship at the first available opportunity? Yes, I'm staying. It occurs to me you're someone who needs supervision."

"Believe it or not, I'm as eager to avoid this story being printed as you are."

“Somehow, I doubt that.”

“Well, that’s because you don’t know me at all.”

“I know enough.”

She wanted to scream. It was like having a conversation with a brick wall. “Whatever.” She stepped into the room, immediately hit by the overwhelming luxury. It was at least four times the size of her bedsit, with a sumptuous king bed against one wall, enormous windows framing a view of the sea, and the bathroom, far from being sequestered from the room, was open plan, with a large claw-foot bath and enormous shower positioned to take advantage of the views.

“Well, then,” she said, over-brightly, as the boat began to purr, and the outside world shifted. Whatever she’d been about to say scuttled from her mind. “We’re moving.”

“We’re on a boat.”

“Yeah, but...I thought we’d just...I don’t know, be parked here.”

“No.” His eyes probed hers. “We’ll be floating in the middle of the ocean, far away from the world, your friends, and nosy journalists. *Katanoitó?*”

“Yes, I understand,” she agreed, distractedly.

His eyes narrowed. “You speak Greek?”

“No, not at all.” A nostalgic smile crossed her lips. “Your dad used to say that.”

Anastasios jerked his head back, as if she’d slapped him again. The air between them electrified, his resentment palpable.

“It’s probably a good idea for you to stop throwing your relationship with him in my face.”

She glared at him, frustration spilling over into raw carelessness. “Does it bother you because you believe he cheated with me? Or because you’re jealous that you think he slept with me?”

His lips were rimmed with white and he went very, very still, his body radiating tension. “You’re obviously aware of the effect you have over men.”

She could have laughed for the ludicrousness of that observation. Given she had precisely zero experience with the opposite sex...

“I’m not some femme fatale,” she sighed, lifting a hand to her temple and pressing it there. “Why don’t you let me tell you about your father and me, so that you can understand—,”

“I already understand plenty.” He moved in the direction of the door, then stilled within the frame. “I realise you didn’t have to come with me today.”

“Didn’t I?”

His eyes glowered and she dipped her head. They both knew he was right. At any point she could have refused to join him, and though he might have expressed his anger, he wouldn’t really have forced her to leave the country. She’d chosen this path because she too wanted to exercise some damage control.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

Her heart kicked up a gear.

“I’m glad you’re prepared to be reasonable, even if it is a little late to make any true amends.”

She bit down on her lower lip. Why did it bother her so much that he believed the worst in her? Because she’d had a lifetime of hurt and rejection, and this was the last straw.

“All I ask is that you spend a few days on the yacht, and stay out of trouble. Do you think you can manage that?”

HE SHOULD HAVE ADDED another requirement, he reflected, later that afternoon, as he watched Phoebe chatting to one of the crew. He was not one of the longer serving members of the team, but rather a seasonal worker, hired for the summer, to help with the additional usage, so Anastasios knew nothing about the man, not even his name. But from this vantage point,

he could see that he was young, fit and objectively speaking, good looking, with his deep tan, blonde hair and crystal blue eyes.

It was fascinating to watch Phoebe talking to him. Whereas with Anastasios she was uptight and on-her-guard the entire time, with this other man, she was relaxed and happy, her smile quick, her eyes sparkling; even her hair seemed to have taken on a life of its own, lifting in the early evening breeze, whipping her face so she had to lift a hand to push it back. He watched the elegant gesture with a tightening in his chest, and realized he could no longer ignore the fact that he wanted her.

Not in a passing, idle way, but with a passion that was rare and hungry. It was the same passion that had galvanized Anastasios at school, making him sure to succeed, because he'd known he would never get anything but the best academic result. It was how he became the fastest long-distance runner at university—because he woke early, every day, the need to triumph fueling him through all weather conditions, so that he focused with single-minded determination on becoming the best he could be.

The same need had lodged in his gut and refused to be dismissed.

He wanted Phoebe Whittaker. Hell, he needed her. And the fact she'd been with his father? Could he get beyond that? Did he have a choice?

What if he believed her—that her relationship with Konstantinos had been innocent? How convenient that would be, meaning he was free to pursue her, to sleep with her as he desperately wanted, as he'd been obsessing over, he now accepted, since the first moment they'd met.

But it wasn't true.

There was no way his father would have left such a sum to a woman he merely met in a restaurant. He'd loved her. And the thought filled Anastasios with a strange rush of anger towards the father he'd always admired and adored. Anger that

his father had cheated on Maggie, certainly, but also, anger that he'd met Phoebe first.

The thought had him turning and stalking away, putting Phoebe, if not out of his mind, at least out of his sight, for now.

CHAPTER 5

“WHAT IS IT?”

She startled, her eyes jerking to Anastasios’.

He sipped his wine, then replaced the glass on the table. “That’s the third sigh in as many minutes. Are you not happy?”

“Because my life has been hijacked by some overbearing dictator?” She asked, leaning back in her chair and regarding him carefully. “Should I be happy?”

“I mean with the meal,” he responded coolly.

She looked down at the dinner, then at Anastasios. “Actually, if you must know,” she said after a pause. “I was just thinking how perfect this would be with just about anyone else.” She batted her lashes at him with mock innocence, then speared a scallop. They were truly one of the yummiest things she’d ever tasted.

“Like my father?”

She sighed heavily—fourth in as many minutes, surely a record. “Well, yes, naturally.”

He stiffened visibly.

“We were friends, what do you want me to say?”

“It’s best if we don’t talk about him.”

“Sure, but he’s the whole reason I’m here.”

“For the sake of my blood pressure, let’s pretend it’s not.”

“Then why else would I be here?” She asked, breath catching in her throat. In the wardrobe of her bedroom, she’d found many clothes, all beautiful, designer items that had made her heart thump to run her fingers over. She’d settled on a simple pair of white cotton shorts and a lemon yellow halter neck that made her tan look a deeper shade of caramel.

He leaned back, his eyes a dark brown as he ran them over her face.

“Are you flirting with me?”

She straightened. “No.”

“Perhaps you do it without realizing.”

“No.”

His lips twisted in a mocking smile. “Okay.” His cynicism was obvious.

“You’re so—,”

“Impossible? You’ve said that already.”

“Well, it’s true.”

“Fine. But we’re stuck with each other, so shall we try to keep conversation somewhere near the boundary of civil?”

“To what end?” She lifted her shoulders, turning away from him. “We’re not friends. We’re never going to be friends.”

“Even strangers are capable of having polite conversations.”

“Is that what you want?” She turned back to him, sipping her ice water.

“I want to know more about you,” he admitted, with a grudging note in his voice. He’d changed too, from the business shirt and jeans and into khaki shorts and a polo shirt that emphasized the contours of his ridged abdomen.

“Such as?”

He visibly weighed his words. “Where are you from?”

A weight settled in her chest. Her past was hard enough to contemplate, let alone discuss. She took a sip of water, then placed her hands in her lap, pleating a napkin several times.

“Is it some great secret?” He prompted cynically. “Perhaps a criminal record you don’t want to expose?”

“No,” she forced a tight smile, but it was obvious that he wasn’t fooled. Curiosity stirred in the depths of his gaze. “It’s just not particularly interesting.”

“Then bore me,” he said. “We’re stuck here together, for days.”

Butterflies flapped their wings inside her tummy. She would keep the details brief. He was asking a simple biographical question—he didn’t need to know the awful truth of her childhood. He wouldn’t *want* that knowledge. “I lived in rural Victoria, then moved to Melbourne when I was fifteen.”

“And London?”

“A year and a half ago. I think you already know that?”

His eyes narrowed. “Why did you move overseas?”

“Why not?”

He leaned forward a little. “If you don’t want to answer, just say so.”

“I thought I had.”

“Then what would you prefer to talk about?” He sipped his wine. “Where I grew up? But you already know that. You know far more about me than I do you, courtesy of my father.”

She couldn’t deny it. “He was very proud of you. He spoke of you often.”

Anastasios straightened, his body very still. “We agreed not to discuss him.”

But the words were tinged with regret, as though he wanted to hear her recollections, even when the circumstances bothered him.

“If that’s what you want.”

The silence that fell between them was prickly, punctuated only by the gentle hush of the waves against the boat’s edges. “Where are we?”

“Just out from the Ligurian coastline. See those lights over there?”

She followed the direction of his finger, trying not to be overly aware of the way the breeze rustled his hair. She made a noise of agreement, focusing on the twinkling city in the distance.

“That’s Genoa.”

“Italy?” She sighed softly. “I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“Where, in particular?”

“Rome, of course.” She pulled a face. “Florence, Venice. The tourist hotspots.”

At his dubious expression, she bit back a genuine laugh. “I *am* a tourist,” she said with a shrug. “What do you expect from me?”

“I suppose it’s understandable. But Italy has so much to offer, so many places of beauty.”

“Where would you recommend, then?”

“Sicily. The food is second to none. Sun-drenched and bursting with flavour. The wines are excellent too—it is a shame you do not drink. In Sicily, you might find you make an exception. There is nothing nicer than sitting on a hill surrounded by vines, looking towards the sea as the sun sets.”

She was captivated by him, sitting on the edge of her seat now, the meal forgotten.

“Where else?”

“As macabre as it might sound, Pompeii. It is impossible to feel full of self-importance when you are surrounded by the eeriness of that place. Lives extinguished in the blink of an eye, the abject horror, the acts of love,” he shook his head, as

if to catch himself on the romance of that thought. “The sacrifice,” he finished with a look of surprise. “Parents huddling their bodies over children—I suppose that’s a normal instinct, though, isn’t it? For a parent to protect a child?”

He was simply making an observation, but to Phoebe, who had no experience of this purported parental protection, the words were jarring. She squirmed a little uncomfortably in her seat.

“You’re right, it does sound macabre.”

“Still, worth seeing.” Something shifted, as though he was pushing aside the romanticism of his descriptions, and she didn’t want that. She liked hearing him talk about places, just not about parents and what they owed their children.

“Cinque Terre is also exquisite.”

“I’ve heard of it,” she murmured. “Five towns, high on cliffs?”

“That’s it,” he agreed with a nod, and she felt a zing of warmth as though she’d somehow earned his approval. Hating herself for being so childish, she took another bite of dinner, content to listen as he explained.

“The villages are very old, and mostly fishing communities, though now, tourism is also important to the region. But that doesn’t change the essence of Cinque Terre, where ancient houses jostle together, washing lines strung from one to the other, grape vines clambering up hillsides, and fishing boats dotting the beaches from dusk until dawn.” He hesitated, and when he spoke, his voice was gruff. “I suppose you know we used to go there together?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t mention it.”

His eyes probed hers, as if evaluating her answer for honesty, and then he took another sip of his wine. “We went most summers. My father was big on tradition—he never had much of that, growing up, and wanted us to have regular rhythms shaped into our lives. Fishing off the coast of Cinque Terre was one such rhythm.” His expression took on a faraway look. “It was nothing like this. No luxury, no creature

comforts. We'd pile into a pretty rickety old boat, row out to sea, and cast our lines. Some days we'd catch plenty, other days nothing, but it didn't matter. He'd talk to us, and sing, and we'd come back satisfied regardless of what was in our basket."

"He'd sing?" She asked with a smile.

"He had a terrible voice." Anastasios shook his head with affectionate indulgence and something in Phoebe pulled tight—an unmistakable sense of longing. What would it be like to have that sort of affection aimed in her direction? She sobered, crossing her cutlery and taking a last sip of water. "But that didn't matter. There were all these songs from his childhood and he'd warble them out, no doubt scaring away the fish in the process."

She laughed softly.

"And we never told him. We never told him anything he did wrong." Anastasios looked at Phoebe, and now there was pain in their eyes. "I think we didn't really see him as a man, sometimes. It's as though he was larger than life, almost a god to us, beyond fault. Perhaps if we'd seen him as he really was, we might have seen the truth."

"And if you'd known about his affair?"

His eyes widened at her apparent admission.

"With Anna," she clarified, earning a small frown from Anastasios.

"He told you about her?"

She dipped her head.

"He shared so much with you."

"I told you—,"

"You were 'friends', yes, I know." But his skepticism was obvious, and she was tired of arguing the point.

"What would you have done, if you'd known?"

"Made him stop seeing her," he answered, without skipping a beat.

“And if he refused?”

“He wouldn’t have.”

“I suppose you could have kidnapped her to be extra sure,” Phoebe pointed out with a wry grimace.

“It may yet come to that.”

“Oh?”

“She’s writing letters that contained thinly veiled threats, asking for what she sees as her share of an inheritance. If she doesn’t get it, my lawyer believes there’s a risk she’ll go public.”

Phoebe’s eyes swept shut. “And in the meantime, you have some bogus story about your dad and me to contend with.”

“Careful, *agape*.” He leaned forward, his eyes skimming hers. “It almost sounds as though you feel sorry for me.”

“I do feel sorry for you,” she responded without a moment’s doubt. “Discovering what you have about your dad, and in these circumstances, must have been incredibly difficult, for you and your brothers.”

“They don’t know yet.”

Her lips parted. “What? Why not?”

“Why burden them with this?”

Phoebe contemplated that. “I got the impression you were close.”

“We are.”

“So wouldn’t you rather lean on them?”

“I don’t need to.”

“Fine, you’re too big and macho to ‘need’ support, but what about their counsel?”

“You think they’d urge me to act differently?”

“Perhaps.”

“What would you have had me do?”

She pursed her lips. “Not accuse me of sleeping with him before I had a chance to explain?”

He pushed back his chair and stood, the lines of his body showing frustration. “I feel as though someone has shaken a bottle of soft drink and is now opening the lid. It doesn’t matter what I do, I can’t get the lid back on and I can’t stop the spray from going everywhere. I admired my father a great deal and yet he has left the most unholy mess behind.”

“And I’m a part of that?”

“Even if I were to play devil’s advocate for a moment, and to say that I believed your version of events—,” the moment of light-heartedness was short lived. “Which is not to say that I do, I’m speaking hypothetically,” he continued. “Just the appearance of the money he left you, the bronze sculpture in your possession, make it highly unlikely anyone else would believe your friendship was innocent. If there weren’t proof of Anna, then perhaps. But his character has changed now, beyond repair.”

“I’m collateral damage,” she murmured.

“Perhaps.” The word showed he was far from convinced. “If that’s the case, I would owe you an apology.”

“Wow. I’m shocked. You’re sounding almost human.”

“But it would also complicate things,” he said with a seriousness that took her breath away.

“Oh?”

“Believing you and my father slept together is all that’s stopping me from kissing you—no, from dragging you to my bed and making love to you until you can barely breathe.”

Her breath hitched in her throat as her eyes went rounder than saucers. She stood, but her knees knocked together and she had to press her fingers into the tabletop.

“I didn’t sleep with him,” she said uneasily.

“The problem is, I’ve seen your apartment. His painting, the sculpture. I saw how you reacted when I told you about him. There is some friend of yours trying to sell the story, and

promising you on a silver platter, for an additional payment. Only an idiot would believe you had no relationship with my father, given all that, and I'm no idiot."

"Aren't you?" She couldn't help the jibe, to cover the hurt dousing her in acid. She'd wanted to go to him. She'd wanted to lift up onto the tips of her toes and kiss him senseless, to press her body to his and silently implore him to do everything he'd just promised.

"You're asking me to take a leap of faith, but it's beyond me. I'm not someone who acts on trust alone. I need proof. Rock hard, solid evidence."

"I'm not asking you to do anything," she corrected after a moment. "I'm just standing here, telling you the truth. Whether you believe it or not, is up to you."

He made a gruff sound, showing his frustration better than any words could. "Would you honestly expect me to make love to you knowing that you've been in his arms, welcomed him with your body?"

She looked away from him, the words he used invoking imagery of Anastasios welcoming her to his bed, of her body taking his, so she shuddered a little, from desire and need, rather than anything else.

"Have I asked you to make love to me?"

She felt his gaze rake her body, the way he looked from her head, lower, sweeping his eyes over her face with lavish fascination, then dropping to the slender column of her throat, her exposed décolletage, the generous swell of her breasts and narrow waist, the hips that were displayed by the white shorts, and her shapely, athletic legs. Her heart was in overdrive as he inspected her with a possessive heat that was completely inappropriate, all things considered.

Yet she didn't move.

She didn't argue.

She stood her ground, and her body gradually came to life. Her skin lifted in goosebumps, her blood pounded through her veins, her stomach twisted tightly and moist heat pooled

between her legs, muscles there clamping in a silent, desperate plea. Her breasts throbbed, and her nipples tingled against the soft cotton of the halter neck, so that when his eyes raked back up her body and they hovered on the swell of her cleavage, his expression was one of obvious admiration, eyes steady on the hardened peaks. Warmth flooded her there, almost as if he was touching her, and in fact, her back swayed forward a little, as though he'd squeezed one nipple and sent her into overdrive.

“You have asked me to make love to you with almost every breath you have expelled, since the moment we met. I'm trying to decide how much of it is an act, and how much of it is real.”

“An act?” She repeated, still trying to make sense of his claim that she'd been unconsciously suggesting they become intimate.

“You are so good at this,” he said with a slow shake of his head, pushing away from the railing and moving towards her. “You simper and smile and seem like such an innocent. No wonder he fell for you.”

“Is that your way of saying you're falling for me?”

He let out a sharp bark, instantly dismissive. “I do not ‘fall’ for women.”

“You just sleep with them,” she supplied, with disapproval.

“Yes.”

Her heart gave a strange, twisting ache, and she turned away, her breath uneven, and breasts aching.

“Perhaps we are very similar in this regard. Perhaps your act is to make men care about you, to smile and bat your long eyelashes, until they are too beguiled to notice that you are accepting offers of holidays to private islands and large lump sum endowments.”

It was like being doused in frosty ice water.

“I didn't ask for any of that.”

“I suppose I'll have to take your word for it.” His hands curved around her hips from behind, surprising her, and a

moment later, he was moving them to rotate her back to facing him. “But here you are, on my yacht, and I can’t help but wonder, if you hadn’t met him, would you be looking at me, trying to catch me?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “For your yacht?” She muttered, tears stinging her eyes. “You’d better believe I’m worth more than that.”

His smile was cool; his hands were warm, and as he stroked her sides, fireworks erupted through her body. “Not just for my yacht.” One hand left her side, lifting to her chin, to angle her face to his. “There’d be this, as well.”

His kiss was soft, a gentle exploration, as if probing her to see if this was something he could do, could imagine. Kisses, she realized, meant nothing to Anastasios. Where sex was a line he couldn’t ever cross, because he imagined she’d slept with his father, he clearly had no problem kissing her until she was incandescent with longing. The problem Phoebe faced was that as soon as he kissed her, common sense went out the window. Rational thought was gone, too.

“Is this how it works, Phoebe? Lunch, once a week, extravagant gifts and holidays. And in exchange, your beautiful body, and the pretense of your total adoration?” He broke the kiss just long enough to press the words to her lips, and damn it, she had no shield for such cruelty, despite what she’d endured—they fired as arrows, straight into her heart.

Sadness flooded her, dousing desire.

She pulled away with no difficulty.

“Nothing about what I shared with your father was an act.” She sniffed, tilting her face from his. “And if you would like to know why, I’ll give you the easy answer: he was ten times the man you’ll ever be. Never, in a million years, would he speak to a woman as you have me.”

“No, he’d just sleep around behind their backs.”

She bit down on her lower lip. “You have issues with him, fair enough, but you have no right to transpose those on me. I

did not lie to you. I did not cheat. I did nothing but be a friend to, and appreciate the friendship of, your father.”

“It’s a pointless conversation,” he said after a beat. “As we’ve already discussed, I don’t rely on words and promises when making a decision.”

“I’m not asking you to make a decision,” she said, through gritted teeth. “You’re the one who kissed me, who touched me. You’re the one who keeps bringing up my sex life as though you have some kind of vested interest, so I’m going to make this very easy for you. I’m not available. I don’t want you to kiss me, I don’t want you to touch me, and I sure as hell don’t want to sleep with you. Just stay out of my goddamned way, *katanoitó?*”

CHAPTER 6

UNDERSTAND? UNDERSTAND? HE DIDN'T understand a single thing about what had happened, since the night he'd met her. He didn't understand his behaviour, his desires, his anger, his hatred. He didn't understand the way he was goading her, provoking her, he particularly didn't understand the way he was insulting her.

There was a level of hypocrisy in his treatment he couldn't fail to be aware of.

How many women had Anastasios slept with? And then bought beautiful jewelry for, or lavish clothes, as part of his dating ritual. Accepting such gifts didn't make Phoebe a whore, so why the hell had he treated her like one?

He bashed his pillow for the millionth time, as the boat rocked gently back and forth, in a motion that usually lulled him to sleep. But sleep was impossible tonight. Their conversation was tormenting him, so too her nearness, so he dismissed the prospect of rest and stood instead, restless, as a caged lion might be. He prowled his room for several moments but the sense of unease didn't lift. It wasn't yet five in the morning, but he couldn't stay locked up in here for several hours longer, despite the luxurious size of his bedroom. Grabbing a pair of shorts, he pulled them on his naked frame and quietly slipped out of his room, hesitating for only the briefest moment outside her door, then striding past, anger stoking to life anew in the pit of his belly.

His father had cheated on Maggie, but also, on them. He'd broken the bonds of their family. He'd been with Anna for a

long time—decades—and kept it totally private, something all his own. He'd had another daughter, for God's sake, and never once thought the family deserved an introduction to her. That she might want to meet her brothers, and vice versa. He'd made a mess, then refused to clean it up. Instead, he'd left that for Anastasios.

Phoebe, in the scheme of things, was an afterthought.

Their affair, if in fact there had been one, had been brief. Eighteen months, no children. The damage was not lasting. And given their age difference, it was difficult to think either had serious plans. She clearly knew about his family, his marriage, and even Anna, which unfortunately only underscored, for Anastasios, how transactional their situation must have been. What kind of woman would accept this from their lover?

Panic beaded sweat on his brow. He didn't want to think of his father and Phoebe in that way. Was it possible Phoebe was telling the truth?

Of course it was possible, it just wasn't likely, given the evidence.

He moved quickly up the stairs, onto the deck rail, walking the length of the boat and switching on a small light at the bow. The air smelled like salt and a little way in the distance, lights bobbed on the surface of the water—he could just make out the fishing trawlers, dragging in their nets after a night's work.

He rested his arms on the edge of the railing, staring out, trying to blot Phoebe from his thoughts—as he'd been trying to do since that evening in London, almost a month earlier. What was it about her?

She was beautiful and graceful, smart and quick, but it was more than that. There was something indefinable that had caught at him from the first moment, and wouldn't let go.

He had wondered, in the intervening weeks, if it was because she represented a connection to his father. No matter how much he hated the fact Konstantinos had engaged in

affairs, there was no denying the fact that Phoebe knew a part of Kon that had been hidden from Anastasios. In his grief, he wanted to understand that part, to understand why his father had cheated. Why they hadn't been enough. His hands gripped the railing tighter as the thought unfurled in his brain. Was that it? Was that the key to understanding the hold she had on him?

“Good morning, sir.”

He turned at the unwelcome introduction. One of the deckhands—hastily dressed, if her messy hair was anything to go by—stood just to the side.

He nodded his greeting.

“Would you like anything to drink? Eat?”

He was sure he was getting close to understanding himself, and with relief, recognized that his obsession had less to do with Phoebe than it did his father's psychology.

“Coffee,” he dismissed curtly, renewed vigour in his frame. She was just a woman, and when the threat of this news story was in the past, he'd drop her at the nearest port and sail into the sunset, happily forgetting all about her for good.

PHOEBE HADN'T EXPECTED to sleep at all well, after their charged disagreement the evening before. She'd showered furiously, scrubbing her skin until it was pink all over then pulling on an oversized t-shirt and climbing into bed. She'd stared at the ceiling, replaying every barb, insult and jibe, the scathing cynicism that had twisted his handsome face into a mask of mockery.

But at some point, the repeating performance in her mind had faded and she'd flipped onto her side, hearing only the soft waves and the gentle hum of the boat's unfamiliar sounds—some mechanics, and occasionally, footsteps, as the crew moved around. When she did fall asleep, it was with visions of vines scrambling up old houses in Cinque Terre, and she smiled softly in her dreams.

She hadn't expected to fall asleep, nor to sleep easily, but when she woke, the sun was high in the sky and the day was already warm. She sat upright with a start, looking around almost guiltily.

As a child, her father had berated them for sleeping in. She had far too many memories of him storming into the small room she shared with Dale, slamming open the door until it hit the wall and the cheap, magazine covers hung in dollar store frames would jangle against the fibro walls. "Get up," he'd roar, spittle at the sides of his mouth, and Phoebe had always known that if they weren't quick, he'd have the paddle ready.

The training of childhood rarely receded as an adult, and she struggled to shake that morning alarm, even now.

Pushing her feet over the edge of the bed, heart racing, it took several gulps of clean sea air to calm her nerves and to remind herself that those memories were more than a decade old. He couldn't hurt her anymore. He couldn't touch her.

When her eyes landed on a glass clock with fine gold hands, and she saw it was almost ten, she even felt a little rush of triumph. Her father would have been so furious, and she couldn't resist the pleasure she took from that knowledge. She'd been too afraid to defy him when she'd been living at home, and it was silly to feel that she'd defied him now, as a twenty four year old, who'd run away from home almost ten years ago and now lived on the other side of the world, but she felt pleased with herself, regardless.

Until she remembered the other tyrant in her life.

Showered and dressed, and changing into a simple cotton dress, Phoebe had delayed for as long as she reasonably could. There were no books in her cabin, nor was there a TV, and she could only watch the rippling ocean for so long.

Besides, she was ravenously hungry after only a light dinner the evening before.

Nonetheless, she moved with care, looking left and right before stepping out, eager to avoid Anastasios for as long as

possible. She should have known she wouldn't be so lucky on that score.

When she emerged into the kitchen, he was right there, naked from the waist up, and bottom half-clad only in a pair of navy blue shorts. Her mouth went dry at this totally unfair display of masculinity. His physique was unfairly beautiful. She tried to look away, but her eyes were locked to his chest, to the delineations of his abdominals, the sparse covering of hair, the depth of his tan, the sheer, rugged masculinity embodied in his frame.

“You slept well?” The gruff question was a sign of civility, perhaps even a show of hostilities being ceased, but it took Phoebe several seconds to drag her recalcitrant eyes to his face, to home in on his own eyes and nod jerkily.

“Like a rock. I don't remember the last time I've been so comfortable.”

“The bed in your accommodation looks half made of rocks.”

It brought back memories that seared her for their intensity. Not only had he seen her bed, he'd been on it, on her. She forced her legs to work, bringing her towards the kitchen but then, with consternation, she stopped. It was large and spacious, but somehow, didn't feel big enough for both of them to occupy at the same time. Anastasios simply took up too much space—not physically, but in every other way. Her awareness of him was making her mind and heart move discordantly.

“Coffee?”

Relief swept over her. “Yes, please.”

He moved to a proper espresso machine and pressed a button, bringing the aroma of freshly ground coffee into the kitchen. It made her think of work, and she made a small noise. “I have to phone the restaurant and let them know I can't come in. My manager's going to kill me.”

Anastasios looked over his shoulder. “Your cell phone will work. There's a beacon on top of the yacht so I always have

reception.”

“Okay.”

Glad for the excuse, she left the room in search of her handbag. Her manager didn't pick up, so she left a voicemail, glad that she didn't have to hear his caustic response in person. By the time she returned to the kitchen, Anastasios had finished the coffee and pulled on a shirt. Disappointment warred with gratitude.

The coffee was delicious, even if the view was ever so slightly diminished.

“This yacht is truly amazing.”

He looked around, as if seeing it through her eyes. “You haven't even seen the cinema or gym yet,” he pointed out.

Her expression revealed her thoughts. “You're serious?”

“It's designed to float on water in the event of an apocalypse.”

She arched a brow. “So the world is burning but you can watch every release of *The Fast and The Furious*?”

He laughed, a genuine sound of amusement that was like warm honey on just-baked bread. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on edge. “Right. What else do you do at the end of all things?”

“How much time do you spend on here?”

She sat at the kitchen counter, watching as he moved to the fridge and removed a platter of sandwiches. Egg, salmon, and tomato and cheese. She reached for a vegetarian one and took a small bite.

“Not as much as I'd like.”

She tilted her head to the side. “You work a lot.”

“Is that a guess, or are you repeating titbits my father has shared with you.”

“Both,” she said, danger signals blaring. As much as she adored Konstantinos, bringing him into conversation was like

the lighting of a fuse, and she wasn't yet ready to resume their sparing.

"It's pretty obvious."

"Oh? How?"

"You just seem like a total workaholic."

"I can have fun, too."

"Yeah? What does fun look like to you?"

"You really want to know?"

"I asked the question, didn't I?"

"And if you don't like the answer?"

"Try me."

"I do many things for fun, *agape mou*. I swim, I run, I watch sport with my brothers, or friends. I hike, when I have time. But what I like to do, most of all, when I want to blow off steam, is have sex."

Her lips parted and heat flushed her cheeks. "I see."

"Perhaps you do."

She didn't, and just the mention of that particular hobby had sent her pulse racing dangerously fast.

"There's no more enjoyable way to spend an afternoon."

I'll take your word for it. She bit back the rejoinder, unwilling to admit to this man just how inexperienced she was.

"I'm a fan of art galleries, myself."

His smirk was teasing, but she ignored it, and sipped her coffee, looking towards the window. The coastline was far away, but even more beautiful from this distance, where the thin strip of white formed by the sand bled into cliffs of green and silver, and little townships dotted along the length. There must have been hundreds of thousands of people within the stretch of land she could see from one side of the window to the other, and none of them knew she was bobbing on this boat having a small emotional breakdown.

“There weren’t any galleries in the town I grew up in. Too small,” she said with a lift of her shoulders. “But there were books. I would check out the tomes on artwork from the library and hide them under my bed, waiting until everyone else was asleep,” *or drunk*, she mentally added, “then I’d pull them out and pore over the images. I wanted, desperately, to see the real things.” She sipped her coffee. “In Melbourne, whenever there was free access to a gallery, I’d go, but I couldn’t—,” she stopped short. How could she tell him that not only had she been homeless, she’d looked it, and galleries didn’t routinely encourage vagrants to walk through their corridors. She blinked quickly. “It wasn’t until I moved to London though that I really *saw* the artwork I’d been craving. I couldn’t believe—I still can’t believe—that you can walk into a hall, for free, turn right and come face to face with some of the most magnificent impressionist paintings ever created.” She sighed softly. “That’s how I spend my free time.”

Heat flooded her face at how much she’d just spoken, and at the way he was looking at her, with a frown, as though trying to slot this new information into the image he had of her as an unfeeling home-wrecker.

“It sounds a little duller than mine.”

She laughed. “Not to me.”

“Really?”

She lifted her shoulders. “I take it you’re not an art fan?”

“Oh, I appreciate art,” he corrected gravely. “But I really, really appreciate good sex.”

Her pulse kicked up a gear. Did he have any idea how he was making her feel? She suspected so. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

The question evidently floored him. “A girlfriend?” He repeated the term as though testing it out, like he’d never heard of such a concept.

“You know. A female you spend time with, blow off steam with, have sex with,” she expanded, finishing her coffee and replacing the cup with a bit of a clatter on the saucer.

“No.”

She considered that. “Commitment not your style?”

“I prefer variety.”

Her expression—disapproval—hid a strange ache tightening inside her chest. “Of course you do. Why am I not surprised?”

“Coming from a woman who has been sleeping with a married octogenarian, you should probably ease up on the judgement.”

His summation took her breath away. She stood, leaving the sandwich uneaten except for a few nibbles. “Do you have any books on board?”

The question, out of left field, obviously surprised him. His brows drew together. “Books?”

“You know, hard covers with paper between, words printed, stories, that kind of thing.”

“I’m familiar with the concept. Yes, there’s a library. Why?”

“There are many things I’d rather do than sit here and be insulted by you, but a book is by far my first choice.”

“You find the truth so upsetting?”

“That’s a little like the pot calling the kettle black, isn’t it? I gave an honest assessment of your situation and you immediately went on the defensive. Why attack me?” She pressed her fingertips to her temples. “I’m trying to make conversation with you, because you were right—

it would make the next few days easier if we’re not constantly at war, but you’re not capable of being even remotely civil. So please, just tell me where I can find the library, and leave me alone.”

He startled. She could tell he wasn’t used to being spoken to so directly. She gathered most people found him intimidating, but not Phoebe. She had known real fear, and it wasn’t warranted by a man like Anastasios. He was strong and

in control, unlike her father, who'd careened wildly out of control, his moods growing worse into the evening, as he drank more and more, and grew angrier and angrier with the world and in his place in it.

"You're right." The words breathed towards her, slowly, and made more genuine by the frown on his face. "That was a cheap shot. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

She hadn't expected his apology. She hadn't expected him to be reasonable. Tears clawed at the back of her throat; she spun away, inhaling deeply.

"Come on. I'll show you the library."

IT WAS HARD NOT to like someone, even a little, who had a floating library on the sea, and that's exactly what she saw when he led her deeper into the bowels of the boat.

"Staff living quarters," he indicated a double wide door, then turned left. "And the books." He pushed into a huge room with shelves lining every wall, filled with books upon books upon books. Gentle light was offered by overhead LEDs, set to dim.

"How many staff are on board?"

"I don't know, exactly. During winter, it's a skeleton crew. Now, it's at least three times that number. There are cooks, cleaners, maintenance workers, two captains. It's a substantial operation. I entertain on here, from time to time—corporate dinners, parties—"

"Sex?" She interrupted, unable to help the rush of heat that flooded her cheeks.

"I thought we'd called a ceasefire?" He asked, dangerously close, so there was no ceasefire in sight, only the pounding of a drum, the strafing of bullets so close to her skin she shuddered.

"You're enabling one of my hobbies," she pointed out, gesturing to the books.

"Are you offering to enable one of mine?"

Her lips parted at the double *entendre* and she shook her head quickly. “I was just making conversation.”

His laugh was unnerving. “To answer your question, then, no, generally. This is not somewhere I bring women.”

“Why not? It’s very romantic.”

“You answered your own question.”

“Did I?”

“Romance is not a part of what I offer.”

“Of course not. You’re more of a wham, bam, thank you ma’am kinda guy?”

“That’s putting it crudely.”

“But accurate?”

He lifted his shoulders. “I don’t generally hear complaints.”

“I’m sure you don’t.”

Her cheeks heated as she heard the words tumble from her lips and lifted a hand, covering her mouth. “I didn’t mean—that wasn’t—,”

“Acknowledgement of my prowess?” He teased, so she felt as though he was laughing at her.

“Right.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I meant...Oh, I don’t know.”

His grin showed he knew exactly what she’d meant, and she honestly wished the floor would open up and swallow her, deep into the bowels of the ocean.

“I date,” he said after a pause, moving deeper into the library, so his face was cast in shadow. He scanned a finger across one shelf, then removed a book. “But brief affairs are more my style. A few dates, perhaps a week or two. Nothing serious.”

“Why not?”

He angled his face to hers. “What do you mean?”

“Why avoid serious relationships?”

His eyes narrowed, as if the idea had never occurred to him. “Why not?” He turned her question back on her. “What’s to gain?”

She pondered that. “All the benefits of a committed relationship?”

“Such as?”

“Intimacy.”

“I have no issues with intimacy.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t mean sex. I mean true intimacy. Heart to heart stuff. Knowing someone with every fibre of your being. Waking up and reaching for them because you can’t wait to see them smile, to hear them speak, to share your thoughts and hear theirs.”

The air between them crackled and she knew what he was thinking, even when he didn’t say it. He was wondering if that’s what she’d shared with his father. It was on the tip of her tongue to set him straight, to tell him her understanding of relationships was not gained through personal experience, but rather because she’d been on the outside, looking in, on relationships for such a long time, she’d built up a fantasy of what an ideal partnership would look like. She had no idea if it was accurate or not, but deep down, she had her fingers and toes crossed.

“And that’s what you want in life?”

He began to move towards her, carrying the hardbound book. Her eyes stayed locked to his.

“Yes,” she answered, but frowned, dubiously. “I know it sounds idealistic.”

His expression showed agreement.

“You’re young enough for idealism to still be acceptable.”

“But you’re too old and cynical?”

“Even at your age, I didn’t want what you seek.”

“Why not? You can’t blame your parents. You believed them to be happily married.”

“That’s true.”

“So?”

He frowned. “I suppose it was my father. He taught self-reliance above all else. He made us understand the importance of the business—we all work for the family company. My aspiration, as a teenager, was always to take over from him. To be the best I could be. And as I got older, I was happy with relationships as a fringe part of my life. Sex, as a silver lining, without the entanglements and drama of what you call ‘intimacy’.”

“You’re a loner.”

“Yes.”

Close enough to touch her, instead, Anastasios held out the book, and she curled her fingers around it without thinking, looking down belatedly. Van Gogh’s self-portrait looked back on her.

“The impressionists,” she murmured, tracing the cover with her fingertip, feeling his eyes on her face, so that when she looked up a burst of energy jolted through her. “Thank you.”

He dipped his head.

“Don’t you ever wonder what you’re missing out on?”

His eyes probed hers. “Never.”

“But—,”

“And even if I had, revelations of the recent weeks would have shaken those thoughts from my mind. My parents had, from the outside, the ideal marriage, yet look what he did to her. There is no such thing as a perfect marriage, a flawless couple. He had a wife, and children, yet still he sought more.”

“I don’t think you should presume that’s an indictment of his love for your mother.”

“My mother is another topic we should avoid discussing. She wouldn’t like it.”

Phoebe sighed. He was still so convinced she’d had an affair with his father. How would she ever get through to him? Perhaps she never would. Could she accept that? Could she live in a world where Anastasios believed the worst in her?

Of course she could. But she really, really didn’t want to.

“Thanks for the book,” she said quietly, taking a step backwards, seeking to break the connection that had tightened around them, the invisible string that seemed to bond them. “I’ll go read it now.”

And she turned and left swiftly, because staying there with him, staring down the barrel of his disapproval, was making her heart ache in a way she couldn’t bear.

CHAPTER 7

IT WASN'T THAT Phoebe had forgotten the date, but she'd been so caught up in recent events that it had, temporarily, slipped her mind. So the day before her twenty fifth birthday, it was an alert on her phone that reminded her of the impending event.

Tomorrow! 7.00pm – dinner with Konstantinos.

She read the alarm with a wave of nostalgia, turning towards the windows of her bedroom and sighing. Last year, they'd gone into the West End to grab take out, then seen a show.

Not only had it been the first time she'd attended a theatre performance, it had been the first time anyone had done something truly thoughtful for Phoebe's birthday. She'd been overwhelmed by Konstantinos's generosity, and kindness.

He'd insisted they'd repeat it the following year, and made her put it in her calendar. She'd had no idea he wouldn't be here. Even at eighty four, Konstantinos had always seemed so alive and virile, so well.

Phoebe dressed slowly, her mind distracted, as she contemplated how truly alone she was. Her father was dead to her, courtesy of his own actions. Her brother had passed away shortly before she'd left for the UK, his passing the catalyst to escape. Her mother, she'd never known. She had some friends at the restaurant, but no one she'd really describe herself as close to. No one, certainly, who'd remember her birthday.

And now, she was stranded in the middle of the Mediterranean with a man who despised her. It was hardly the ideal way to spend her last day as a twenty four year old, but she refused to be maudlin.

This was certainly better than life on the streets in Melbourne. She had a roof over her head, a good job with excellent tips, and the debt she owed the rehab center for her brother's treatment was slowly coming down. Maybe by the time she was forty she'd be in the clear, she thought with a wrinkled brow, then a shrug of her shoulders. Because what else could she do?

Her fingers stilled on the collar of her singlet.

The cheque from Konstantinos would have more than cleared her debt. But her pride?

She couldn't accept payment from Anastasios, knowing what he thought of her. And even if Kon had offered her that money, she'd have refused to accept it. She'd never welcomed his lavish gifts. She liked him as a person, not because of his wealth, and she never wanted him to doubt that.

But just for a moment, she allowed herself to be tempted. To imagine paying off the exorbitant fees and be able to focus a little on her life and her future.

It was never going to happen though. The money would come at too high a price.

“GOOD MORNING.” His eyes raked over her, before settling on her face. He didn't smile, but her heart still stammered as though he had.

She offered a tight smile in response. “Good morning.”

“Did you sleep just as well last night as the night before?”

“Like a baby,” she confirmed with a nod, carrying the book towards the kitchen bench and placing it down, checking carefully first to ensure there were no spills or crumbs.

He nodded towards the espresso machine. “Coffee?”

She nodded. "I can make it."

"It's no bother."

He turned and went to the machine, so she stared at him shamelessly, drinking in the sight of his strong back and defined arms as he ground coffee, filling the basket, then flicked the switch. The aroma made her stomach clench.

"Why would you hide books under your bed?"

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Yesterday, you said you would borrow books from the library, then hide them. Why?"

His memory was impressive, so too his attention to detail. "My father didn't approve of reading."

"Is that so?"

"Unfortunately. If he found us with a book, he'd –," she clamped her lips together, the familiar sense of shame creeping through her.

"Yes?" Anastasios prompted, bringing the cup over. But rather than placing it down, he walked around to her side of the bench, standing directly beside her, so the heat of his body was palpable.

She shivered. "Be angry," she mumbled, reaching for the cup as a distraction technique.

"He'd yell at you for reading?"

The coffee scalded her throat a little. "He'd yell at us?" Her laugh was brittle. "I wish that's all he'd do."

Anastasios stiffened visibly, his eyes burning her face with the intensity of his gaze. "He'd hit you?"

She flinched, pained at the thought of reliving those hellish years. The fear, the pain. "I learned how to avoid his anger, for the most part. It was my brother who copped the worst of it."

"Is he older? Younger?"

"Older," she whispered, clearing her throat. "He passed away."

Anastasios was quiet, mulling over that, his eyes roaming her face. “Your father beat him.”

“Yes.” Another shudder. “Mercilessly. Whereas I knew dad’s triggers, Dale was stubborn and almost seemed to relish goading him.” Her eyes were huge as she recounted those terrifying years. “I tried to protect him, but I’m not exactly an imposing figure, and as a girl, I was very small.”

Undersized. Undernourished. She remembered with stark clarity the words the school nurse had used, a frown beetling her brow, as she’d described her concern to Phoebe’s father. Phoebe had been beaten for that, for bringing embarrassment on the family, and for interrupting his afternoon of gambling on the horses and throwing back long necks of beer, all to be dragged to the school and lectured by a matronly woman.

She wrapped her arms around her chest.

“He thought books were for snobs, that being smart, or trying to become smart, was just a way of showing off. He’d had to drop out of school when he was eleven, and I guess always had a chip on his shoulder about it.” She looked up at Anastasios, curious as to how he’d respond to this, even as she was almost having an out of body experience, the words erupting from her of their own volition.

“But you are very intelligent,” he surmised thoughtfully.

Her eyes widened. She didn’t bother to deny it. “I always got good grades in school,” she admitted. “But—,”

“But?”

She shook her head, the admission that she’d dropped out and run away too hard to admit to this man, who’d achieved so much. Konstantinos had been so proud of Anastasios; he’d told her all about how clever he was, how gifted. But Konstantinos had been proud of her, too. He’d admired her for her tenacity—a trait they shared. Their childhood had much in common; he’d seen her as she was. Not a victim, but rather a survivor, and survivors, Kon used to say, were stronger than steel.

“It doesn’t matter.” She pushed back from him, coffee cup gripped in her hands. “It’s another beautiful day out here. So far as prisons go, this isn’t so bad.”

HE WATCHED her sunbaking with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. Was this what it had been like for Konstantinos? Had he tried to fight his attraction to Phoebe? Tried to focus on the reasons they couldn’t and shouldn’t be together, only to have her effortlessly work her way in past all his defenses?

Anastasios had been so sure there was no risk, bringing her out here to the middle of the ocean, and yet danger was everywhere. He’d wanted to hate her, but the more he learned about her, the more he felt a strange protective instinct, and the yacht no longer felt big enough for both of them.

“I HAVE to go to the mainland for the day.”

She blinked up from her drowsy sleep state, lifting a palm to shield the sun from her eyes. All the better to see Anastasios, and the breath flew from her body at the sight of him in faded jeans and a crisp white polo shirt, his hair brushed back from his brow, a pair of reflective sunglasses hooked into the neck of his shirt.

“Oh.” She nodded, hating the taste of disappointment that flooded her mouth. “No worries. Do you want me to stay here?”

As soon as she asked the question, she hated herself for how needy she sounded—and how compliant! She was his prisoner—shouldn’t she be trying to barter her way off the boat, no matter what?

“It’s best. I’m going for business; it wouldn’t be any fun for you.”

Translation, he didn’t want her company. She turned to face straight ahead, nodding in the same gesture. “Sure, okay.”

“I have meetings,” he added, as if she’d asked for further explanation.

“Are you asking my permission or something?” She rallied herself to ask, pleased that the words were both waspish and impatient. “Or is this a warning not to throw myself overboard or take a jetski and make a bid for freedom?”

He didn’t answer for so long she wondered if he’d gone, and when she glanced up somewhat sheepishly it was to find him staring straight ahead.

“I’ll call my friend at the paper today, get an update on the story. If he’s killed it, then you can leave anytime. Deal?”

Ice sledged her. She nodded quickly and looked away, hoping he’d go away before the tears stinging the backs of her eyes found purchase on her cheeks.

HE WAS IN A FOUL MOOD, and leaving the yacht only worsened it. He stared down at her for as long as he could as the helicopter lifted above the ocean, then he tacked towards Italy, making a beeline for Rome. He had an office there, and a home, and a whole normal life that he could slide into, pretending, for a time that he’d never met Phoebe Whittaker.

As soon as he was settled behind his desk with its view of the *Foro Romano*, and in the distance the *Colosseo*, he focused on the practicalities of distraction. He’d neglected work since Konstantinos’s passing; it was time to rectify that.

He made a flurry of calls, sending his secretaries into a spin with his sudden reemergence and lightning round of demands. He organized meetings, checked reports, anything he could think of to push Phoebe from his mind, and when she finally crept in—only two hours after sitting at his desk, he surrendered, just for a moment.

“Tommy? It’s me,” he said, as soon as his friend had answered the phone.

“Tasso. I wondered when I’d hear from you again.”

“I’ve been busy. How are things?”

“If you’re asking about the article, it’s close to running.”

Anastasios gripped the receiver more tightly. “It’s not true.”

“The source reckons there’s proof.”

Anastasios felt like a band was tightening around his chest. “What proof?”

“A love letter.”

“*Chrīstós*. From my father?”

“Apparently.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“No, but the legal department has.”

“Can you get me a copy.”

“The source wouldn’t let us have it. It’s been shown to the relevant person, that’s all.”

“Tommy, I thought you were going to help me out on this.”

“I’m trying, mate.”

“Don’t you own the damned tabloid?”

“Ever heard of media censorship laws? I can’t get involved on editorial.”

“It’s going to kill my mother.”

“All I can say is that you should think about warning her. Do it your way, in your own time, so it’s not such a bolt out of nowhere.”

“You have no doubt it’s true?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t.”

Anastasios frowned. Then why did he? Nothing had happened to exonerate Phoebe and yet, in the last two days, he’d started to question his original conviction. He’d started to wonder—to hope?—that he’d been wrong.

He ground his teeth together as that hope died a savage death.

“The one thing they’re waiting on is a quote from the girl. No one can find her though. I suppose that’s your doing?”

Anastasios ground his teeth. “I need you to kill this. Think of whatever loophole is at your disposal.”

“Give me a denial to pass before legal. That’s your best bet.”

“*She* denies it.”

“No, you have to be the one. Your family. Your clout.”

Anastasios considered that. “And then they’d stop it?”

“Perhaps. Leave it with me?”

He squinted into the sunlight. “Do I have any other choice?”

Tommy was silent. “I’ll do my best, Tasso. You have my word.”

He hung up, but with a growing sense of impatience. He didn’t like things going against him. He sure as hell didn’t like losing his grip on control. This story didn’t belong in the tabloids. It was a private matter, nothing that warranted the gossip hungry papers latching onto.

His father was gone and his mother—she’d be devastated. But what about Phoebe? Photographers invading her life, sleazy journalists hounding her for grimy tell-all interviews. She’d hate that. Three days ago, he wouldn’t have cared, but now he’d gotten to know her better, and the idea of her life being upended because she’d chosen to get involved with someone high profile?

The story couldn’t be published.

He ground his teeth, the threat of new ‘evidence’ making it harder to control. But Anastasios thrived on a challenge.

He turned his mind to the situation at hand, even as there was a constant drag on his attention. Knowing Phoebe was out there, bobbing along on the yacht, split his focus, so he worked harder to concentrate, to ignore her, to resist her. Control was paramount.

“HEY, STRANGER.”

Cora smiled as she strolled into his office.

He blinked up at his cousin, a frown etched across his face as, two hours later, he was still torn between pondering the Phoebe conundrum and dealing with a mountain of work.

“What are you doing here?”

“A little birdie told me you’d flown into town. I wanted to see how you’re doing.”

He lifted a brow. It could only be his assistant—a friend Cora had recommended to the job.

“I was about to leave.”

“Oh,” she covered it quickly, but hurt briefly marred her features, and he felt like an absolute shit. Cora was more like a sister to him than a cousin, a good friend, too. She recovered quickly though, sympathy softening her eyes. “Does that mean you don’t have time for a drink with your favourite cousin?”

He considered that, but there was a pull to the yacht he couldn’t explain. “I’ve already been longer than I intended.”

He’d pushed himself to stay away, but now he was champing at the bit to get back.

“One drink,” she lifted a single finger in the air. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

CORA HAD ALWAYS BEEN PERSUASIVE—IT was one of her many talents. As a girl, she’d been able to wear down her doting parents, so they’d grant her almost anything. She’d never taken ‘no’ for an answer, and they all admired that about her.

“Thanasi’s worried about you.”

Anastasios lifted his brows, surprised by the remark. “Worried about *me*?” It was absurd. Anastasios was more than capable of taking care of himself.

“After the funeral, you basically disappeared,” she pointed out. “And when you are around, he says you’re distant. Distracted.”

All these things were true, and yet Anastasios couldn’t see that they were any cause for concern.

“Dad left a lot of projects up in the air. I’ve been busy.”

“I know.” Cora’s voice was soft, her eyes running over his face. “You look exhausted.”

He ground his teeth together, not wanting to elaborate on the reason for his perceived exhaustion—the thoughts that kept him up at night, the distraction that was constantly chewing through his focus.

“I just wondered if there was something else going on?”

He stiffened, careful not to reveal any response to that. What was happening between himself and Phoebe was not something he wanted to discuss, with anyone. A waiter appeared with their drinks, a scotch for Anastasios and a pink champagne for Cora. She lifted it to her lips, sipping it gratefully. Her glossy brown hair was piled on her head in a ballerina bun, and she wore a tutu dress that showed off the slender lines of her body, and a tan she didn’t have to work to cultivate at all.

“Such as?” His voice was neutral, his face nondescript.

She hesitated.

“I presume this is what you wanted to discuss. Cut to the chase, Cora. It’s not like you to obfuscate.”

“It’s delicate,” she leaned closer, her mouth, painted a coral pink, pursed in a serious line of concentration.

The hairs on the back of Anastasios’ neck stood on edge. This wasn’t about Phoebe. It couldn’t be. And the only other situation of any gravitas was Kon’s affairs...He had no reason to suspect she knew, and yet there was something in her demeanour, and the timing, that had him bracing for the worst.

“I’m waiting.”

She reached into her clutch purse and pulled out a pamphlet, passing it across. It was the brochure for an opera performance in Verona. He scanned it, then pushed it back. Confusion shifted inside his chest.

“You’re asking me to go with you?”

“I’ve already been,” she corrected. “Two nights ago.”

“And you’re recommending I go?”

“Yes, but not for the reason you might think.”

“It wasn’t good?”

“Oh, no. It was *excellent*. A particularly fine soprano, a relative newcomer to the scene. Ophelia Agnavadi.”

“Should I have heard of her?”

“Not necessarily, though in a few years, I think she’ll be as famous as Pavarotti.”

“Good for her. Your point?”

“There’s a rumour about her.”

“No doubt.” He glanced back at the pamphlet, studying the beautiful brunette with dispassion. She was quite stunning, and yet, compared to Phoebe, she was too—something. Or not enough of something else. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but she was dull compared to the light that shone from Phoebe’s eyes.

“It concerns you.”

“Me?” He looked more closely at the picture. Was it possible he’d met her? Slept with her? He racked his brain, but he was sure he’d remember her name, if not her face.

“Or more specifically, your father.”

He gripped his scotch glass tighter, his face giving nothing away, his mind in freefall. Another lover? Heaven help him. He couldn’t imprison or bribe them all.

“Yes?”

“It’s delicate.”

“You’ve said that already.”

“So I should just blurt it out?”

“I promise not to shoot the messenger.”

“Okay, okay.” Her smile offered sympathy, so mentally he braced for what was coming. “There’s a rumour that she’s Uncle Kon’s daughter.”

He straightened, his back filled with iron suddenly. “What did you say her name is?”

“Ophelia Agnavadi.”

“Not Westbourne?”

“Hmm, no. Why?”

He stared at the brochure, his body numb. Another love child? Or the same one? Damn it, he needed more information.

“I’m sure it’s just a rumour,” Cora said gently. “But the thing is, she does look an awful lot like us. Don’t you think?”

He leaned closer, his eyes tracing the woman’s face, as he recognized certain features. Ghosts of recognition, really. A flicker of something familiar in the corners of her eyes, a nose a little like Thanasi’s, a smile that bore a passing resemblance to Dimitrios.

“Could it be true?”

His eyes met Cora’s and he wished he could simply deny it. But this was Cora. He could trust her. He could lean on her.

“Yes. It’s very likely true.”

She breathed out slowly. “Tell me everything.”

IT WAS several hours later that he brought the helicopter back in over the yacht, the sun already low in the peach-hued sky, and despite the way his eyes searched the deck, there was no sign of Phoebe. What had he expected? A welcome party?

He docked the helicopter with the ease of a man who’d performed the operation many times before, then pushed out,

the brochure to the opera still heavy in his pocket.

Prior to his meeting with Cora, Ophelia had been an academic concept. A half-sister was interesting, but the present situation was an emergency, and he intended to devote his energy to crisis management. There'd be time later to speculate on the newest member of the family.

And yet, if the rumours were circulating, he was already walking a dangerous tightrope.

Two, in fact.

He dragged a hand over the back of his neck, distracted as he strode into the lounge area. He'd thought of Phoebe all day, far more than he'd wanted to, and yet he was surprised to find her here, wearing a tiny pair of shorts and a bra, doing a strange, twisty yoga pose.

He stopped in his tracks and stared, not even attempting to hide the direction of his thoughts. Her bottom was pushed into the air, her shapely, toned legs on full display, so every thought evaporated from his mind, leaving one part of his anatomy in charge.

He wasn't conscious of speaking, but he shifted a little, more into her peripheral vision and she startled, looking quickly and then dropping to the floor, her face pink from her exertions.

That didn't exactly help matters.

"You're back," she spluttered, pulling a couple of airpods from her ears. That explained why she hadn't heard the helicopter. "I didn't realise."

"Evidently."

Stay where you are. Any closer and you'll explode.

"How was your day?" She pushed to standing in one lithe motion, stretching her arms over her head in a gesture that only served to deepen the hammering sensation of need.

"Interesting."

"Oh?"

“What exactly are you doing?”

“Yoga. Why?” She frowned. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No. I want you to keep going. That’s the problem.”

Somehow, her cheeks grew pinker. She gaped, searching for words, and he closed his eyes, the events of the past day weighing heavily on him.

“Have you eaten?”

She looked around. “What time is it?”

“Eight.”

“It’s late! I hadn’t realized.”

He also, therefore, could discount any notion that she’d been distractedly watching the clock, waiting for his return. “The day got away from me,” he explained, moving past her, into the kitchen and pulling out a platter of dips and breads. “Come, sit with me.”

Her eyes traced his face, and she hesitated. This morning, she’d really opened up to him, and though it didn’t mean anything to him, she felt strangely vulnerable now.

“I won’t bite,” he promised, and her heart did a funny flip flop as visions of him doing exactly that seared her, memories of his lips clamped around her nipples sending her into a tailspin. She cast about, looking for her shirt. It was discarded on the sofa, a casualty of the warm night. She walked towards it quickly, ripping it over her head then emerging, hair in disarray.

Anastasios was emptying his pockets, a gesture that struck her for how normal and domesticated it was, and for a fraction of a second she let her mind imagine that this was normal. That they were, in some way, a couple.

Longing was so strong, it almost felled her.

She blanked her face of emotion and pushed aside the childish, futile wishes, moving to meet him in the kitchen. While he gathered plates, she poured water glasses and removed a couple of cloth napkins from a draw.

“Do the staff usually feed you?”

“It depends what kind of mood I’m in. If I ask for food, I get it.”

She couldn’t help smiling. “Oh, how simple life must be for you, Anastasios Xenakis.”

“In some ways.”

Her eyes fell on a piece of paper he’d removed from his pocket and she gasped involuntarily.

“What is it?”

“This woman—,” she pointed to the brochure. “She’s fantastic.”

“You know of her?”

She shot him a furtive glance. “Don’t read anything into this,” she said warily.

He tilted his head, a gesture of encouragement.

“I went to see her perform last year.” The air between them crackled. “Your dad took me,” she rushed over that point, not looking at him, not seeing the way his features tightened. “She was so wonderful. I felt everything she felt. Her face is so expressive, so moving. Your father and I both wept like babies.”

CHAPTER 8

JUST THE THOUGHT OF his father crying convinced Anastasios. He had to go and see the performance. Curiosity was a beast within him as, the next morning, he pulled on a shirt, planning to work, when he thought better of it, switching to a pair of boardshorts instead.

Your dad took me.

Two distinct emotions had been writhing inside of him since learning about Phoebe.

Anger, with his father, and with Phoebe, for conducting an affair despite Konstantinos's marriage and their age difference. There had also been jealousy, from that first night, and now, jealousy was in the clear ascendancy. Somehow, he'd come to accept that whatever had happened between Konstantinos and Phoebe had been his father's decision to make, his father's mistake to regret. But the idea of them together offended him as a man—as a man who desired a woman with all of his soul.

He didn't want his father to have taken her to see theatre performances. He wanted her all for himself.

The thought instantly sobered him.

That wasn't his style. It wasn't his way. He liked his life, he liked being single. He wasn't talking about a long-term commitment though, he hastened to reassure himself. How could he? No one could ever know about Phoebe. Her relationship with Konstantinos made any kind of future untenable. But here, floating at sea, adrift from the usual

obligations and requirements of his life, perhaps it was akin to being in international waters, where no rules applied?

He stared at himself in the mirror, determination recognizable in his eyes as he accepted, finally, that desire for Phoebe wasn't going away. Certain things were inevitable, and necessary. Only by accepting what was sparking between them could he put her behind him. If the last month had taught him anything, it was that.

As random thoughts and reckonings began to form one cohesive plan, he moved out of his room as noisily as he could, enjoying the thought of waking her, of her body in bed startling in recognition of his, passing.

But before she joined him for a coffee, he had work to do. He reached for his phone on the kitchen bench and started a lengthy text to his assistant.

PHOEBE HAD NEVER BEEN a big believer in celebrating birthdays. Last year, with Kon, had been the first year she'd actually enjoyed the day. Nonetheless, she always marked off the date dutifully in the calendar of her mind, as if cataloguing the fact she'd made it another year.

There had been nights, as a child, when the terror had been so bad, her father's violence so extreme, that she'd wondered if she would. Phoebe firmly ascribed to the belief that getting older was a privilege and she met each birthday with a grateful heart.

And despite the fact her companion—her kidnapper, she reminded herself—didn't know it was a special day, that didn't stop this from being a delightful place to spend her twenty fifth birthday.

When she stepped into the kitchen, it was to a half-naked Anastasios and a platter of danishes. Her heart leaped. *Happy Birthday to me.*

"Good morning," he said, his custom greeting firing something inside of her. Today, when their eyes met, they held,

and the electricity arcing between them was almost impossible to contain.

“Hi.” Her voice crackled. She swallowed to clear her throat. “It’s another beautiful day.”

He turned to look out of the window—an unnecessary gesture, as sunlight surrounded them. “In fact, it’s a perfect day for jet skiing.”

She blinked at him. “It is?”

“Sure. Most days are,” he added with a smile, that had the power and wattage of a thousand suns. “Care to join me?”

Her heart gave a funny little squeeze. Under ordinary circumstances, she might have fought the idea of that. Things between them were so complicated. But today was her birthday, and it seemed only fair to give her heart what it wanted most in the world.

“Of course.”

His eyes sparked with hers and her veins flooded with lava.

“I’ve never been jet skiing,” she said with a nervous smile. “What if I fall into the water?”

“You’ll just have to hold on tight.”

EASIER SAID THAN DONE. An hour later, one of the jet skis had been floated by the staff, and Anastasios was sitting on top of it, chest covered in droplets of water, hair slicked back from his face. Her mouth went dry.

Suddenly, she was nervous. Not about jet skiing, but about sitting right behind him.

“Come on, live a little,” he goaded her, and she bit down on her lip, still hesitating. Only the sun was so warm and the water so beautifully inviting and clear.

She looked back to him. “No sharks?”

“Just me.”

She laughed softly. “You, I think, I can manage.”

“We’ll see.”

A blade of anticipation sliced through her, but before she could give in to her doubts, she pointed her arms over her head and dove into the water, swimming away from the yacht first, then treading water a moment, turning back to face him. It was the loveliest sensation—the water was warm, and the sun glinted off its surface.

“Making a break for it?”

“Prisoners are hard wired to attempt escape,” she said with a grin, moving her arms so she put even more distance between them.

“This prisoner will have her freedom soon enough. Come, enjoy your last little bit of captivity.”

She dove under water to hide the sobering effect his words had on her. She *wanted* to get back to London, and her bedsit, and her job, and the mountain of debt that was waiting for her. She wanted to get away from Anastasios and his accusations and smouldering eyes. Didn’t she?

A lump formed in her throat. It was no good. She kicked under water a bit longer, until the gleaming belly of the jet ski was close enough to touch, then emerged, long hair shimmering down her back, reminding Anastasios of a mermaid.

His eyes bore into hers as, wordlessly, he extended a hand to her, urging her up. She stared at it for several beats before acquiescing, putting hers in it and being pulled higher, her pulse racing so fast she was sure he must feel it through her wrist.

Without his help, she would have managed, but with it, she moved with ease from the water, onto the jet ski, her body brushing his as she lifted one leg over the seat and settled against him. His back was warm and smooth, and shockwaves of awareness overtook her.

Pleasure danced on her skin.

“Ready?”

He asked over his shoulder.

He was asking about the jet ski ride, but the question took on a new meaning to Phoebe, who felt as though she were on the precipice of something new and dangerous, something inevitable.

“Yes,” she said against the crook of his neck, where her head was resting. “Let’s do this.”

There was silence, save for the squawking of a bird overhead, and the words settled amongst them, to Phoebe’s mind almost seeming like an unspoken pact. A moment later, his hand reached down and squeezed hers, dragging one further across his chest.

“Hold on tight.” His voice was gruff, her pulse spiked.

The engine revved, powerful and intent, and then, they were off, so his final words took on renewed importance. She clung to him, not because she thought she might fall from the jet ski but because it was an illicit pleasure that she’d been denying herself since meeting him, and finally being able to touch him like this was sheer, blissful relief. A present, on her birthday.

He drove expertly, cruising up the coastline for twenty minutes, so her eyes feasted on the little Italian towns as her fingers traced lines over his bare chest without her realization, drawing patterns because they were so hungry to touch and feel him.

The vegetation of the coastline gave way to more homes and then, a sight that had Phoebe holding her breath. Perhaps he sensed the change in her, because he slowed down then began to idle.

“What is it?”

She asked, unable to look away from the coastal town with its arched bridges forming a barrier that almost seemed to hold back the village, preventing it from toppling into the sea. Buildings of soft pastel colours rose from the bridge, including

a very old church, proud in the center of the headland, with a terracotta roof and a bell tolling to mark the hour.

“The town is called Atrani.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s not particularly famous, though it deserves to be.” He shifted a little in his seat, making her intimately aware of how close they were. Her hands clung to him. “Want to take a closer look?”

Her heart stammered and she answered without hesitation. “Yes.”

His laugh was low and throaty and set her heart tumbling wildly through her chest. “I like a woman who knows what she wants.” The approval was like the lighting of a flame. Before she could respond, he started the engine again, driving slowly this time, in deference to their proximity to the shoreline. Choosing a secluded spot, away from the few people who were dotted in the water, he eased them up to the sand, cutting the engine and removing the key.

“Can you park here?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m not exactly *au fait* with jet ski regulations.”

“It’s fine. Come.” She stepped off, and was instantly braced by a wave of cold. Suddenly, she wanted to be back on the jet ski, her body pressed against his.

“I only have my bathers,” she said, eyeing the town with regret. She’d have loved to explore it better.

“Lucky for you, I planned ahead.”

He reached into the console of the jet ski and removed a brightly coloured kaftan. But rather than handing it to her, he came to stand right in front of her, lifting it and placing the hole over her head. She could have shimmied into it herself from there but instead, his hands lingered, easing the soft fabric over her body, thoroughly checking it was in place before standing back.

Sparks detonated just beneath her skin.

She wanted to beg him to come back and keep touching her, but his back was turned as he pulled a shirt on over his broad chest.

“Shoes?” She pointed out, wiggling her bare toes.

“Ah, of course. Where’s my head at?” He pondered, but the look he threw her was simmering, so they both knew the answer to that.

She bit down on her lower lip, the danger of their circumstances something she knew she should beware, but in that moment—on her twenty fifth birthday—Phoebe simply wanted to exist—to enjoy.

He removed a simple pair of slides for her and loafers for himself. “Ready?”

She nodded, eyes scanning the town, excitement in her belly. When he took her hand, she jerked her face to his, her heart leaping, but he was already moving, so she knew the gesture meant nothing to him, it was simply a way for him to guide her.

“Atrani is just outside of the Amalfi, and doesn’t attract the same number of guests, which is in some ways a shame, but in many, a blessing, for the true fabric of the town is preserved. Traditional life carries on here. It is still a fishing town, but there are cafes and restaurants.”

The beach was shaped like a cove, and a wide ramp emerged from the sand, leading them to the top of the bridge she’d spied from the water. Once on top of it, she paused, looking out at the glittering ocean. He drew close to her, ostensibly so he could point into the ocean. “My boat.”

She laughed then. “It’s a little hard to miss.”

He grinned and her heart bounced wildly in her chest. His smile was beautiful. She could easily grow addicted to it.

They walked through the narrow winding streets, hands held, to all the world looking like two lovers on a date, and

Phoebe felt like that, though she knew there was danger in forgetting the truth of their circumstances.

It was a beautiful town to explore, with little alleys leading to shops and restaurants, children playing happily in the streets and grandfathers watching on, some in singlet tops, others smoking, all chatting, watching, laughing with hoarse, dry voices. The sun was high, and life was simple.

A bird flew overhead, and just as Phoebe looked up to follow its path, it relieved itself, a perfect droplet falling and landing on Anastasios' shoulder. It was so absurd to think of such a thing happening to a man like Anastasios that she burst out laughing.

“Oh, you think this is funny, do you?” But he grinned, angling his face to survey the damage.

“Just a little,” she lifted her finger and thumb, to indicate a small amount.

“Perhaps you would not be laughing if it had happened to you?”

“Perhaps,” she agreed, still smiling. She pulled her hand from his, her stomach instantly dropping to her toes, but her fingers lifted to his shirt, pulling it a little from his shoulder, and then, the laughter disappeared, leaving only sizzling, suffocating awareness.

“Let's find somewhere to clean you up.”

“It's only a little bird poo. I'll survive.”

She looked around. “There's a café. Come on, they'll have some kind of restroom, I'm sure.”

For hours they'd walked but those twenty or so strides to the small café with its tables and chairs on the footpath and two orange trees in pots by the door were strained with an unbearable tension.

Anastasios spoke in flawless Italian, gesturing to his shirt, then Phoebe, then shrugging, so she was at a loss as to what had been said, but the woman behind the counter laughed and

pointed towards a set of saloon doors, so they slipped through together.

She could have left him to clean the shirt himself, but Phoebe went, drawn as if by a powerful magnetic force. The bathroom was small, clearly not for public use, as it was filled with personal artefacts.

“Here,” she said, her voice husky. “Pass me the shirt.”

He cocked one brow as he lifted it over his head, avoiding spreading the offending mess any further.

“I can do it,” he said, without handing it over, without making any efforts to clean it, either. They stood like that, toe to toe, eyes hooked, their breath sounds filling the small space.

Slowly, she lifted a hand, gripping the shirt, but he didn’t release it. Eyes met, breath intertwined, hearts raced. Phoebe swallowed, her throat thick and parched.

“Here,” she murmured, tugging the shirt a little.

He frowned, releasing it, but stayed where he was, so close.

“You know,” her voice was impossibly husky. “They say it’s good luck.”

“Do they?”

She made a gargled sound of agreement, letting the water run out the poop, careful to keep most of the shirt out of the stream so it remained dry, not taking her eyes off what she was doing, because the alternative was to look at Anastasios and if she looked, she’d want to touch, and if she touched, well, she’d be lost. Even more lost than she already was.

“And what do you think, Phoebe?”

She swallowed again. The water ran clear, the offending stain removed. She wrung out the area with fingers that shook, still not looking at him.

With a small sound of frustration, he shifted, bringing his powerful body closer to hers, pressing a finger beneath her chin and tilting her face to his.

“Is it a sign of good fortune?”

The shirt was balled in her hands, her eyes latched to his, her heart somewhere in the region of her throat now. “I’ve never found it to be so,” she admitted.

“Maybe this is a first, then?”

She couldn’t speak. Her vocal cords simply wouldn’t cooperate. As if understanding, he reached for the shirt, taking it from her hands. She stayed right where she was, eyes hooked to his, breasts tingling as she inhaled and they brushed his bare chest.

“You’re so different to what I imagined,” he murmured. She didn’t have to ask what he meant. He’d arrived in London expecting to find some money-grabbing woman, who seduced men for sport and profit, and that was nothing like Phoebe.

“Yes,” she said softly, leaning forward, swaying, inviting him to kiss her with her body.

He lifted his hand slowly, as if against his will, his fingers curving around her cheek, his thumb brushing the sensitive flesh to the side of her lips. She trembled, expelling a soft breath and an even softer sound of submission. His eyes flared, sparking with hers and she shifted forward, lifting one hand and pressing it against his chest. His heart thumped beneath her palm. She closed her eyes, breathing, trying to calm her rattling nerves.

“Look at me.” It was a growled command she didn’t dare disobey. Conflict ravaged him; she could feel it pulling at the fibers of his being. “I hate that you were his,” he said darkly, his thumb moving to tease her lower lip, stroking across it until she shuddered. “But not enough.”

She didn’t know what he meant, her brain couldn’t operate, but a second later, his lips crashed down on hers, his body pushing her backwards until she collided with the tiled wall, captured between the hardness of his body and the tiles, moaning as she trembled with the delight of his touch. His kiss was one of madness, as if this was their last moment on earth, a kiss that was needed to sustain, to breathe, to exist. He kissed

her hard, desperately, hungrily, leaving no room for air nor breath, nor time for thought, there was only the passionate possession of a man driven crazy by the desires he'd tried to master.

Finally surrendering to his body's needs, he kissed her with all the evidence of that desire, ravaging her mouth then dropping lower, to her neck, teasing the skin there, his hands roaming the kaftan hungrily, his search for skin futile, denied by the length of the dress she wore so he growled and pulled at one of the straps, pushing it down just far enough to expose the top of her breast. He dropped his mouth there and sucked, a hand cupping her other breast, his fingers teasing her nipple as he marked her skin dark purple, pulling up with eyes that showed triumph, eyes that screamed, 'Now, you're mine'.

She shivered at the intensity of what they'd just done, of how completely it felt like a beginning and not an end, and of how desperately she needed more of this, and him.

Having always run from strong emotions, courtesy of her father, she felt them pummeling her now, from the inside, and from Anastasios, who physically reverberated with the strength of their desire.

He swore in Greek, dropping his head to the curve of her neck and inhaling, as if to bring himself back under control. She stood where she was, trembling, supported by his body and grateful for that strength, because without it, she might have spooled to a puddle on the floor.

When he separated, after a minute, he was himself again, calmly pulling his shirt over his head.

"Come on, *kardia mou*, they'll come looking for us if we take any longer."

"You go ahead," she said, clearing her throat and smiling weakly. "I need another moment."

More triumph lit his eyes but he nodded, dropping his head and kissing her once more, so she shivered. She waited for him to leave and then breathed out, flames licking the insides of her soul.

HE BOUGHT two cups of gelati from the store, and they walked through town eating, talking, but things were different now. Awareness had shifted. It hummed between them, growing louder with every step, more imperative, so it was no longer a question of *if* they'd indulge their needs but *when*.

Denying it was futile, and far less fun.

Fun?

There had been nothing fun about that kiss. It had been essential, lifesaving, terrifying, even. He closed his eyes and saw the mark he'd left on her breast, the pleasure it had brought him to physically delineate his possession of her. How barbaric that was! How seriously messed up. He was competing with his dead father, and the worst part was, if Konstantinos were still alive, Anastasios couldn't have said who Phoebe might have chosen.

The thought brought him no pleasure.

They walked down the ramp, towards the beach, sometime in the early afternoon, and the air between them crackled with the building awareness. He pushed the craft off the sand, floating it in the water, then turned to face her. Phoebe's eyes were on the town, a look of nostalgia there.

"I'm just committing it to memory," she explained wistfully. "It's honestly been one of the best days of my life."

Pleasure thundered through him, of a different nature—a different sort of triumph. He'd given her that. Not his father, but him, Anastasios. And he liked the way it felt.

The afternoon sun was high, beating down on them, and before climbing back onto the jet ski, Phoebe lifted the dress from her body and sunk into the water, reminding him again of a beautiful mermaid. He watched her because he couldn't do anything else, and when she stood, he extended a hand, guiding her to the craft.

He took his seat first, holding his breath until she'd placed herself behind him, one leg on either side of his body, arms

wrapped around his waist. His arousal strained at the fabric of his board shorts and he was glad their positioning made it impossible for her to see.

Staff were waiting as they approached the boat, so all Anastasios and Phoebe had to do was slide off the jet ski, into the water, and the crew brought around the swing, securing it to four points of the jet ski and lifting it back onboard.

Phoebe watched from the water, fascinated by the mechanism, and he studied her. The inevitability of their coming together was in every movement they made. Beneath the water, his body sought hers, and hers his, so they came close to one another, their feet moving in unison to remain afloat. He wanted her, and he no longer doubted that he would have her. But delaying the inevitable was its own form of pleasurable torture, and a reassuring demonstration of control. Bringing himself to the edge of his patience then pulling back showed that he didn't act purely as his libido required.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh?”

Her thoughts were written all over her face, so he laughed softly, to cover how damned tempted he was.

“Not that.”

Heat flushed her cheeks and something lurched deep in the center of his being.

“I don't know what you mean,” she lied, badly.

“Then let me show you.” He moved closer, eyes teasing hers as he kissed her lightly on the tip of her nose. “Race you to the boat.”

CHAPTER 9

PHOEBE'S HEAD WAS SPINNING. The afternoon had been a complete whirlwind. From the moment they'd stepped onboard the yacht, the crew had swung into action, leading Phoebe to her room where a stylist was waiting with a selection of couture gowns, shoes and bags. Phoebe conducted a mini-fashion show, conscious the entire time of the purple mark on her breast, and how it had gotten there. She chose a deep red gown in the end, totally unlike anything she'd ever worn before, with simple satin spaghetti straps, and a vee neck at the front. It clung to her like a second skin, falling like water, the silky fabric making it impossible to wear a bra, so her nipples tingled against the dress as she moved. It fell to her ankles, cut on the bias, emphasizing the gentle swell of her hips, and she teamed the dress with a pair of black espadrilles, that were both elegant and comfortable. A small black clutch would carry her essentials.

After she was dressed, the stylist set to work arranging her hair, blow drying it in large, voluptuous curls until it fell down her back in tumbling waves. Her makeup was modest, just a dash of lipstick and mascara to emphasize her features, per Phoebe's request.

She stood transformed, and yet she still had no idea where they were going.

When she stepped into the living room, Anastasios was fixing them drinks—a mineral water for Phoebe and a scotch for himself, and the look he gave her made her skin sizzle all over.

He stopped what he was doing, staring at her slowly, possessively, his eyes travelling from her glossy hair to her breasts, to her hips and all the way down to her feet, then back, his head shaking slowly.

“You are stunning.”

She smiled, the red lipstick that had been artfully applied making her teeth seem extra white.

“Thank you.”

He reached into his pocket and removed a long, velvet box. “I have a little something extra.”

“Oh?” Her heart went into dangerous territory, racing faster and faster.

He crooked his finger in the air, indicating for her to move towards him, and she did so, a little unsteadily, crossing the floor and standing close enough to feel warmth emanating off him in waves.

Her breath was audible as he unclasped the box and turned it to face her, revealing a necklace made of pure diamonds. She gasped, because she couldn't imagine ever seeing something like this in real life, let alone being asked to wear it.

Eyes huge, she looked up at him.

“What is this?”

His smile was slightly mocking. “A gift.”

Her heart twisted, and she shook her head a little. “It's beautiful.”

“I thought you'd like it.”

“I do,” she frowned. “But it's too much. I can't accept it.”

He stilled, lifting the necklace to her neck. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” her voice softened with a hint of ambivalence, so he lifted it into place, reaching behind her to clasp it together. On her person, it hung perfectly around the base of her throat, each diamond sparkling and throwing a thousand little light fireworks across the room.

“It looks perfect on you.”

But the idea of accepting something so lavish from Anastasios rubbed Phoebe the wrong way. Even after the day they’d shared, she couldn’t forget the genesis of their relationship, the things he’d thought about her, the cheque he’d written her.

“I’ll borrow it for tonight,” she compromised. “Then you can have it back.”

“It’s not really my style,” he said seriously.

She laughed. “You could pull off anything.”

He lifted his finger, gently tapping the underside of her chin so their eyes met. “You look very, very beautiful, Phoebe.”

Pleasure warmed her cheeks. “It’s just the dress.”

“No, it’s most definitely what’s beneath the dress.”

Desire made the hairs at the back of her neck stand on end.

“It’s a little fancy for dinner on the deck, though,” she murmured.

“Just as well we’re going out.”

Her stomach swished. “Where to?”

He leaned closer. “It’s a surprise.”

Her pulse was thready. She pulled back, to meet his eyes, then wished she hadn’t as pieces inside of her locked into place, making her feel...*complete*. The word breezed through her, inspiring a warning, as well as a thrill, because the word was perfect. It was just how she felt. Just in that moment, just for tonight.

“ANOTHER FIRST,” she said, forty five minutes later, as the helicopter circled over Rome and Phoebe craned to see everything she could of the ancient city.

Her enthusiasm for things was novel and addictive. The women he usually dated—if a drink in a bar before taking

them to bed could be called dating—were so sophisticated it hurt, and would never have shown even a hint of the pure, unadulterated delight Phoebe was expressing.

“Oh, Anastasios,” she said quickly. “I’ve seen so many pictures, but I never dreamed it could be so pretty.”

Her words came to him through the headsets they both wore, and she spoke quickly, her voice high pitched.

“Where are we going?”

His response was simply to grin, and bring the helicopter in lower, for the second time in as many days, over the Xenakis Corporation’s high rise, where a helipad stood at the top. He landed with ease, flicked off the instruments, unfastened his seatbelt before reaching over and laying his hands on hers. It wasn’t necessary. She was more than capable of unclicking the thing herself, but having his hands so low on her hips lit a fire in his gut that powered him.

She turned to face him, lips parted, those expressive eyes showing that while Rome had captivated her, he was the cherry on top.

She showed him the same enthusiasm she felt for this city, for the world he was opening up to her, but pleasure was short lived. Always there was the question in the back of his mind: was this how it had been for his father?

He pulled away, his smile tight, and if he’d turned back to look at Phoebe, he would have seen the confusion briefly dim her pleasure. But then her hand lifted to the necklace and she toyed with it, smile restored.

One of his drivers was at her door, opening it, so by the time Anastasios rounded the helicopter, Phoebe was on the rooftop, and Anastasios was very, very aware, on a cellular level, of the way the evening breeze pulled at her dress, so that she might as well have been naked. He was also aware of the way his driver’s gaze lingered on her figure a moment too long, his appreciation apparent.

Anastasios’ hand tightened by his side, and he looked away, catching his breath and his temper.

“I’m excited,” she murmured, moving closer and putting her hand in the crook of his arm, the sweetness of her words and her gesture blowing away his bad mood like sand in a storm.

Downstairs, a sleek black car was waiting. He opened the door before the driver could, his body close to Phoebe’s as she stepped into the car and wriggled to the far side. A moment later, he brought his body down beside hers, close enough that their thighs touched.

This evening already felt like a masterclass in foreplay.

For dinner, he’d chosen a hotel with a rooftop restaurant overlooking *il colloseo*. It was far more touristic than he would ordinarily frequent, but he knew Phoebe would love it—he was right. She was so captivated by the beauty of the view, she didn’t seem to notice the way people looked at her. Everyone from the waitstaff to the patrons stared as she crossed the space, hands lifted to her lips. She turned to face him, tears in her eyes.

“This is incredible.”

Was that his heart, thumping so hard, as though he’d run three marathons, back-to-back?

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Who wouldn’t?” She murmured, with a soft shake of her head. The same gentle breeze lifted her hair now, so the fragrance of vanilla and jasmine wrapped around him. He put a hand in the small of her back, a jolt of awareness shocking him as they moved to the table his assistant had reserved, by the edge of the restaurant, with incomparable views.

“Of course, this is our table,” she said, as they were seated. “Always the best for you.”

“My assistant arranged it.”

“Ah. And the necklace?”

“That was me.”

She glanced down at the table, her throat shifting visibly as she comprehended that.

“What a fascinating life you lead, Anastasios.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Look at what we’ve done today,” she said, with bemusement. “Taking your jet ski off your enormous floating palace, cruising the Italian coastline, dressing up like Cinderella, a bucket of diamonds wrapped around my neck, a helicopter to Rome followed by a chauffeured car to dinner. What next? I literally can’t think of anything to top this.” She was quiet a moment, her lips pulling to the side. She hesitated, searching for words.

A waiter appeared, brandishing menus and Anastasios wanted to tell him to get lost—he was far more interested in whatever Phoebe had been about to say. But when the waiter disappeared, the moment was gone.

“You said you wanted to see a little of the world.”

“Are you now my guardian angel?” She prompted.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

She turned to look at the view. “I never would have thought I’d be sitting here like this.”

“How come you haven’t travelled,” he pushed. “England is not far from the continent. A train or flight can be easily arranged.”

“I know,” she said with a lift of her shoulders. “But I never seem able to justify it.”

He remembered then what his friend Tommy had said, that Phoebe’s financial circumstances were stretched. “Surely your job pays well enough? And your accommodations are presumably affordable.”

“They are,” she said with a small lift of her lips. “You’re just like your father,” she said quietly. “He could never understand why I make the sacrifices I do.”

He hated the comparison. In that moment, he even hated his father, just a little. “I see.”

She sighed, reaching out and putting her hand on his. “Until I explained my circumstances to him properly,” she said with a shake of her head. “The thing is, I have a lot of debt.”

He braced, wondering if this was how it had begun. The part of his brain still capable of rational thought heard the line and tried to marry it with the woman opposite him, with a bald-faced request for help. But she sighed softly.

“I ran away from home, two years after my brother did. He was living on the streets of Melbourne when I arrived.”

He was frozen still, the confession the last thing he’d expected.

“I’d planned to get enrolled in school—I was fifteen and had no concept of the fact I’d need somewhere to live and food to eat. I was so naïve. And with Dale being on the streets, I just sort of fell into life beside him.”

Anastasios could have been knocked over with a feather. This was the last thing he’d been expecting.

The waiter returned to take their drink order and Anastasios barked a command for mineral water then thrust the menus back at him, telling him to bring whatever food the chefs recommended.

“So you lived on the streets, too?”

“Yes.” Her eyes had a faraway quality, and she focused on a point over his shoulder. For his part, Anastasios was filled with a need to *do* something. To shout at someone, to punch something, at the very idea of this delicate, kind, beautiful young woman having ever found herself in those circumstances. “At first I thought it would just be a few weeks. I didn’t realise it at the time, but Dale was spending all our money—not very much, anyway—on drugs and alcohol. He’d become an addict, since I’d last seen him, and he was too far gone to simply break the habit.”

Anastasios swallowed a curse, leaning forward and doing the one thing he could, flipping his hand to capture hers, weaving their fingers together. “You must have been very scared.”

“Not at first, but as his addiction worsened, he’d disappear on me for nights at a time. He got in with some pretty dodgy blokes and I didn’t like spending time with them.” She shivered. “Mostly, I just felt really lonely,” she whispered.

Beneath the table, his spare hand gripped his leg, hard.

“And what did you do, when he was gone? Where did you sleep?”

She frowned, as if not understanding. “Where I always did. There’s a bridge, by the aquarium. We had a spot there.”

He swore under his breath, anger like a beam splitting him in two.

“One time, days and days went by and I hadn’t seen Dale. No one had. I feared the worst, went around to all the hospitals. He’d been clipped by a tram and fallen onto the tracks. Thank God, he wasn’t badly hurt—just a broken wrist. But the hospital had a social worker, and she offered to get him into rehab, and to try to help me. I really think she did try, Anastasios, but the systems aren’t easy to navigate, and there was no community housing available to a fifteen year old. I’d have had to go into foster care, and having just escaped my dad, I was terrified of who I’d end up living with.”

“So you stayed on the streets?” He tried to curb the disapproval from his voice but hell, he’d have moved heaven and earth to go back in time and make it so that she never had to face that awful decision.

“And Dale bounced in and out of rehab. After the first stint, I was able to get him into a private facility as a trial. I was desperate and idealistic. If they could just make him better, everything would be okay. I’d find a way to pay, somehow.”

He stared at her, fascinated and full of admiration for her decisions. “By then, I was eighteen. The social worker had found me a job—just taking payments at a service station, but it was enough. I could make some payments on the facility,”

“Instead of rent?” He interrupted.

“Yes,” she bit down on her lower lip.

“So you were still living rough?”

“I’d worked out how to live by then. I knew the safest spots, where I wouldn’t be bothered.”

“*Christos.*”

“It’s not as bad as you might think.”

“If that’s true, it’s simply a credit to your attitude, nothing more.”

She lifted her shoulders then paused, as their drinks appeared, along with an antipasto platter.

“Leave them,” Anastasios dismissed the waiter.

“Thank you,” Phoebe offered a bright smile to compensate for Anastasios’ shortness. “You know, if you’d spoken to me like that, I’d probably have spat in your food.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Yes,” she rolled her eyes. “But you shouldn’t have been so rude.”

“I’ll apologise when he brings our meals,” Anastasios said with a hint of sarcasm. “How did you end up living in London, then?”

“Oh, that came later. First, there was the endless saga of Dale’s rehab, relapses, rehab, the emotional rollercoaster of seeing someone you love hurt themselves like that. Have you ever seen someone who’s addicted to ice?”

He regarded her for several beats. “Not personally.”

She shivered. “Good. It transforms people. He would go from being my sweet, dumb big brother to—,” she shook her head sadly. “He’d be so like dad.”

“He hit you?”

“No! Just once,” she amended. “And by accident. He was trying to stay standing and swung out to reach the wall but I was between him and the wall, and got a slap across my face. It was an accident.”

He could think of nothing to say. He was at an atomic level of rage.

She sipped her drink.

“For a year or so, he got clean. We rented a little apartment, and things were looking good. I even enrolled in night school, to graduate high school.”

The noise he made was involuntary as his throat constricted. “But then, he started using again. I didn’t realise for months. He lost his job, and mine wasn’t enough to cover rent. He refused to go into rehab. Two months later, he died.”

Anastasios squeezed her hand. “I’m very sorry, Phoebe.”

“I just wish there was something more I could have done. But addiction is such a fearsome beast, and he was so completely in its thrall. His life had been a disaster. Dad was awful to him. I think he had to do what he did in order to blot his memories.”

“It sounds like you did everything you could, and then some.”

She lifted her shoulders. “I was working as a waitress by then, in a little bar near Fed Square. The money was good, and the customers nice. I became friendly with a woman who told me about a nannying job in London. The annual salary would have been enough to clear Dale’s rehab debts in two years, plus, I’d get a chance to travel. Airfare was all covered, too. It was a dream come true, a truly fresh start.”

“Hmm,” he said, skeptically.

“Yes, well, unfortunately, I didn’t share your wise cynicism. I naïvely believed some fairy Godmother had waved her magic wand. I signed on the dotted line and was whisked over to London and taken to meet my employers.”

“But you didn’t like it?”

She shivered. “There were no children. It was a porn agency. They figured that because they’d paid my airfare and advanced me ten thousand pounds, I had no choice but to star in their movies.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“Oh, I’m serious,” she said, shaking her head.

“What did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I ran away. I hid on the streets—but it was winter, and London is nothing like Melbourne. It was scary, Anastasios.”

Again, that protective instinct fired to life.

“I refused to let myself fall backwards. I’d come so far. I signed up at an employment agency, who got me a job working at the restaurant straight away. I saw an ad for Mrs Langham’s bedsit and went to meet with her. She was very kind, and very supportive, and told me I could pay her rent in a few weeks, when I had the money, so I was, very luckily, able to start working.”

He saw the bedsit through her eyes now, not as a dingy, tiny space, but as a godsend, a sanctuary when she’d most badly needed it.

“I’d already used the ten thousand pounds to go towards the Rehab centre, and they wouldn’t refund it, so I still owe money to the porn company.”

He made a gruff sound of disagreement. “I beg your pardon, you owe them *nothing*.”

She brushed him off with a tight smile.

“So that’s how I wound up in London. Your father came into the restaurant during my second week. I was wary and angry and sad and somehow, he broke through all that. We became friends almost that first night.”

Anastasios listened without the usual burst of anger. In truth, he was just so glad there’d been someone to support Phoebe emotionally after everything she’d been through. “Your strength of character is a beautiful thing,” he said, simply, and it was.

“I’m flattered,” she said, but she was pushing him away, straightening, perhaps uncomfortable with how much she’d shared.

Being pushed away was the last thing he wanted.

“Dance with me.” He stood, before she could demur, holding out a hand to her.

She looked around. “No one else is.”

“So? I don’t care about anybody else. Dance with me, *agape mou.*”

She stood then, as if she couldn’t not, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight as they swayed in time to the music, oblivious to everyone and everything around them.

CHAPTER 10

IT HAD ALREADY BEEN a day that had completely topped her wildest expectations, but when Anastasios' driver pulled up outside the Piazza Navona and he led her into a stunning Palazzo, the strains of classical music audible over the din of the assembled guests, anticipation lifted inside of her.

“What is this?” She turned to face him, but he was distracted, his attention focused elsewhere.

She frowned, a little caught off guard. Had she shared too much at dinner? She hadn't intended to be so honest with him, but it had felt so *right* to speak freely, to open up to Anastasios. She'd felt a connection building between them and had simply trusted him with her story.

Had she misplaced that trust? Or misread his interest?

“Anastasios?” She stopped walking, uncertainty reshaping her features, so he shook his head and offered a smile. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, of course.” He looked around the grand hall—wide with very high ceilings, chandeliers, cream walls and gold swirling details, then back to Phoebe. “I thought we should go to the opera together.”

Her lips parted, and she was so excited she didn't hear the tension in his voice. “Ophelia Agnavadi?”

“You seemed impressed by her.”

“I was. Oh, she's wonderful. You're going to love her.”

Anastasios compressed his lips. “We'll see.”

Phoebe suppressed a laugh. “If you don’t like the opera, why did you organize this?”

He didn’t answer, and a moment later, they were moving towards the wide doors at the end of the corridor. Only as they crossed the threshold did he lean close and say, “Because you do.”

Her heart practically skidded into the theater.

They were not seated with the general public; she couldn’t say why she’d expected they might be. Instead, an usher led them to a narrow stairwell which opened out onto a little balconette. They were alone in there.

The singing was every bit as beautiful as she remembered. Phoebe was moved to tears within minutes of the performance commencing. At one point, she looked over at Anastasios, to see his reaction, and she froze, because he looked as though he’d seen a ghost. He was transfixed, turned completely to stone. He stared at the beautiful soprano, his skin pale, and she wondered if that was simply how opera affected him? And then, she wondered if there was more to it?

Jealousy, unmistakable and fierce, burst through her, but she tamped down on it. Anastasios was simply caught up in the music. Besides, she had no right to feel jealous. A single kiss did not a commitment make.

Her heart stammered at the harsh reality of that, a heart that was beating, more and more, she feared for Anastasios.

HIS PHONE BUZZED a little after intermission and he removed it from his pocket, shifting slightly so the light from the screen was visibly only to his eyes. It was a text from Tommy.

I have a photo of the love letter.

He’d forgotten, completely, about his friend’s supposed evidence of the affair, and being reminded now brought a complex tangle of emotions. He should have felt glad. To have proof, to know what he was dealing with, meant he could start planning for how to manage the situation. But only when

confronted with the truth did he realise how badly he'd wanted Tommy to be wrong. He'd come to believe Phoebe, and the complication of her relationship with his father threatened to bring out the worst in him.

A moment later, an unsolicited and definitely unwanted photograph landed on his screen. Conscious of Phoebe, spellbound, at his side, he shifted a little more, ensuring his phone was private, then clicked it to large size and read it with a chest that was too full of anger to leave space for air.

Phoebe, A little something until we see one another again. Wear it and think of me, as I will be thinking of you. This weekend meant the world. You're very special to me. K.

He read it again, trying to explain it, trying to rationalize it. He imagined any circumstances in which his father might have innocently penned the note. There were none. It was so intimate. So affectionate. He closed his eyes, picturing his father's face. His father who had been made of iron, who was tough and demanding, and he knew that only the deepest love would have softened him to the extent that he would communicate like this. White hot rage barreled through him at the betrayal. He told himself he was angry on behalf of his mother, who'd loved Konstantinos for so many decades, only to be treated like this, but deep down, there was more. It was personal to Anastasios.

He was still processing the letter when another message came through. 'Also, there's this.'

Anastasios braced for what was to follow, then stared at his screen as a picture appeared. He recognized the interior of the restaurant instantly, and could tell the image had been snapped from behind the counter. It was a close up of Phoebe and Konstantinos, and seeing them together was so discombobulating, he felt as though the world was tipping sideways.

Kon was sitting at the table, and Phoebe stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder, body angled towards his, and his father's expression was so full of love, of lust, that Anastasios

wanted to punch something. There was no mistaking their intimacy.

Something inside of him shattered at her deception, at the feeling of having been lied to by this woman, who he had come to—to what? To like? Care about? To trust? All such bland terms to describe the way she'd taken up sole occupancy of his mind.

But she'd lied. To his face, and all along. She'd drawn him in with her act, she'd been so goddamned insistent about her 'friendship' with Kon, that Anastasios had actually started to believe her.

And yet, he'd been right all along. What a hollow victory that was.

ON WENT THE SHOW, so glorious, the other singers dwarfed by the brilliance of Ophelia, and when it ended, Phoebe stood spontaneously, tears in her eyes. She turned to enthuse with Anastasios, but he was staring straight ahead, brooding, as if he hadn't even realized it was over.

Ophelia returned to curtsy; the applause was deafening. Anastasios finally stood, leaned close to Phoebe and said, "Excuse me a moment."

He slipped out and away before she could stop him.

With a small shrug, she returned her attention to the finale of the performance.

But when the performers had left the stage and the lights had come on, and half the audience had emptied, there was still no sign of Anastasios. With a frown, she moved out of the performance chamber, into the stunning, wide corridor. There were no paintings on the wall, but the ceiling was a frieze, from the renaissance age, so she paused to admire it, studying the artwork until long after the rest of the crowd had left. Only security guards and staff remained, but Phoebe barely noticed. There were so many details in the art, so much to see, she wasn't remotely conscious of time passing.

“You cannot just walk away from me.” A woman’s voice reached her, and Phoebe looked, naturally curious, only to see Ophelia Agnavadi, now dressed in jeans and a sweater, striding towards—of all people—Anastasios.

“Unlike you, I have not had decades to come to terms with this.”

Phoebe stared from one to the other, totally at a loss as to what was happening.

“And that’s supposed to be my fault?” In speech, Ophelia’s accent was American.

“You are no longer a child. You could have reached out to us.”

“And said what?” She demanded. “He was my father, too, Anastasios. Do you think I wanted to ruin his life?”

Shock was reverberating inside Phoebe. Konstantinos had a secret child? The byproduct of his affair with Anna? And that child was Ophelia Agnavadi? Was that why Konstantinos had taken Phoebe to the concert in London? Why his eyes had overflowed with tears at the end? Phoebe moved closer, her heart in overdrive, concern for Anastasios at the forefront of her mind, but also loyalty to Konstantinos, who would have hated this scene.

“Have you thought, for one second, what it was like to be me? To know about all of you, and your big, happy family? Your cousins and aunt and uncle and corporation and family parties, that my mother and I were excluded from? A dirty little secret that would threaten everything he cared about most? Do you know what it’s like to get to see your father two or three times a year, when he can escape his ‘real’ family? To watch your mother pine over him, be devoted to him, until she can barely survive, and then to be discarded when someone new catches his eye?”

Phoebe’s heart twisted. She wanted to rail against that, to scream, because Konstantinos wasn’t like that. It couldn’t be true.

“Why would I come to you, Anastasios? Why have you come to me?”

Unconsciously, Phoebe moved even closer, the pain on Ophelia’s face drawing her in, making her want to weep.

“To see if it was true.”

“Well, you have your answer. Now, go away.”

He made a gruff sound. “It’s not that simple. You are my *sister*, for God’s sake.”

“Whatever,” she waved a hand through the air. “If your dad didn’t see it that way, then why should we?”

“I’m so sorry to interrupt,” Phoebe said gently, moving to Anastasios’ side as if just by her presence she could calm him. “But perhaps this is a matter better discussed in private—,”

Ophelia blinked, as if only just realizing where she was.

“Ophelia,” Anastasios’ voice was drawled, and when he looked at Phoebe, there was none of the easy affection they’d shared all day. “Allow me to introduce Phoebe—a ‘friend’ of our father’s. She met him around eighteen months ago.”

The intonation he laid on the word ‘friend’ left no room for doubt as to his meaning, the timeline added grist to the mill. She startled, eyes wide, spine straight. His betrayal was like a slap in the face. Her lips parted, shocked, hurt, nauseated. The hurt was all the worse, coming as it did from the peak of happiness.

“You?” Ophelia asked, the word roughly dragged from her. “You’re who he left my mother for?”

Anastasios said nothing. There was no help from that quarter. Her heart splintered.

“I was good friends with your father,” she said, quietly, trying to find calm, reason, sense.

“I can just imagine,” Ophelia spat.

“It really wasn’t like that.”

“Sure,” Ophelia rolled her eyes. “So what was it like? Were you spending time with an eighty four year old for the fun of it?” Phoebe hadn’t expected this vitriol from Ophelia, and it hurt. It hurt because she’d adored her performance, and admired her greatly. It hurt because Anastasios was standing by and letting this happen. Her world was crumbling.

“Actually, yes,” she responded with quiet pride and an angry defensiveness of Konstantinos. Her hurt had her adding, “He was truly the best man I’ve ever known.”

Unfortunately, it only validated both Anastasios and Ophelia’s suspicions. Phoebe couldn’t care less. She felt angry and hurt and used, because Anastasios had thrown her to the wolves with no warning and no hesitation.

“I suppose we’ll have to agree to disagree,” Ophelia responded tartly.

“We don’t have to agree on anything.” Phoebe was shaking though, her knees quivering at the awful scene. Her glance roughly encompassed Anastasios as well. “Excuse me. I’ve had enough of this. Good night.” She turned and walked away, her back ramrod straight, her mind numb.

Outside, she looked around, as if just seeing the world for the first time. Earlier, with Anastasios, this piazza had seemed like the most beautiful, romantic place on earth but now it was dark and menacing. She had lost her bearings, but she knew one thing for sure. She couldn’t go back to the yacht with Anastasios.

She needed space and time to think.

“Phoebe.” His voice was stern, unemotional.

She turned slowly to face him, teeth pressing into her lower lip. “What?”

His eyes probed hers, but there was such darkness in his, such suppressed anger, that goosebumps lifted on her arms despite the balmy warmth of the night.

“Was that really necessary?” She whispered, then shook her head. “Couldn’t you have at least warned me?”

“You made your bed when you started sleeping with him,” Anastasios said quietly.

Phoebe gasped, lifting a hand to her chest. “How can you still believe that?” Tears weakened her voice. “How can you think that after everything—,”

His eyes were harder than granite. “Why would I doubt it?”

“Because you *know* me, Anastasios.”

“Because you told me a few sob stories about your life? Who even knows if they’re true? Maybe that’s just how you get men to feel sorry for you, to give you gifts, like this,” he pointed to the necklace at her throat, a necklace which had, until that moment, meant so much to her.

Bile rose in her throat. “I told you, I don’t want it.” She reached up, trying to unclasp it, but her fingers were unsteady, and her clutch purse didn’t help. “I don’t want it,” she said again, the words tumbling out of her. “I don’t want it.” And now the necklace was choking her, so she started scratching at her throat, wanting it off, wishing she’d never agreed to wear it. “Please, please take it,” she turned around, but the second his fingers connected with her skin, every cell in her body began to reverberate and she made a wretched, sobbing sound, because she knew then how much she loved him, even when he had no love for her. He undid it, his fingers still hovering there, but she stepped away from him, quickly, urgently, needing to fight her body’s craving.

“I never asked for anything of your father. I never asked for anything from you.”

He stared down at the necklace then pushed it into his pocket as carelessly as if it were a stick of gum.

“I’m not interested in discussing it. Let’s go.”

“No way. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“And what else do you propose to do?”

She hated him in that moment, the love in her heart lurching wildly to its counterpart, light to shadow. “Find a

hotel,” she snapped.

“And waste money you don’t have? Then a flight back to London? That makes no sense.”

“Nor does going to the yacht and pretending none of this happened.”

“We won’t do that. We can’t.” His lips compressed and he angled his face away, his chest moving as though he too were grappling with dark emotions, trying not to let them win. And when he spoke, he was in command again, his voice measured. “In the morning, I’ll have you taken back to London.”

Have you taken, like an errant piece of luggage. She swallowed over a lump in her throat that might very well have been her pride. She hated how right he was. She couldn’t afford a hotel in Rome, nor a flight to London. She dug her fingernails into her palm and nodded stiffly. “Fine. Let’s consider my kidnap an economic one, this time.”

She turned away before she could see him flinch.

THE SILENCE WAS DEAFENING. It had crackled the whole helicopter ride, where even the aerial view of Rome in the late night couldn’t distract her from the way he’d spoken to her—as though she were a piece of dirt on his shoe. Introducing her as their father’s ‘friend’, the word layered with so much cynicism and sneery contempt that even aliens would have inferred his meaning.

When the helicopter touched down, she unbuckled her seatbelt and removed the headpiece then fumbled with the door, but she had no idea how to open it. Anastasios reached across, his arm strong and capable, lifting the handle, then pulling back swiftly. He too was aware of the spark between them, even when neither wanted it.

She stepped out without a word of thanks, then thought better of it.

At the door to the main cabin, she looked back at him. “I suppose I should thank you,” she said caustically.

He walked towards her slowly, his face in shadows. She didn't wait for an answer.

“Every year, I dread my birthday. I have this tradition, you see, of always having the very worst birthdays in the world. Like the year Dale saved up and bought me a CD I'd wanted for over a year and my father hit it with a hammer, or the year my father beat Dale until he had to go to hospital, or the year I was on the streets and cornered by three guys—god knows what they would have done to me if a routine patrol hadn't driven past at that exact moment. Jail was a relief compared to that fear.”

His face was immovable, except for his eyes, which stormed with emotions she couldn't interpret. She didn't notice, anyway.

“Every year of my life, my birthday has sucked, except for last year, when your beautiful dad made me feel so good, Anastasios. So important and valued.” She shook her head. “And then there's you, and how you made me feel tonight. I'll never forget it. So congratulations, in a litany of truly awful birthdays, you've managed to take the cake. Thanks for everything.”

It was churlish and unnecessary, but her heart was hurting, and she was lashing out from that wounded place, wanting to wound him when she suspected she didn't have the power.

She stalked through the boat, towards the stairs. It was only when she reached the door to her room that she realized he'd followed.

“It's your birthday?”

She glared at him. “Yes.”

“I didn't know.”

“No,” she responded with a shift of her head. “You don't know anything about me.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why? If you had known, would you have waited until tomorrow to humiliate and denigrate me?”

His eyes bore into hers, dark emotions swirling between them.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said with a shake of her head, all the fight leaving her. “I’m going to bed. I just want this over with.”

“Stop.” His word was commanding. “Let me show you something.”

He pulled out his phone and pressed some buttons, then handed it to her. A photo appeared with a familiar note. She gasped when she read it, for the feelings of warmth and affection that flooded back to her.

“How did you get this?”

His eyes sparked with hers. “The source who’s selling the story to the tabloids produced this as proof. My friend sent it to me.”

She shuddered at the gross invasion of her privacy, shoving the phone back at him. “And you believe that’s evidence of an affair?”

“There is also this photo.” He swiped his phone screen and a photo came up. She stared at it with disbelief.

“We were just talking,” she said, even when a part of her could see their obvious closeness, could understand that it could be misconstrued.

“These things, combined with the bequest, the statue, the painting, the weekly rendezvous, and now, the reference to a fabulous weekend, they paint a very clear picture.”

She nodded, not because she agreed with him, but because she understood the truth of their situation. She’d never be able to make him understand.

“When did you get this?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’m just trying to work out if you’ve been hating me this whole time, pretending to be sweet and kind and making me think—,” she clamped her lips together. “Or if you’ve been lying to me all along.”

“That’s a little rich, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never lied to you,” she whispered tremulously. “Not once.”

“I was told of the note’s existence only yesterday.”

“So all today,” she said with a shake of her head. “You thought this.”

“I’ve thought it all along,” he reminded her.

“Then what was that kiss today?” She challenged.

“Biology,” he said with a lift of his shoulders, brushing it off. “We were there, you were looking at me as though I was ice cream on a hot day.”

“Wow.” She blinked quickly. “Good to know.”

They stared at each other in angry, crackling silence and then she pushed the door inwards, so close to the sanctuary and privacy of her room.

“Your father was a complex man, Anastasios. He felt things deeply. A month before he died, he was in a very dark place. He was full of regrets and grief and anger. I spent the weekend with him, yes. Not romantically, but as a friend, because he was falling apart, and I wanted to hold him together—I owed him that much at least.”

Anastasios crossed his arms over his chest, his skepticism obvious. “My father wasn’t someone to ‘fall apart’.”

“Not in front of the family,” she agreed readily. “He held it together for all of you for so long, but he never got over her. He never got over the loss of Valentina, and how he blamed himself. That grief was with him every step of every day and I understood it. I mirrored it, in so many ways.”

“He gave you something to wear,” Anastasios said, reminding her of the note. His tone indicated how little he wanted to speak of his father’s grief, nor his sister’s death.

“A hat,” she said with a shake of her head, half-laughing, half-sobbing, clutching a hand to her chest. “A stupid hat, because we sat in the sun for so long that I got badly sunburned. He was upset and I didn’t want to interrupt him talking, so I sat there, but later that night, when he realized, he

felt awful. So he sent me a stupid hat. It was like Van Gogh's. That's all." She gestured towards his phone. "What you have there is evidence of two friends and a shared joke, nothing more. But I know you won't believe that."

He said nothing and her heart broke.

"That's fine. I don't think I even care anymore."

CHAPTER II

THAT WASN'T EVEN A little bit true. She still cared, she cared a lot more than she could acknowledge, even to herself. The idea of Anastasios believing the worst of her was like being doused in acid. She lay in bed, staring at the window, eyes closed and leaking salt water, for a long time, until the tears slowed and finally stopped, and only her deep, soft breathing remained.

She loved him, and he hated her.

Or perhaps it was more nuanced than that; she couldn't have said. There was chemistry between them, but for Anastasios, that's all it was. For Phoebe, every moment, every conversation, had all been a prelude to love.

Her throat was raw, her body aching all over. In the small hours of the morning, she pushed out of bed, restless, and went to the bathroom, splashing her face with water and staring back at her reflection. Her eyes were hollow, and she looked—so broken.

She could have screamed.

How had she let this happen? After everything she'd been through, wasn't she better than this? Stronger?

She stared back at her reflection, willing herself to remember that strength, to fight. But could anyone ever fight Anastasios and win?

Her eyes dropped lower, to the mark he'd made on her breast, a mark she'd taken to mean—to feel—she groaned,

lifting her hand to cover the mark and beneath it, her wounded heart.

She was going to leave in a few hours. As soon as she could. There was no way she could be around Anastasios when he saw her as he did. She valued herself too much to be spoken to and treated the way he had.

But she'd always regret leaving without resolving things properly. She craved him on an instinctive level, and leaving him without fulfilling that need would be like walking the earth half alive for the rest of her life. Would she ever feel this way about another man? Or would she die a virgin, because she hadn't taken this opportunity when it was right before her?

Slowly, she stripped the nightgown from her body, then her underpants, until she stood, naked in the bathroom. Before she could second guess her intentions, she galvanized her body, moving through the bedroom towards the door, and her destiny.

IT WAS A TORTURED SLEEP. He tossed and turned, dreams fragmented by memories and thoughts, unpleasant and dark, so he would wake suddenly, sit up, remember the events of the last few days and sink back against the pillows, wondering when he'd allowed things to spiral so completely out of control.

He was therefore not asleep when a sound came from just beyond his door. Barely a sound, more of a click. He stilled, holding his breath, listening with every fiber of his being. Silence.

But he knew.

He felt her.

He moved quickly, standing, not bothering to grab a robe, stalking to the door and wrenching it inwards, his naked body before her naked body, so he groaned, his eyes devouring her even as his mind was clanging with alarm, and warning, begging him to pull back and think.

“I’m leaving as soon as I can,” she said quietly, chin tilted with determination and pride.

He was silent. He couldn’t speak.

She was so *beautiful*. His eyes fell to her breast, to the mark, and he closed his eyes on a rush of need.

“This is the last time I’ll ever see you. I mean that, Anastasios. After I leave this boat, I don’t want to hear from you again. Not once. Not ever.” She lifted a hand to her neck, as if searching for a necklace. His gut twisted as he remembered the diamonds he’d removed earlier, the way he’d made her feel about wearing them, despite the fact she’d demurred and he’d insisted.

“But?” He prompted, his body still, the world no longer spinning, as he waited, on tenterhooks.

“I want you,” she said simply, then frowned, because it wasn’t simple at all. “And if I left here without telling you that, I know I’d regret it.”

He groaned, an ache developing deep in his gut. Hell, he wanted her too. Wanting her had never been the problem, but acting on it? How could he?

“If you want me to leave now, I will. But if you feel the same as I do, then share tonight with me. Just tonight.”

It was an offer too good to refuse. He heard her words and even though he wanted to shut the door on this complication, he knew he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. There was a greater power at work here, something more important than either of them.

He swore under his breath then stepped forward, his naked body brushing hers, his mouth moving even before his brain had caught up, kissing her, tasting her, aching for her.

She moaned into his mouth and he tasted salt, tears, in their kiss, but he didn’t stop. He understood. This was complicated, and in some ways, it was wrong—did she feel the betrayal of Konstantinos in her request?

He pushed all thoughts of that from his mind and existed purely in the here and now, kissing her with all the desperation

of his soul, lifting her around the waist, holding her body to his and carrying her through his room, to the bed in its center. He exalted in the perfection of that moment, her skin against his, the taste of her flesh as he rolled his tongue over her shoulder, the sweet little trembles against his mouth, his body, his hands, as he laid her down on the bed and traced his fingertips all over her, inch by inch, making her his, just once.

He tasted her breasts now as he'd wanted to do for so long, his tongue adoring them, teasing them, feeling her flinch with every bite, every kiss, until he moved lower, his mouth on her belly, her hips, her thighs, and finally the sweetness of her sex, worshipping her there, flicking her with his tongue until she exploded against him and he dug his fingers into her hips, needing to hold onto her or slip off the edge of the world.

He wanted to torment her, to mark her in so many ways, to make her beg for him, to make her long for him in a way she'd never forget, never be able to replace, but more than that, he wanted her, with a strength that made impatience impossible. Stretching, he reached for a condom, pushing it into place without removing himself from her for long enough to allow reality to intercede, then bringing his body over hers.

"Every time you are with another man, you are going to think of me," he said darkly, his need to make her understand this point surprising him.

She bit down on her lip, her eyes showing an emotion he didn't understand, but he kissed her, tasting her surrender, her need, parting her thighs with his knee and pushing into her swiftly, angrily, the possession so powerful that at first, he didn't realise how tight she was, nor that there was a barrier, holding him back, that her body had stilled, her mouth no longer returning his kiss. He pushed up onto one elbow, his brain in shards, nothing making sense. Unmistakably, though, her tightness was a sign—but he couldn't believe it.

"Pheobe," her name was a growled plea. She was a virgin?

He stared at her, needing an explanation, to understand, but she shook her head, pressing a hand to his chest. "Don't stop," she said softly. "I wanted this."

He couldn't understand, but she lifted her hips, drawing him deeper, and when he moved, slowly now, pleasure twisted her face and her nails dug into his shoulder, so his grip on reality and control slid further away, instincts taking over, his body moving to the beat of its own drum, until he had stirred them both to a peak of pleasure, an inevitable explosion that tore through the cabin, splitting them both apart.

Her cries filled the air, the intensity of her orgasm showing itself in the way her muscles squeezed him, so hard and tight, and her nails dragged down his back, and his own explosion seemed to shift all the pieces of his soul into a new, unrecognizable order. He lay on top of her, shattered and confused, for several long moments before flipping onto his back and staring at the ceiling, his breath tortured, his head spinning.

Beside him, Phoebe moved, pushing to standing so he sat up, staring at her, watching as she moved towards the door. Hell, no. She wasn't going to walk away without answering some questions.

“PHOEBE, STOP.”

She paused in the doorway, huge emotions crowding out everything else. She'd thought having sex would close the book on her feelings for him, but when they'd come together, love had burst through her, awakening so many bits of her, pieces she'd presumed had been too damaged by the life she'd led for salvage.

“This was a mistake.”

Behind her, Anastasios stilled, his body taut for a moment before he turned away, stalking to the bathroom and disposing of the condom. When he returned, she was gone, back in her own room.

He walked in without knocking, but he didn't speak. He simply stared at her, trying to understand, to make sense of how this woman who'd allegedly used his father could possibly be a virgin.

She was still naked and given that he wore a pair of shorts, she felt at a distinct disadvantage. She reached for an oversized shirt and pulled it on.

“I don’t understand.” His accent was thick, his confusion was obvious.

“You haven’t understood a thing about me. Not from the first moment we met.”

His brows knit together, the symmetrical features of his face highlighted by the shadows of the early morning light. “So this was what? A way to prove a point?”

She startled.

“Did you think you could sleep with me as evidence that you hadn’t slept with my father?”

She pressed her hand to her lips to quell her emotions, to hold them in rather than letting them burst out. “Even now, you see the worst in me,” she whispered unevenly, tears on her lashes. “Even now you think everything is calculated and premeditated.”

He compressed his lips until they were rimmed white. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have believed me?” She asked, softly, wrapping her arms around her torso.

“Yes.” But they both knew it was a lie.

“Sure. Just like you believe the ‘sob story’ of my childhood,” she muttered, and he had the decency to look, momentarily ashamed. “I don’t understand what the big deal is,” she said after a moment. “You’re used to one-night stands, and that’s all this was.”

Perhaps surprise kept him silent, because he stood there, staring at her, for several beats.

She pushed home her advantage, needing to get rid of him before she gave into her tears.

“And I’m exhausted,” she said, gesturing to the bed. It was an outright lie, but she didn’t care. “Would you excuse me?”

Consternation was writ large on his face. Her heart squeezed.

“We need to talk about this.”

“Why? To what end? It doesn’t change anything.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true.” She rubbed her upper arms, but it didn’t warm the ice cold of her heart. “You’re still the same guy who’s spent a month thinking the worst of me, berating me, accusing me, embarrassing me in public, who threw a cheque in my face and never stopped to wonder why I hadn’t cashed it,” She let that point sink in. “I tore it up, by the way, and threw it in the bin. It’s long gone.”

His eyes swept the room, almost as though he were looking for an anchor point.

“Sex is one thing, but do you really think I could ever forgive you for the way you treated me?” Her eyes slammed into his, the fierce anger flooring him. “This,” she pointed from herself to him, “was a one-time thing. An ending, not a beginning.”

He was uncharacteristically silent for several beats.

“I’d like to sleep now.”

“Phoebe—,”

“No.” She was angry and hurt, and shocked. “It’s over. There’s nothing else to say.”

He moved to the door, standing in the frame, his face tilted to look back at her. “You’re wrong. There’s plenty, but it will wait.”

HE HADN’T SLEPT at all after that, and he suspected she hadn’t either, if the bags under her eyes were anything to go by.

She was wearing the same outfit she’d been dressed in when she came onboard the yacht, her hair pulled into a ponytail, her features pinched, her eyes meeting his but totally

shielded, so he couldn't understand a single thing she was feeling.

“Good morning.”

She nodded crisply.

“Would you like a coffee?”

Her eyes flew to the machine, then back to his face, her fingers tightened on her old, battered handbag. She looked so vulnerable and at the same time, so courageous, that he ached to draw her closer and hug her, to hold her against his chest until—until what?

“I'd like to leave.”

He expelled a sigh. “But first,” he said quietly. “We should talk.”

“Not this again,” she said with disbelief and anger. “I don't want to talk.”

“I owe you an apology.” The words were drawn from him slowly, aching, and she flinched, because they hurt more than anything else.

“Don't.” Her voice whipped around the room.

“I should have listened to you—,”

“But you didn't. Not until you had proof. My words meant nothing to you.”

“I didn't know you then,”

“But you did last night,” she whispered. “At least, I thought you did,” her brow furrowed. “I thought, these last few days—,” she shook her head. “You got that photo and an innocent letter and immediately believed the worst, instead of turning to me and asking about it. You've spent this whole time accusing me of being mercenary and opportunistic, but did you ever stop to think about the person fabricating this story? They're the one seeking money from the papers, not me. I would *never* do that.”

He pressed his hands flat to the table.

“But you’ve never questioned your conviction. You made up your mind about me before we met.”

“That was about him, not you. It was him I was angry at.”

She understood that, but didn’t allow it to soften her. “Strange, because it seems that I bore the brunt of that.”

“You did.”

Silence stretched.

“Don’t leave today.”

She pulled back as if he’d slapped her. “You’ve got to be kidding me?”

“I don’t want you to go.”

She practically growled at him. “Because I was a virgin?”

“No. Yes. God, you must be able to see how convincing the story was? How easy for me to believe?”

“I never said I didn’t. I only asked you to listen to me, and you didn’t. Not even for one second. Changing your mind now doesn’t mean I have to change *my* mind.”

“Then let me change it. Spend some time with me—,”

“What for? What do you want from me, anyway, Anastasios?”

He frowned, stumped by the question. It clearly hadn’t occurred to him to consider when all this would end.

“I just know you can’t leave yet.”

It was only then that she realized she’d held hope in her heart, right to the last.

“That’s not good enough.” She pulled her ponytail over her shoulder, the gesture drawing his attention. His eyes lingered there a moment, and sparks ignited in her bloodstream. “Last night, you told me you’d send me home today. I trust you’ll keep your word?”

He ground his teeth together, a muscle jerking in his cheek. “Phoebe—,”

“Stop.” She said angrily. “I have not been treated well, Anastasios. By a lot of people, I’ve been treated very badly, in fact, but no one has ever burrowed into my soul the way you have, and ripped me apart from the inside out. There is not a person alive who’s ever made me feel like you did last night, and believe me, that’s saying something.”

X

“FIONA? I need to speak to you.”

The older woman smiled at Phoebe, but it was a smile Phoebe no longer trusted.

“The last time we worked together, a friend came and had lunch. He gave me a gift, and when I threw out the wrapping, I must have thrown out the note he’d included with it. You were the only other person working that afternoon.”

Fiona had the good sense to look a little green about the gills.

“Recently, I’ve been shown a photograph of that note, as well as a picture of me and this friend, by a newspaper, wanting to run a story about me that has no basis in fact. The story, if run, would be very, very damaging to the family involved.”

Despite what Phoebe had been through, she tended to see the best in people, which was why she’d never noticed the calculating tightness in the depths of Fiona’s eyes. She saw it now though, clear as day.

“The people involved should have been a little more careful then.”

Phoebe compressed her lips. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She was devastated that anybody—let alone several people—could take her innocent friendship with Kon and turn it into something so wrong. “However, I think you should know, the Xenakis family has very deep pockets.”

“Are you saying they’ll pay me more than the paper?”

The admission barely mattered—Phoebe had easily worked out who the culprit must be, the moment she gave it a little clear-headed thought.

“No,” she tacked a smile onto the denial. “What they’ll do is sue you—for everything the paper paid you, and then, for damages. Given the provably false narrative, that would be quite a lot.”

Fiona gasped. “I don’t believe you.”

Phoebe shook her head slowly. “Yes, you do. People like that don’t play to lose. If you get in the game with them, you’re going to get knocked out. That’s a fact.” She lifted her hands in the air. “I know the truth, so article or not, it’s no skin off my nose, but you should think about this: no act is without consequence and these would be particularly high.”

She left the restaurant then, a watery smile on her face, that quickly turned to tears. It had taken every last shred of bravado to have that confrontation, but now, she was spent. The last few days had taken a toll on her. Her soul was broken. With her head bent and heart weary, she walked towards the underground, wanting only the peace of her bedsit and a quiet cup of tea.

X

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

Anastasios paused, just inside the door of their family home, grimacing. At just after midnight, what were the chances of being met by one of his brothers? He turned to see Thanasi, one shoulder propped against the doorframe. God, he wanted to be alone. *So why come here?* Good question. In the midst of the mess of his life, something had drawn him here, to this place he’d lived for so many years.

“I was in the area,” he said honestly. For two weeks, the yacht had drifted around the Med, leaving Anastasios alone with his thoughts, but then, he’d set a course for the Saronic gulf, bringing his yacht into dock at his family’s jetty. Based on the peninsula of Porto Mezi, their family enclave was

completely private, with a main house and several separate dwellings, which the brothers had moved into during their teenage years. It was a compound, secluded from the rest of the peninsula by natural geography.

“It’s not exactly somewhere you stroll past,” Thanasi said probingly.

“What’s with the fifth degree?” Anastasios asked, too sharply. Then again, he hadn’t seen nor spoken to anyone since Phoebe had left the yacht. He was out of practice.

“Nothing,” Thanasi eyed him consideringly. “You good?”

“Of course. Why?”

“Just wondering. You seem quiet.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Same thing as you, I suspect.” Thanasi looked over his shoulder. “Checking on mum. Haven’t you seen my messages?”

Anastasios was ashamed to admit it, but he’d barely thought of his family, and his grieving mother, since Phoebe had left the boat. He’d read Thanasi’s messages, imploring him to come home, to help with Maggie, but he’d been paralysed, adrift. “How is she?”

“Stoic on the outside, shattered, I think, beneath that. She’ll be glad to see you in the morning. Want to share a nightcap?”

Anastasios instantly rejected the idea. He wanted to be alone. So why had he come here?

“No.” Too harsh. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He stalked through the house, into one of the guestrooms, and lay down on the bed. Even here, she pursued him.

HIS MOOD DIDN’T IMPROVE in the morning. He went through the motions with his mother, hearing about Leonidas’ recent visit, ignoring the barbed looks Thanasi was shooting him. It

was only later, when the two brothers were alone, that Thanasi spoke.

“I don’t know what the hell has gotten into you.”

“What do you mean?” Anastasios was in no mood for this. He barely looked at his brother.

“First Leo, then you. I expect this of Dimi, but you two are supposed to be here, with me, helping her. Where the hell did everyone go?”

“Our father just died,” Anastasios said. “People deal with grief in different ways.”

“Some people seem to think they have the luxury of sticking their heads in the sand. What about mom? You’ve all but deserted her.”

Anastasios couldn’t argue that. Nor could he fight the sense of responsibility. But Thanasi was on a roll.

“I’ve been messaging you. I’ve left voicemails. You haven’t responded to a single one. What did you think was happening back here, Anastasios? You’ve completely disappeared, forgetting all about her and our family.”

“That’s not true,” he was forced to defend himself, jerking to his feet and moving towards the window. He stared out, unseeing, at the dark ocean and milky moonlight. “I might have been absent, but I’ve been very much focused on this family, believe me.”

Thanasi crossed his arms over his chest, his features showing skepticism. For a moment, Anastasios was struck—by how shitty it felt to be speaking the truth and be disbelieved. A powerful sense of guilt almost felled him.

“Listen, Thanasi, we need to speak. There’s something going on that you should know about.” He heard the words and realized where he was going, and felt a strange bubble of apprehension. But he couldn’t keep these secrets forever. He needed to share the load. Telling Cora had helped, but she was a cousin. No matter how close they were, she had her own parents and siblings; it wasn’t the same. Thanasi understood more closely what this would mean to Maggie.

Anastasios poured two generous measures of scotch then carried them across the room. Before Thanasi had begun to drink, Anastasios began the story. Of Annie, of Ophelia and finally, of Phoebe. He discovered that talking about her felt good. That in the absence of being with her, and being able to touch her, simply saying her name and describing her to his brother sent his insides into a tailspin.

Thanasi's glass was empty when Anastasios reached the end, and the brothers stared at one another.

"That's a lot to take in."

"Yes." Anastasios winced. "So you see, I might have been absent, but my mind has been engaged in how to handle this, how to protect our mother from the media speculation. It couldn't come at a worse time."

"And what have you decided?"

Anastasios looked away. The truth was, since Phoebe had left the yacht, his mind had been running at about an eighth of its usual speed.

"Annie Westbourne is on hold, for now. I'm in negotiations, via Georgios. I can string those out a while. So long as there's the question of her inheritance, she seems willing to stay quiet."

"And the younger mistress?"

"I was wrong about her," Anastasios admitted, frowning. "Tommy told me the source of the story had retracted their report. It was a cash grab, nothing more." His stomach sank to the ground. All of the ways in which he'd let her down came back to him. All of the things he'd said. The way he'd treated her. He saw it as if from a different perspective and he wanted to shake himself, to reach back through time and somehow alter what he'd done, how he'd acted.

"So there's no possible harm from her?"

"No." The word was a guttural admission, heavy with emotions.

Thanasi watched his brother with care. Anastasios was, of all of them, the most like Konstantinos, in many ways. He was famously in charge of his emotions, steady and level-headed, focused on business to the exclusion of all else.

But what if something had changed for him? What if the woman he'd sought to silence had changed something fundamental within Tasso?

"Tell me what happened," Thanasi said, gently. He saw now what he'd missed at first. His brother was broken, altered. Beyond the grief they all felt, the wheels had come off for Anastasios, and Thanasi knew that the woman on the yacht must be at the heart of that. "Tell me about this girl."

Anastasios fought temptation for a moment, finishing his scotch then holding the glass in the palm of one hand. He was tempted to excuse himself, to disappear to his room, but something inside of him snapped, and it was then that Anastasios understood: he'd come here because he needed to talk to someone. To have someone help make sense of what had happened. He just hoped Thanasi wouldn't stand in judgement of Anastasios for too long. Though God knew he deserved it...

CHAPTER 12

ALMOST AS SOON AS Phoebe and Konstantinos had met, they'd bonded over their grief. Neither was used to sharing, but they each found something in the other that called to them, at just the right moment, and against all odds, they opened up to one another. In a way that defied explanation, they'd been kindred spirits.

Phoebe spoke about Dale, and the loss of his life, but more achingly, the loss of his hope, how her father had beaten it out of him, and Konstantinos spoke of Valentina, the daughter he'd lost when she was only five years old. Without her, their family had never been complete again. He blamed himself, and whenever he saw the pain in his wife's eyes, he felt rage, because he wasn't able to make it better. He never could. They had Leonidas, Valentina's twin, and instead of being able to know gratitude for him, Konstantinos had struggled with feelings of rejection. Why had one twin lived when the other died? How could they keep going, with a Valentina hole in their lives?

Phoebe had thought that coming to England would help her to escape her grief, to outrun it, but it hadn't. Konstantinos had helped her understand that grief never left you. Eventually, you learned to live alongside it, but never easily, never without pain.

He was right.

And she felt it even more now.

Every morning she woke as though she were drowning, sitting upright, struggling to breathe, her mind casting around for why there was such darkness on the periphery or her vision, and then she remembered, like a cement truck crashing down on her.

She'd fallen in love with a man who'd seen the worst in her, who'd refused to love her back. She'd slept with him, and she'd done the only thing she could—left him—but that didn't mean she'd stopped loving him.

Life became like a strange two-dimensional image. She stepped through her days as if in grayscale, going from home, to work, and back. She avoided Mrs Langham, didn't go to the galleries, didn't speak to anyone.

She was weary. Wearing by life, by loss and love, and by grief.

For weeks, she existed as a shadow person, half hoping she could fade away completely, when all her light had finally dimmed.

X

“TASSO?”

His mother, wearing a loose, black dress, seemed to float towards him, an anxious smile on her face. He braced, as he had every time they'd been near one another. He hated that Konstantinos had cheated on her, he hated that he knew, and his mother didn't. And that he couldn't tell her. At least, not yet. Not when she looked so weak and desperate.

She took the seat beside him, sighing softly. “I didn't expect you to stay so long.”

It had been a week. At least, that's what his iPhone told him. He'd lost count of the days, and the nights. He closed his eyes against the memories that had been tormenting him, and worst of all, the guilt that was chewing through his stomach.

“Nor did I.”

“Something’s bothering you.”

“I’m just busy,” he denied, because how could he put his own worries on his mother?

“You thrive on being busy. That’s your preferred state. This is different; you’re brooding.”

“Am I?” He turned to face her, unaware of the tension that radiated off him.

“Something’s happened?”

“Not particularly.”

“Is it your father?”

He shook his head, turning back to the view, looking out to sea.

“He used to love it here.” She pressed a hand into the seat, her smile misty. “He said it reminded him of when he was a young boy.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“There’s a lot about your father you didn’t know,” she said quietly.

Anastasios turned to his mother, an alarm bell sounding. Was it possible she already knew? That all of this had been for nothing?

“There were things in his past he was ashamed of, no matter how many times I told him he didn’t need to be. Things I wish he’d shared with you boys. It might have helped you to understand why he was always so hard on you.”

“He wanted us to strive to be best,” Anastasios said.

“Yes, but there’s a reason for that.”

“Because *he* was always best.”

“Your father had to be. It was the only way to rise above the squalor into which he was born.”

Anastasios was very still, listening.

“He lived in abject poverty for much of his life. When he was fourteen, he was basically the full-time carer to Athanasios. His father was a drunk, a terrible man, I believe. There was no stability. He used to beat Kon, often, and then Athanasios. Your father knew he needed to get out, to make a new life for himself. At eighteen, he left home, began to work, using his guile to build the business.”

Something stammered inside Anastasios. He knew his father had grown up poor, that this was behind his unwavering focus on the business, but he hadn't known about his father's abusive childhood. Would that man have looked at Phoebe, and the way she was desperately trying to find her feet in life, and have wanted simply to help her? To help her as he'd needed help? A wave of recrimination rolled through Anastasios. “I thought he was given an apprenticeship.”

“He was, but only because of his focus, intelligence and determination. After two years, he could buy a little place and afford a nanny—he brought Athanasios to live with him. Every moment after that, your father worked, and worked, and worked to become a success, to create safety for his brother. That drove him, and he never relaxed. Even when he had all this, he was, I think, afraid of it being pulled out from under him. He had a hard life, Tasso, but he loved his children so very much.”

Her voice wobbled, and he knew she was thinking not just of her boys, but of Valentina too. Anastasios lifted his arm, wrapping it around her shoulders, his heart aching for this woman, and for another woman, far away. Phoebe had done it tough, no question. She'd been born to a bastard who hadn't deserved her, and yet still she saw the good in people. She'd been trying, for so long, to fix her life, to live to the potential of her spirit rather than the limitations of her birthright. She was so full of character and strength; was it any wonder Konstantinos had wanted to help her?

“You must miss him.”

She put her head on his shoulder. “I do.” She wiped away a tear. “But I'm so lucky, Tasso. We had a wonderful life

together. I'm sad he's gone, but so grateful for the time we had. He was my soulmate."

Anastasios stroked his mother's arm, comforting her, even when he rejected her claim. Was there any such as thing as a soul mate? His father hadn't thought so, or he would never have cheated.

And what did Anastasios think?

He stared out at the ocean, questions in his mind he couldn't—and didn't want—to answer.

ALL ROADS LED TO PHOEBE. Five weeks after she left the yacht, it didn't matter if he was working, sleeping, swimming, or running, she was there, in his mind, memories of their conversations, her smile, her laugh, her sheer, unadulterated delight at the sights of Europe, his desire for her, it all swirled through him, all the time.

He had no reason to think this unique, unfamiliar form of torture would ever end, and he knew he couldn't live like this forever.

Five weeks after she left the yacht, Anastasios boarded his jet, bound for London, and finally, for Phoebe.

SHE WAS dead on her feet. At the end of a double shift, what she wanted, more than anything, was a long soak in a bubble bath. There was no such luxury at her bedsit, but a girl could dream.

When she'd finished, it was almost midnight, and she stifled a yawn as she stepped onto the street, pressing her hand to her mouth, not noticing the black four-wheel drive that was double parked on the pavement.

She stepped around it, just as the door opened, and someone emerged. She lifted her head to apologise automatically, but the words were strangled in her throat.

"You!"

She froze, her body reverberating with the sheer shock of seeing him again.

“Phoebe.” The word rang through the air, or perhaps it just felt that way to Phoebe. Was he really here? She took a step backwards, because otherwise she was afraid she might reach out and touch him.

“I need to speak to you.”

Her face grew ashen. “It’s all sorted. I’ve dealt with the problem. You don’t have to worry that my ‘affair’ with your dad will leak,” she muttered, stepping further back.

“I know. I heard from the paper.”

She pressed her lips together and looked away.

“Then I can’t see why you’re here. We have nothing else to talk about.”

“You *know* that’s not true.”

She turned back to face him, eyes wild, every bit as angry and as hurt as she had been the night they’d slept together. “Then what? What do you want? What do you have to say to me? More insults? Accusations? Is there someone in the car you’d like to introduce me to as your father’s whore?”

He flinched at her crude anger. But she was so mad! All the feelings that had been pummeling her for so long were finally given a target and she was venting them with great relief.

“It’s a more personal conversation than I’d like to have on the street. Would you come with me?”

Her jaw dropped. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Do you honestly think I’d ever go anywhere with you again? I told you, I don’t want to see you. I *can’t* see you.” Her voice wobbled, damn it, right when she needed to be strong.

“It won’t take long.”

“Then say it here.”

He dug his hands into his pockets. “Do you want to at least sit in the car? It’s cool and you’re only wearing a singlet top.”

She blinked. Was it cool? She supposed it was.

“I’ll survive.”

“I came to give you this.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. She hesitated, but then reached for it out of curiosity, opening it and almost vomiting when she saw another cheque.

“No way.” She handed it back. “I told you then and I’m telling you now, I don’t want it.”

“It’s not from me. It’s from him.”

“I told *him* I didn’t want anything from him. Our whole friendship, he wanted to give me money, to pay off my debts, and I always told him no, because I didn’t want that. What I wanted, he gave in abundance—kindness, compassion, friendship.” She sniffed. “Don’t you get it? He was like a father to me. I loved him, not for his money, but for how he treated me.” She looked away, emotions threatening to overwhelm her. When she could trust herself to speak once more, she flicked a glance back in his direction. “Tear up the cheque, Anastasios. I can’t believe you think I’d accept it.”

“I don’t. I knew you wouldn’t.”

“Then why the hell show up here?”

“It was an excuse to see you again.”

She ground her teeth together, refusing to ask why he needed an excuse, not allowing herself to be mollified by his wanting to see her again, five long weeks after that awful scene on the boat. “Yeah, well, you’ve seen me. Now go away.”

“No, Phoebe, please, wait.”

No way, she thought, turning and walking away from him, but he caught her wrist, pulling on it gently.

“Don’t,” she snarled, so filled with emotions she felt like she was going to explode.

“Listen, I’m doing this wrong. I shouldn’t have started with the cheque.”

She was flabbergasted. “There would be no right time, now or later, when you could—,”

“No, I know.” He dropped his head, planting a hand on his hip.

“In every way,” he said quietly, so she had to lean closer to hear him. “By every measure, I have let you down. By not believing you, by denigrating you, by disrespecting you and by failing to realise how I felt about you until it was far, far too late. The thing is, I am completely in love with you.”

She flinched, the words ones she would have loved to hear, back then, but which felt like insults now.

“No, you’re not.”

She took a step away from him.

“Love isn’t what you think it is.” She bit into her lower lip. “Love isn’t capable of treating someone the way you did me. It’s just not possible.”

He moved closer, putting his hands on her hips.

“I love you.”

“Saying it again doesn’t mean I’m going to believe it.”

“Then believe this: I am completely miserable without you. I think of you every second of every day. I crave you. I long for you. I want to be back at Atrani with you, laughing with you, holding you. You have marked my soul and my heart, and they will be, forever yours.” He squeezed her sides lightly. “I think I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you. I became so angry that he’d met you first. You have no idea how angry. And then, I clung to that anger, rather than letting myself realise what you mean to me. But I have not been without you, ever since then. You’ve been here, in my thoughts, my dreams, and mostly, my heart.”

Tears filmed her eyes.

“You can tell me that you don’t love me, and I’ll believe it. I don’t deserve your love. But don’t you dare say that I don’t love you. I have lived with the regret and disgust, the guilt, of

how I spoke to you, how I treated you, every moment since you left.”

She blinked away from him. “Because you found out I was a virgin,” she whispered.

“It forced me to accept what, deep down, I already knew, yes. Nothing about you added up to the woman I’d presumed you were. But I had to cling to it, because the alternative was loving you so hard, I’d be prepared to give up anything and anyone. I was scared.”

She dropped her head forward, his words some kind of balm, but the pain was there too, so sharp and hard.

“You think you’re the only one? You hurt me more than I have ever been hurt by another soul. What kind of idiot would I be to put myself in the position of allowing you to hurt me, ever again?”

“Listen to me, *agape mou*. You know me. You know my determination. If I swear to you now, on everything I care about, that I will never, not for even one second, cause you pain again, would you think about giving me a second chance?”

Oh, her heart. How desperately it wanted to reach for him, to accept what he was offering, but she’d been too scared.

“I can’t,” she whispered. “It was too much. Once felt like agony. Twice, I don’t think I’d survive.”

He caught her face in her hands, tilting it towards himself. “Only you can decide if the pleasure of the life we could share is worth that risk. For my part, I would take this gamble again and again and again. Without you, I know my life is meaningless. With you, it’s technicolour.”

“This isn’t fair,” she said quietly. “You can’t give me what I need.”

“What do you need?” He asked, urgently.

“Safety.” She hugged her chest. “Certainty. I don’t want to feel as though I’ve been dropped off the edge of the cliff. The

way you made me feel that night,” she shivered. “I can’t go through it again.”

“I made the worst mistake of my life that night.”

She understood what this apology meant to him, that Anastasios was not a man to admit his failings, and that he was doing so now unreservedly. But her heart was still too damaged, her memory too strong.

“I’ve been hurt so many times,” she said softly. “I’d rather be alone than risk going through that again.”

His eyes swept shut, a look of torture on his features. “You deserve safety,” he agreed. “You deserve everything.”

Her heart turned over in her chest. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and hold him tight, to sink into his words and promises and stop overthinking things. But her past made her wary, and she wore that wariness like a shield now.

“I didn’t come here with any expectations or hope, except that you might consider giving me a chance to show you how sorry I am.”

“But a chance might lead to success and then—,”

“You worry I’ll hurt you again.” The words were wrenched from his chest.

She sobbed, pulling away from Anastasios. “You broke my heart.” She shouted the words, needing him to understand. “You broke my heart,” softer now, but heavy with pain. “And I had given it to you, so completely.” She wiped her eyes.

“I know that. God, Phoebe, I know.”

“That day...my birthday...it was so perfect. For the first time in my life, I felt cherished. I felt loved.” She shook her head. “And the contrast of those feelings to the crash down to earth afterwards. The way you looked at me, I’ll never forget it.”

“I hated the idea of you with him. It made me so angry, I couldn’t see sense. I got those messages from Tommy and I just...saw red.”

“You couldn’t see me.”

“I did. I do. I see you, and I love you.”

“Love isn’t enough,” she said, honestly, her heart collapsing at that admission. “You say you love me? That you loved me even then? And yet you thought the worst of me every day. Every day.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but she slashed a hand through the air, silencing him, angry beyond bearing. “You know what my life was like, growing up. I’ve been on the run from that pain for so long; don’t ask me to walk right back into it.” Doubts throbbed inside of her, but she knew she was speaking the absolute truth. There was danger in Anastasios, and it didn’t matter that she loved him too, that she wanted to be with him, she had to look after herself, first and foremost. “Please,” she groaned, wretchedly. “Just leave me alone.”

X

“JESUS CHRIST.” Dimitrios opened the door with a look of thunder on his stony features, his grey eyes raking Anastasios from head to toe. “What the hell, Anastasios?”

Dimitrios did not use any diminutives when speaking with his family. He never allowed himself to relax around them, and that was a part of it.

Anastasios shouldered his way into the door and Dimitrios lifted two thick, dark brows at the stench of alcohol that followed. “Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Of course I do,” Anastasios rumbled, squinting at his watch anyway. “Were you sleeping?”

Dimitrios barely slept. He looked around his Kensington penthouse with a grim look. His office light was on, casting a narrow beam into the living room. A half-full scotch glass was on top of the grand piano. “What do you think?” He nodded to the glass. “I’d ask you to join me, but it smells as though you’ve already emptied a bar.”

Anastasios' eyes narrowed. "I'm fine," he muttered. "Just fine."

"Really?" Dimitrios would have been amused if he were capable of feeling any degree of levity. "You don't seem fine."

"I'm *fine*," Anastasios said, dropping his head into his hands and standing so completely still that Dimitrios could only stare. Humour was beyond Dimitrios but worry was not, and he felt it in spades now.

"Is this about Konstantinos?" Dimitrios did not refer to their parents as 'dad' or 'mum'. Distance was best kept, at all times.

Anastasios' eyes locked to Dimitrios', and there was such torture in their depths that Dimitrios completely understood. He moved to the piano and poured a second glass, handing it to his brother. "Sit down. Tell me what the hell has happened."

Anastasios drank the scotch as though it were a lifeline, wincing afterwards, as the alcohol burned its way down. "I've messed up."

Dimitrios frowned. "You're Anastasios Xenakis. You don't mess up."

Anastasios swore in response, a sharp, short curse that flooded the room with dark emotion. "I've ruined it."

"What have you ruined?"

"Everything."

"You're not making any sense." Dimitrios had some of his own scotch, then sat down behind the piano. He lifted his fingers to the keys and began to play, the 'moonlight' sonata a fitting piece given his brother's mood.

Anastasios took two long strides, bringing him to the edge of the piano, where he watched, a transfixed expression on his face. "You're so musical."

Dimitrios' expression was one of wry agreement, but then, how could he not be? Given that he'd exiled himself to the attic for much of his childhood, teaching himself to play the old piano up there.

“Do you think that sort of thing runs in families?”

Dimitrios pulled a face. “You’ve heard yourself sing, haven’t you?”

Anastasios didn’t smile. He was lost in thought.

Dimitrios sighed, stilling his hands atop the keys. “You’re not yourself.”

“No.” Anastasios blinked as if to clear his mind. “You’re right. I’m not.” He finished his scotch and placed the glass down heavily. “I don’t know if I ever will be again.”

Dimitrios stayed where he was, watching his brother.

“Dad came to London often, before he died.” The words were slightly slurred, weighted by something Dimitrios didn’t understand. “Did you see him?”

“Sometimes. Why?”

“He came every week.”

Dimitrios regarded his brother. “Does it matter?”

“I’m trying to work it out. To understand him.”

“We saw each other, yes.”

“Why?”

Dimitrios began to play once more, heavier now, the somber tone of the song flooding the modern apartment.

“Is there a problem?”

Anastasios peered at Dimitrios. “No,” he admitted, eventually. Then, with a groan. “Did he ever tell you about her?”

Dimitrios frowned. “Who?”

“A woman.”

“A woman?” Dimitrios repeated. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“A *friend*.” The word was filled with emotions that Dimitrios couldn’t understand. “A woman that dad became

friends with, here in London. He saw her often, too. Did he mention her to you?”

“You can’t seriously think he was having an affair? He was in his eighties and he was devoted to Maggie.”

Anastasios’ face paled. “It wasn’t romantic between them,” he said with an angry shake of his head. “Only a fool would think that.” He refilled his scotch glass and threw it back. “Only a goddamned fool.”

“He mentioned no one to me,” Dimitrios said after a moment. “But he seemed happier than I’d seen him for a while.” He shook his head, because that wasn’t quite right. “No, he seemed at peace. As though something that had been bothering him for a long time had started to make sense. There was a general air of contentment I hadn’t seen in Konstantinos. Not for a long time.”

Not since Valentina, he added mentally, unable to reference that awful tragedy, for the guilt that was always festering in his gut, the secret guilt; he’d never told his family how he’d contributed to her drowning.

“She helped him,” Anastasios muttered. “And he helped her.”

“Who? What the hell are you talking about?”

Anastasios snapped his face back to Dimitrios, but he didn’t elucidate properly.

“She didn’t want his money. She just wanted him to love her.”

“To love her? I told you, Konstantinos wasn’t cheating on Maggie.”

Anastasios peered at his brother, then shook his head.

“To love her as a father. To love her as a friend. To be treated with respect. She deserves that.”

“You are making no sense.”

“But I understand now. I know what I have to do.”

“What?”

“I have to fix this.”

“Fix what?”

“Everything. I broke everything. And I have to fix it.” He reached out and squeezed Dimitrios’ muscular arm. “I have to fix everything. I can’t let her walk away. Not without trying, trying to show her, to make her understand—,”

Dimitrios stared at his brother as though he’d lost his mind.

Anastasios straightened, eyes locked to Dimitrios’ with renewed intent.

“I love her. I have to make sure she understands that. I have to show her that she’s safe with me. And if she still chooses to walk away, okay. But I have to try, Dimitrios. I have to try.”

X

TWO NIGHTS LATER, he was waiting out the front of the restaurant when she finished her shift, watching her with eyes that were impossible to read. Her heart kicked up a notch, desire dwarfed by the force of her love, which had only grown since his confession the other evening.

“Have you eaten?”

She eyed him suspiciously, her heart in her throat. She couldn’t let him back in but, oh, how she wanted to! “I had some bread at the start of my shift.”

“Would you consider having dinner with me?” The words rang with intensity.

She shook her head, but he was moving closer to her, pressing his thumb to her chin, lifting it.

“Dinner. Nothing more. I won’t even tell you how completely you are my moon and stars.”

On cue, her tummy grumbled, and he arched a brow.

“Fine. Dinner,” she surrendered, her insides tightening with myriad feelings. “But it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Perhaps not to you, but to me, *agape mou*, it means the world.”

RATHER THAN TAKING her to a restaurant, he’d chosen somewhere far more meaningful—he wanted to show her how well he knew her, how completely he understood her. He wanted to make her happy. “A storage facility?” She asked, frowning. “Are you planning to feed me, or kill me?”

He grinned, and the spark between them burned brightly, so she sobered immediately, pushing him away with every fiber of her being. The pain from that morning on the yacht whipped her back, reminding her of why she couldn’t do this again.

They drove through two gates and then, he typed in a pin code to access a secure garage. “Come on.”

He came around to her door, opening it for her, and when she stepped out, their bodies brushed. The world tilted wildly off its axis, but all he did was reach down and take her hand, weaving their fingers together.

She bit back a sigh.

He typed in a long numeric code and a door swung open, heavy and metallic, so she honestly wondered what would happen if they got trapped in here.

“It’s monitored,” he said, leading her deeper into the dark room. The smell of delicious food assailed her nostrils, but when he flicked on a light, food was the last thing she could think of.

“Ohmygod.” This was no ordinary storage facility. “Have you robbed The National Gallery?” She muttered, staring at the paintings lining the walls, some hanging, some resting against the wall. There were Van Goghs, Rembrandts, Degas, Da Vincis, Picassos, and so many, many more, from the best artists of all time. “I can’t believe this,” she said, walking from

one to the other, tingling all over at the idea of being in the same room as these masterpieces. “My God, Anastasios, what is this?”

“Our family vault.”

“Your family vault,” she repeated. “You have these beautiful pieces in a vault?”

He shrugged, but his eyes clung to her with an intensity that made her stomach roll. “They are investments.”

“They should be on display,” she whispered, spellbound. “These are masterpieces. I’ve never even seen this one before.”

“It was privately owned, by one family, up until the nineties, when my father bought it.”

It took Phoebe over an hour to appreciate the pieces, and that was just a first glance. They sat in the middle of the floor, and ate picnic style, surrounded by the incredible art, so Phoebe could barely think straight.

“Do we have to go already?” She asked, when he cleared the food and moved to stand.

“I have to fly back to Greece,” he said with obvious regret. “But I’ll be back next week. Will you have dinner with me again?”

She wanted to agree, if only to see the paintings again, but already she could feel herself softening towards him, could feel her love leaking out of every pore of her body, overtaking her whenever she glanced at him or he spoke. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said with a shake of her head.

His lips pressed tight. “Just dinner.”

“But it’s not just dinner,” she said. “Is it?”

His expression showed guilt.

“I know you think you love me, or perhaps you just feel guilty for what happened between us, but I’ve already told you, I can’t get involved with you. It doesn’t matter how many

world class paintings you own, that doesn't change the fact that I need to guard my heart. I'm sorry."

"Don't." The word was tortured. "Don't apologise. You never, ever need to say that word to me."

Tears filled her eyes. She loved him so much, pushing him away felt every single kind of wrong. "It's just too hard to spend time with you. We're not friends, Anastasios, and we can't be lovers. So what's the point of another dinner?" She looked around, wistfully, then focused her gaze on him. "I'd like to leave now, please."

In the car, they drove in silence, only as he approached her home, he slowed, then swerved off the road.

"The point," he said, the words rumbling from his chest. "Is that I love you." He hooked his eyes to hers. "This is not an ordinary love, but something I will feel for all time. I cannot let you go without a fight, and yet, if you truly want me to disappear from your life, if you can honestly say that will make you happy, then I will. Because love is about sacrifice, and if I have to sacrifice my own happiness to guarantee yours, I will."

She sucked in an unsteady breath.

"But if you think you might love me too, despite that night...if walking away from you will make you as miserable as it will me, then I ask only this: don't ask me to leave without giving me a chance to show you that I can be everything you need. I'm asking you to dinner because I understand that you need time to trust me again, and I will gladly take as much time, going at your pace, if there's even a chance, the smallest chance, that you might, one day, be able to forgive me.."

She closed her eyes, anguished and torn.

"I need to fix this."

She knew how she felt about him, and even though she was terrified, she found her mind moving into lockstep with her heart.

“Do you know something I learned from your father?” She said, slowly, thoughtfully.

Anastasios shook his head.

“Love often doesn’t look as we expect it to. We are fed an idealized version of love from a young age, first through fairy tales and then through Hollywood, but in the real world, it’s more complex and knotty than that. He did love your mother, Anastasios, but he loved Annie too. His greatest guilt was that he couldn’t be what either woman needed, he couldn’t give either of them his whole self.”

Anastasios stared at her, and she softened her features in sympathy.

“I don’t know if you love me enough,” she said after a beat. “I don’t know if I can trust you not to hurt me.”

He made a low, guttural noise but before he could speak, she continued, “But I do know I’ll regret it if we don’t have one more dinner together. I’m not ready to say goodbye yet.”

He lifted a hand to her face, cupping her cheek, and moved closer, so close to kissing her, but she sobbed, confusion making it impossible to surrender to the moment.

He seemed to understand, and pulled back. “Thank you.” The words were heavy with emotion. “Dinner is an excellent start.”

In the end, his probation extended to multiple dinners, but each lasted for longer, and started earlier, until four dates later, they wound up having lunch, then going for a walk through The National Gallery, so that Phoebe could show Anastasios her favourite pieces.

To Anastasios, it might have simply been a gallery, but to Phoebe, it was a shrine, and sharing it with Anastasios meant more than she could say. More than she could admit, even to herself. Deep down, fear was still holding her heart tight, making it difficult to let go and step into the future she knew he wanted them to have.

“Your father hurt you deeply,” Anastasios said, that same night, as they walked, slowly, back to the car, neither of them

willing to end their time together, just yet.

“It’s not so much that he hurt me,” she said thoughtfully, “but that he shaped me. I’m tough, Anastasios, because I keep people outside. The danger comes from letting someone in.” She lifted a hand to his chest.

“Especially someone who treated you as I did.”

Her eyes fanned shut. “I’m sorry.” Because she felt as though she was failing him, and herself, but she couldn’t help the self-protective instincts.

“Don’t apologise,” he groaned, and then, breaking the unspoken rules they’d observed for weeks, he wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her tight, breathing her in. “If all this can ever be is dinner, after dinner, after dinner, then I will be happy, because at least that is something. It’s something with you. Do you know how much I live for our time together, *agape mou*?”

A single tear slid down her cheek. She loved him. There was no sense fighting it. But how to admit it? How to fearlessly own that love?

“I feel the same,” was the best she could do, and he made a noise of relief, holding her so tight against him. “Dinner tomorrow?” It was the first time she’d asked him, and his eyes glowed with relief and pleasure.

“Absolutely. I can’t wait.”

When he arrived to pick her up, it was with a spring in his step, as an idea that had been borne years earlier suddenly seemed to have gained impetus, and Phoebe was at the heart of that.

“There’s something I want to speak to you about,” he said, as soon as she opened the door.

Phoebe lifted a brow. “Hello, to you too.”

“Hello,” he laughed, and her heart swelled, because she loved the sound of his laugh, almost as much as she loved him. “It’s more of a favour, really.”

That had her pausing. “A favour?” She opened the door wider, but didn’t move.

“The art in the vault,” he nodded.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been thinking about it, and you were right. It shouldn’t be hidden away in storage. Those are priceless, very old pieces, many of which have been in private collections for centuries.”

She shook her head, bemused that she was so lucky as to have seen them.

“I’ve spoken to the family. We would like to open a gallery.”

“Oh!” She clasped her hands together. “That’s such a wonderful idea. You already have several galleries’ worth of masterpieces.”

“I have spent many very pleasurable hours listening to you talk about art, about colour and pigmentation and preserving and canvas stretching, framing and oils. Your passion is obvious. I cannot think of anyone better to help curate the selection.”

Her stomach swooshed and her lips parted. “What exactly do you mean?”

“You’d be a coordinator,” he said. “Reporting directly to the main gallery curator.”

She stared at him as if he’d just sprouted three heads, but reality—and pride—quickly came back into focus. “That’s very kind of you, Anastasios, but surely you know me well enough to know I could never accept that kind of offer.”

“Hear me out. This would be a one-year contract. If you don’t like it, you can resign, no hard feelings.”

“Yeah, but it’s still nepotism, or whatever,” she said with a shake of her head. “You’re giving me this job because you feel bad about what happened between us, or because you feel sorry for me because of my mountain of debt, and I don’t want charity.”

“This isn’t charity, and it’s not because I love you, it’s because you’re brilliant at this, and I want you to be a part of it. It was your idea.”

His words might have warmed her if she’d been at all capable of focusing on them, but her heart was doing the most ridiculous, fast beating and her lungs were expelling every bit of air so she felt hot and woozy.

“What did you say?”

“You know how I feel about you,” he brushed that aside. “That’s not why I’m offering you this. In fact, you’d have to meet with the curator and interview formally for the position. Once you start, you’ll have nothing to do with me. My family would own the gallery—my brothers, and my mother. My own part in it would be insignificant. If it would make you accept the role, I would step back from any involvement whatsoever”

Her heart was growing, bigger and bigger and stronger and stronger and she felt the truth of his words and the beauty of his offer all at once. More than that, she felt the future shimmering right before her, a future she’d almost lost because of fear, that she was in danger of destroying altogether.

“Where would the gallery be?”

“We’re still scouting locations. Greece is the sentimental favourite.” He leaned closer. “I know that’s hardly convenient, given that you live in London, but our corporation has excellent relocation packages available. You’d have accommodation organised for the first three months, while you settled in.”

“I see,” she nodded, pretending to think about it. “And would you be based in Greece as well?”

He eyed her warily, as if assessing what she might want. “I can be anywhere,” he said after a beat. “If you were to turn down the offer, I’d probably spend more time in London.”

“Ah. Why?”

“I’m pretty sure you know the answer to that.”

Her heart thundered. “I like hearing you say it though.”

“Are you enjoying my torment?” He queried, with the ghost of a smile. With a smile that spoke not of happiness but of ruination, of doubt, and she understood that for all the power he wielded to hurt her, she held that same power within her hands. She couldn’t exercise it though. Not any longer.

“Sort of,” she lifted a hand to his chest and felt his own heart rushing to pump blood through his body. “Just a little.” Their eyes connected and a jolt of surety passed between them. “Do you promise this is based on merit?”

“Do you really need to ask that? You’re a walking art encyclopaedia and if you’d ever had the opportunity to pursue it, you’d be running your own gallery by now. I want you to have your dreams, but not because I don’t think you’ll find your own way to them, just because you deserve them now.” He hesitated. “I know that’s what he wanted too. He wanted to make up for the cards you’d been dealt, because he understood what you were up against.”

Tears filled her eyes. “I know that.” She forced her gaze to Anastasios’, needing him to understand. “But he also knew why it was important to me to succeed on my own, just as he had.”

“Is that a ‘no’ to the gallery?”

She was being torn in so many directions. She’d wanted to keep Anastasios at a distance, but her heart was needing him to be close. She wanted to grab the art gallery opportunity with both hands, but caution was a ribbon, tying her in knots. “I don’t know,” she whispered.

“I will do whatever makes you comfortable,” he murmured. “Including giving you time to think. I’ll go right now, if you would like.”

It was crunch time. She could keep him at arm’s length, until she was sure that this was the right decision, or she could go with her gut, which already knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this was right, in every single way.

“I’ve been thinking about something,” she said slowly, staring at his eyes, losing herself in their depths. She felt only

good things when she stared at him. There was no wariness, no pain. Instead, love, faith, trust and hope mixed inside of her, as well as excitement at the prospect of what they could do together. “My father was a very bad man. He hurt me often and I hated him.” She reached out, putting a hand on Anastasios’ chest. “That night in Italy, when we fought, I thought you were just the same as him, but you’re not. He was truly terrible, whereas you are a very good man, who made a mistake. You can’t promise you won’t make another mistake, and I won’t ask it of you. It’s enough to know that you will try.”

“*Christos*, Phoebe, I *can* promise you, and I do promise you. I will never hurt you, and I will never let anyone hurt you. My actions that night were out of character and I have spent a lifetime repenting them already.”

Her heart fluttered.

“Would you like me to leave, so you can think about things?”

Her heart twisted.

“No.”

His eyes flared. “Would you like to go for dinner?”

Her cells fired with pleasure. “Nope.”

“Then what would you like to do? The decision is yours, Phoebe. All yours.”

She looked over her shoulder, into her tiny bedsit, then back at Anastasios. “There’s not a lot of space, but seeing as you’re here—,”

The words hovered between them, and each knew there was so much more to what she was saying. Anastasios’ eyes were suspiciously moist, but when he spoke, his voice was pure, confidence billionaire tycoon.

“If you’re inviting me in, the answer, my beautiful, darling Phoebe, is a resounding yes.”

EPILOGUE

SHE STRETCHED AND WOULD have fallen off the narrow single bed if a strong arm hadn't banded around her waist and pulled her back, right into a wall of naked flesh. She smiled as shards of memories speared her into waking, and she spun, quickly, as excited as a little girl on Christmas morning.

“You're here.”

His eyes held hers, and his expression was cautious. “And you're happy about that?”

She lifted a hand to his cheek, moving closer so their noses brushed. “Yep.”

“No regrets?”

“Nope.”

He made a soft sound of relief and then kissed her. “Thank God.”

“Do you have plans today?”

“That depends on you.”

“It's my weekend,” she said.

“So I can have you for forty eight hours?”

She blinked, the words lighting fires in her soul. Before she could answer, he moved even closer, so their bodies were completely melded.

“Or possibly longer?”

“How long are you thinking?”

“A lifetime, at least.”

Her heart jumped about wildly, and she dropped her gaze, not sure if she was understanding him.

“I love you. I am always going to love you. And one day, when you’re ready, I want to stand in front of the world and make that official.”

Tears, happy tears, filled her eyes, as she blinked up at him. “Is that a proposal?”

“Would you accept?”

She laughed. “Hedging your bets?”

“What can I say? I like to win.”

“I think you’ve won.”

He sobered, stroking her back so shivered, desire stirring anew. “I really have. And I’ll never forget it, nor how close I came to losing.”

“But you didn’t. I’m right here.”

CORA WEAVED amongst the well-heeled guests, and felt something tighten in the center of her chest. How was it possible she felt lonely in the midst of family?

Because she was alone, she thought wistfully, looking down at her empty ring finger, frowning. Divorce was hard, but marriage had been harder. She was free, and she was glad for that, but that didn’t mean there weren’t times when she regretted, when she wished...but she’d never make that mistake again. Her marriage had been a disaster, just as her parents and cousins had warned it would be. Who met their life’s partner at seventeen? In a typical rush of spontaneity and over-confidence, she’d married in haste, on her eighteenth birthday, the enormous party at Ibiza a deliberate snub to her family and an invitation to the world.

She groaned softly, forcing her attention back to the room, her eyes landing quite naturally on Anastasios and Phoebe. Their backs were to her, as they spoke to one of Greece’s most

well-known politicians, but their hands were clasped behind her back, and even from this angle, their love was palpable. Cora turned away quickly, shocked by the tears that stung her eyes.

Her marriage had *not* been like their relationship. The mutual support and affection had been missing from the start, and whatever physical attraction had been there at the beginning had begun to wane until the dislike overtook everything else. It was a miracle she'd managed to keep it together for as long as she had.

She jostled through the room, needing fresh air, needing to be able to breathe properly, and as she cut through the room, not looking, not concentrating, her shoulder connected with something so hard and firm that she almost spun out of control. A hand reached out, curving around her upper arm, steadying her and holding her, so she blinked up into a face that was vaguely familiar and completely overpowering for how compelling handsome it was.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured, her words raspy. "I wasn't looking—"

"No, you weren't." The voice was accented and gruff. Her stomach twisted. "You were in an awful hurry."

"I just needed some air."

"Dressed like that?" His eyes travelled the length of her body and suddenly, the stunning couture gown she'd chosen for the occasion felt as though it might as well have been a string bikini. A thousand lights fired to life inside her bloodstream. She tilted her chin with a defiance she didn't feel, as her nipples tingled against the expensive silk.

"What's wrong with how I'm dressed?"

"It's snowing."

"Oh." She looked outside, her inability to breathe now had nothing to do with memories of her ex-husband and everything to do with the powerfully attractive man staring down at her.

"But if you insist, at least wear this." He shrugged out of his jacket and handed it to her. She took it on autopilot,

frowning a little.

“That’s very kind, but I have a jacket somewhere.”

“This is here. Isn’t it easier?”

Nothing about this was easy. Her eyes latched to the breadth of his torso, revealed by the removal of his jacket, and her first thought was one of utter awe. He struck her not as a man, but as a minotaur, half man, half beast, pure muscle and strength. Her throat was as dry as a desert.

“Are you sure?” Damn it, her voice was quivering with desire.

“I never offer what I’m not willing to share. Take it, *alsaghir*.”

The foreign word tripped off his tongue and she trembled a little, wrapping his jacket around her shoulders then closing her eyes as his scent engulfed her. Masculine, exotic, spiced. Her knees trembled.

“I won’t be long.” She turned and fled, her fingers shaking as she pushed open the door of the gallery and stepped onto the busy Athens street.

DEEP INTO THE ICY-COLD NIGHT, Phoebe stood in the center of the Gallery Valentina in the middle of Athens’ art precinct, with a glowing sense of accomplishment. The guests and staff were gone now, the champagne had been put away, the floors cleaned, leaving a pristine space with the art she’d hand-chosen adorning the walls.

The curator Rebecca had given Phoebe a lot of latitude, appreciating her insights and natural instinct for arrangement and placement, and for Phoebe, her work had become an extension of who she was, so she could no longer tell where she ended, and her vocation began. It felt as if her true purpose in life had been realized. The blissful happiness she experienced every day was something she’d never known possible, let alone that it would be hers.

“Well, my darling?” His voice sent goosebumps over her skin, as it always did.

She smiled as she turned to face him, and as he drew her into his arms, holding her tight, swaying a little, as if dancing to their own soundtrack. Gratitude filled her, for the courage she’d had in taking the step to be with him. Ever since that evening, she hadn’t looked back. “That was amazing.”

“You’ve certainly put together an exceptional showing.”

“Not hard with pieces like this. The media was in a frenzy.”

“I expect the gallery will be at capacity for months.”

“Definitely.” She drew back, so she could see him better. “I’m so grateful to have had the opportunity to work on this.”

“You earned it. And you proved what a natural you are. Just don’t let one of the bigger galleries headhunt you. At least, not right away.”

His faith in her made her heart swell, particularly because she knew he was right. She could feel how good she was at this.

“I’m sorry your dad isn’t here to see it,” she said, softly, glad they could speak of Konstantinos now with equal grief and sadness for the void he’d left in their lives.

“He’d have been so proud of you.” Anastasios kissed her forehead.

“I really think he would have.”

PHOEBE HAD BEEN WORKING twenty-hour days for the week leading up to the gallery’s opening, so the surprise Anastasios had planned for opening night had to be postponed. Of higher priority was getting her home, running a bubble bath then tucking her into bed for a good night’s sleep.

But in the morning, when she stepped into the kitchen, all the elaborate plans he’d made for candlelit dinners on the rooftop terrace with the accompaniment of a string quartet fell

completely by the wayside. She was so heart wrenchingly, ethereally beautiful, and he was so utterly and completely in love with her, he had to speak the words he'd been thinking for months, before they chewed through him from the inside out.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about,” he said, sipping his coffee to moisten his suddenly dry throat.

“Can coffee be a part of it? I’m so tired.”

Maybe this wasn’t the best time. Maybe she was too tired to think straight? But his nerves were stretched to breaking point and he knew he had to do this. He’d been waiting months, deciding that focusing on the gallery was most important for Phoebe, that he didn’t want to get in her way or be a distraction.

He turned and began making her coffee on autopilot. It was a small morning ritual they had, one he hoped to take part of every day for the rest of his life.

He slid the cup across the bench, then stood, still and silent, while she took her first sip.

“Okay, shoot.”

He arched a brow. It was a command, and he was more than willing to obey.

“I love you,” he said, simply, so her brow furrowed.

“This is not new information, but I’ll never get sick of hearing it.”

He laughed softly, his nerves relaxing a little.

“More than I ever knew it was possible to love someone. Being with you has blown the walls right off whatever I thought relationships were about. I’ve known for a long time that I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and what I’m asking is if you would like to spend yours with me?”

She blinked, the coffee forgotten. “You know I do.”

Was he doing this wrong? Did she understand what he was asking?

He reached above the cabinets—far too high for Phoebe to reach, let alone see—and pulled down a black velvet box. He opened it carefully, then bent down on one knee, holding the ring for her to see. She lifted her hands to her mouth and clasped them there, eyes misty.

“What I mean to ask is if you’ll marry me, Phoebe Whittaker? You are my soulmate, in every way.”

“Yes, I really think I am,” she whispered. “And you are mine.”

“Then shall we make it official?”

“Oh, you betcha.” She grinned, looking down at her fingers as he slid the diamond solitaire onto one, then stood, folding her into an embrace.

Love wrapped around them, stronger for their trials, their faith and trust built on the journey they’d had to go through to get to this point. Theirs was indeed a love that would last for all time.

EARLY THE FOLLOWING SUMMER, they held an intimate sunset ceremony on the deck of the yacht, just their closest friends and family in attendance, and with a minimum of fuss and formality. Both had wanted their day to mark their love, and they’d achieved that. It was palpable in the air.

But after the guests had disembarked at Porto Mezi, and it was just Anastasios and Phoebe on board, Phoebe caught her groom in a reflective moment.

“Are you thinking about him?” She asked gently, nuzzling close to his side.

“Indirectly.” He angled his face to Phoebe’s, a thoughtful expression on his features. “Actually, I was thinking about Ophelia, and how strange it is that she wasn’t here.”

He shrugged. “Or perhaps it would have been strange. Certainly for mum. But she’s our sister, and at some point, we’re going to have to acknowledge that. You heard the grief in her voice, the rejection she’s lived with. Our father was

wrong to exile her; it wasn't fair to her, or us. But I'm perpetuating that by keeping her a secret."

"Do you think your mum's ready to learn about her?"

"No. But she may never be. So what option do we have?"

It was a question that was too thorny to answer in that one night, but one they knew they'd have to tackle. And they would, together, side by side, facing their life's challenges as a true partnership, mutual strength derived from each other's support, and love.

THE END

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