A close-up photograph of a man from the chest up. He is wearing a dark, well-tailored suit jacket over a white dress shirt and a gold-colored tie with a fine, repeating pattern. He has a short, neatly groomed beard and mustache. His hands are clasped in front of him, holding a pair of dark-rimmed glasses. The background is a dark, textured grey.

THE
FASHION MOGUL'S
Secret Wish

SHAYLA FROST

The Fashion Mogul's Secret Wish

An Enemies To Lovers Romance

Shayla Frost

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Published in The United States of America.

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Contents

[1. MARIE](#)

[2. KARL](#)

[3. MARIE](#)

[4. KARL](#)

[5. MARIE](#)

[6. KARL](#)

[7. MARIE](#)

[8. KARL](#)

[9. MARIE](#)

[10. KARL](#)

[11. MARIE](#)

[12. KARL](#)

[13. MARIE](#)

[14. KARL](#)

[15. MARIE](#)

[16. KARL](#)

[17. MARIE](#)

[18. KARL](#)

[19. MARIE](#)

[20. KARL](#)

[21. MARIE](#)

[22. KARL](#)

[23. MARIE](#)

[24. KARL](#)

[25. MARIE](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

About

He is the enigmatic stranger who stole my heart in one unforgettable night.

Mixing business with pleasure is never a good idea.

That's how I find myself flirting with the broody stranger sitting alone in the corner.

That one night lit a fire in me, making me crave for more.

My world forever changed when a chance encounter reveals his true identity.

Karl Penfield, the wealthy fashion mogul and devoted single dad.

To make matters more complicated, he's also my best friend's brother.

When a past encounter left me pregnant, forcing me to give my baby away.

The last thing I expected was the search for my son, to lead me back to Karl.

As our hidden past threatens our growing love.

We're determined to face these challenges, but the ghosts of our past lingers like uninvited guests.

Our secrets brought us together, but the past isn't easy to forget.

If I cannot trust Karl to protect my heart, I risk losing a love I never expected to find.

Chapter 1



MARIE

“Ma’am, Mr. Howard and his associates are waiting for you in the conference room.”

I looked up from my computer noticing that my assistant, Morrison, was addressing me. I checked my watch and was alarmed at how much time I’d spent on my laptop. He looked at me with curious blue eyes, waiting for my reply.

“Thank you, Morris. I’ll be there in a minute. Also, please get the lawyers in the room. I want everything set before I get there.” He nodded and left the office. Sighing to myself, I eased out of my seat and stretched, the satisfying crack making me smile. It was time to finalize this deal with Howard. We’d been in one too many conversations on it. Finally, he was willing. Brushing through my auburn hair with my fingers, I left the comfort of my office and headed to the conference room.

It felt good to walk and stretch my legs on the way. It helped clear my mind, especially since I’d been trying to distract myself from the recent failings in my romantic life – not like it

even existed. I gave little notice to the view through the panel of windows as I walked to the conference room. The staff gave curt nods and stayed off my path; they knew better than to bump into me. I found the door to the room open. I entered and closed the door behind me.

The room was large; its circular shape made it seem more spacious. The large oval glass table dominated the room with several people sitting patiently, waiting for me. Before I could say anything, Howard rose from his seat with a grin on his face.

“Marie! You look amazing. Wow!” His voice boomed in the room, and he quickly walked over to me. I flinched internally with goosebumps rising on my skin. His arms were wide open. Out of courtesy, I gave him a side hug. I knew his goal was to press my body to his, and I wasn’t going to give him that chance.

“It’s nice seeing you. Sorry for keeping you all waiting.” I disengaged myself and walked to my seat at the head of the table. I felt the ghost of Howard’s palm on my waist, and I stopped myself from glaring at him—that bastard! Morrison pulled out my seat, and I gave him a small smile to show my thanks. He nodded and took a seat beside me. He was a quiet man but quite observant and reliable. Howard, looking a bit annoyed, unbuttoned his jacket and slouched in his seat. His eyes were fixed on me. I didn’t look at him, knowing what he was thinking.

This deal we were about to sign was important to both our companies. If not, I wouldn't tolerate this attitude from him. I was comfortable with people admiring my beauty, but Howard was just creepy about it. Still, for the deal to work, I'd have to sacrifice something, I mused. "Thank you all once again. Please, bring out the contract and have Mr. Howard's lawyers review it." I gestured to my lawyers, three men who looked bored being here. They snapped to attention and the lead attorney fished out the contract from his briefcase. He slid it on the table over to Howard's lawyers.

"Dear Marie, we're past titles, don't you think?" Howard's voice was suggestive.

I didn't take the bait. I waited for his lawyers to finish going through the contract again. We had sent them a soft copy earlier, but to do away with any suspicion they'd need to go over the hard copy.

"Mr. Howard, I could show you around if you need a friend here." Morrison spoke softly by my side. Howard snorted and looked away while Morrison chuckled to himself. The lawyers were done with the contract and showed it to Howard, who skimmed through it and nodded.

"This satisfies me. I'm sure this will be the beginning of a long working relationship, Marie." He flashed me a smile as he brought out a pen. I spared him a glance. My media house, DRP, had been seeking to expand into more households in rural areas in America, and with Howard's help, it would be much easier. He had the resources to carry it out while he

stood to get free advertising on our roster for his real estate business in upstate New York.

Howard finished signing and passed the contract to me. Morrison handed me a pen, and I signed it as well. I gave the signed contract back to my lawyers. “Morris, help these gentlemen out. I’d like to have a word with Mr. Howard here.”

“Yes ma’am.” Morrison rose and the men followed him out of the room.

I rose from my seat as well and faced Howard. “This was a win-win situation, and I’m glad we could finally come to an agreement. I hope we can work together in faith. I had more than good faith in mind. Such a win deserves to be celebrated. How about this? Do me this favor and let me take you out for a drink. We can begin to explore our new professional relationship.”

Who the hell does he think he is? I carefully eyed him, taking in his height and sly green eyes. He wasn’t the kind of man that appealed to me. However, I wanted to keep it professional and perhaps a celebratory drink would not hurt in cementing the deal.

“That sounds great. I will meet you at the garage.”

I was already leaving the room and walked quickly to get his eyes off me. A few minutes later, I retrieved my purse and left the building. The sun was already setting so I planned to get home after this. Howard brought his car to the entrance.

I contemplated whether or not I should get in. I need to drive my own car. I wouldn't have to listen to his unwelcome advances, and I could leave whenever I felt like it.

Another part of me thought to give him the benefit of the doubt. So, against my better judgement, I entered his car. Willing to forego his constant flirtations and forge a business relationship instead. After all, we just signed a contract to work together, and this is an opportunity to celebrate the beginning of a successful business arrangement. As the saying goes, *start a relationship as you expect it to continue*.

"I thought I said the garage?" I heard myself say.

"I couldn't let those pretty legs walk that far." I rolled my eyes. He laughed and drove off. The ride was smooth except he kept on talking. Bragging about his privileged lifestyle, his wealth, the women who do anything to be with him, of how successful he was – he must have been overcompensating for something, I thought. I was glad he did all the talking because I was in no mood myself.

The car parked in front of a high-end bar that sat comfortably between a French pastry shop and a boutique. He comically races around from his side of the car to open my door. I got out, not needing his help. He coughed to hide his embarrassment when I didn't take his hand. "Let's go in," he winked as he opened the large glass door in front of us. Despite my distaste, I had to admit that the place was a thing of beauty. It had a medieval Britain look to it. We walked in and took our seats.

A waiter came over to us; he spoke with a slight Scottish accent. “What would you like to have today?” His smile was congenial.

“Scotch neat and?” Howard looked at me.

“Prosecco Margarita,” I replied. The waiter returned within a few minutes. I took a sip of the drink and barely paid any attention to Howard, who was staring unabashedly at me.

“I found this place by accident. From the look on your face, you like it too. I’ll be honest with you, Marie, you’re the first woman I’ve ever brought here and that says a lot.” Did he say this to any woman to impress her or what? If he thought that would work on me, he’d better think again.

“I see.” I gave a curt reply. He looked stunned and his eyes flashed with annoyance. For God’s sake, I am a damn Rosii, not some young impressionable girl. I am a twenty five year old woman for god’s sake.

“What is it you want Marie? I’ve tried my best with you. You’re the first woman I’ve ever gone out of my way for, yet you won’t even show appreciation for—”

“For what Howard? Our deal was not a favor from you to me, and this might impress some young fool but not me. I hate games so I’ll be frank. I don’t see a romantic future between us, so kill that dream. This was a mistake.” I stood. As I was about to take my purse from the table, I saw someone sitting farther inside the bar. I couldn’t get a full glimpse of him as it was dark where he sat. Still, I could feel his burning stare on

me. For some strange reason I felt no fear; rather his gaze made me feel warm and shy.

“Marie! How dare you look down on me? Do you know how many women would kill to be in your place? Okay, calm down and sit. We can still work something out.”

I pulled my hand back as I saw him reach for me. Was he that delusional?

“I have somewhere to be and with someone far more important.” I just said that to make him leave me alone, but it sounded true. This mystery man made my insides twist with anticipation. His gaze held a promise, and I wanted to take it. Maybe, just maybe, this would prove to be a good thing after all. Unfazed, I walked toward him, ignoring Howard.

Chapter 2



KARL

I watched as she walked over to me, slowly. She looked familiar. I was curious because I felt as if I'd seen her somewhere. I wasn't sure of my intuition. I've met and been with many women; and although such a time was in the past, I couldn't help but feel she might look like someone familiar and special. Since she was walking over, I guessed she must know me. Her skirt suit hugged the curve of her waist, and her pale legs moved with the grace of a cat in heels. She mesmerized me. My erection was a sign as it strained against my pants. She reached me and waved at the free seat. She didn't wait for my reply, she sat down in the open seat across from me.

The light met her brown eyes, it made them brighter. At that moment, I wanted to reach out and kiss her soft, full lips. Something about her brought out the primal playboy side of me that I had buried.

"Couldn't help but feel your gaze across the room, stranger."
Her voice was low and soft. She spoke while holding my gaze

boldly. Few women manage that. She certainly was confident.

“I see you left that man hanging!” She understood what I meant and scoffed.

“That douchebag over there is not a man. Right now, I’d like to be nowhere around him. However, for you, I could spare a minute.” She smiled easily. I caught the joke in her reply.

“A minute won’t be enough to take you to the stars and beyond, woman.” I was now feeling the heat from my body rise. My suit felt tight, especially with my length straining against my trousers.

She laughed, clearly enjoying herself. “And you wish to take me to the stars, huh?”

“I can, pretty bird.” I said, happy we were shrouded by the darkness in the corner booth. I leaned into her, blowing a slight breath her way. She looked at me and sighed. Her eyes widened with mischief. Suddenly, I felt her foot resting on my crotch. It was my turn to widen my eyes.

“Stranger, it seems my foot would just be enough to send you over the edge.” She pressed her foot lightly on my erection, and I felt myself twitching rapidly. My breath was strained. Damned woman. No one had been able to act this boldly or make me feel so turned on in years except...I thought to a few years back, a dark lit club and drunken sex. Maybe that’s why she looks so familiar, but the connection wasn’t strong, and she didn’t seem to recognize me.

I trapped her foot between my thighs, then used her foot to rub up and down my length, feeling it grow harder and hotter. Her face was red, and she was breathing hard, obviously excited as well. I wanted to take her out of there so I could savor the look on her face alone. The corner we were in was secluded, but it wouldn't be long before someone came near us. The door to the bar banged close as the man she came with left.

"I...this is unexpected. I should leave." She looked shy. She had taken her foot back and I missed the feeling of it on my erection. She rose to her feet unsteadily. I gave her a wolfish grin and got to my feet. Her back was already to me as she turned to leave.

I pressed my body against hers and breathed in her scent—minty cocoa. I wrapped my hands around her torso, pushing her breasts a bit. She drew in a sharp breath in wonder and rested her body on mine in surrender. "Why don't we go somewhere more private." She nodded. I pulled her through a side door to my left and entered a passageway that led to a private room. Although it was a bar, it offered private rooms to its customers who needed them. I had a rented room since I frequented the place a lot.

I reached the door, and as I was opening it, she pressed her body to my back, her hands roaming wantonly. I enjoyed her caresses and desired more. Turning to face her, I carried her so she could wrap her legs around my waist. Immediately, I kissed her, long and hard. My mind opened to so many possibilities with her in my arms. I walked backward into the

room and kicked the door shut. I had no time to look around. I was focused on this divine being in my arms.

Through the haze of our kisses, we fell on the bed. I took a moment to stand and help her out of her clothes. She in turn helped me out of my suit. I wanted to get in bed, but she raised a hand to stop me. She pushed her hair out of her face and grabbed my length. I curled my toes as she moved her hand up and down slowly. She went further to kiss the tip and sucked it hard. Her tongue wrapped around me, and she pushed me further into her mouth. I gasped, feeling so much stimulation from just that motion. She made a great effort, trying to take everything in. I kept her hair out of her face and allowed her to access my full length, bobbing her head up and down.

She stopped and lay down on the bed. I took the hint and climbed on top of her. She smiled warmly at me, pulling on my heartstrings. I kissed her again. This time slowly. I felt her boobs in my hands. Her body responded readily to my touch. In fact, she was hungry for everything I gave her.

I made her go further up on the bed and put each of her legs on my shoulders. She was already wet and waiting for me to enter. Condom, I thought, but it was too late. I was already thrusting, enjoying the sounds she made and reveling in the pleasure I got thrusting in and out.

“You’re so tight baby.”

Having sex with her felt different—more intimate and daring. I could say real. I placed her sideways and continued. My face was closer to hers now. She put an arm around my neck. I

kissed her as I thrust repeatedly into her. We had no words to say; our bodies responded to each sound we made. She held my gaze and kissed me so hard my lips hurt.

Her muscles tightened around me, and I felt her jerk. Soon her body succumbed to the wave of pleasure flooding out of her honey pot. When she was done, she let out shuddering breaths. I kissed her forehead tenderly and thrust into her like a storm. I pulled out and spilled on her thighs.

Her replete, satisfied look made me want to roar knowing I put that smile on her face. I went to the bathroom to clean up and brought back a washcloth. She reached for it, but I moved it away. "I created this mess, so it is my responsibility to clean it up my angel."

She smiled at this and pulled me close, snuggling against my chest.

I was surprised that she slept soundly. It was a surreal experience. Kissing her cheek, I closed my eyes for a minute to catch my breath. I woke with a start, looking at my watch; it was six in the morning. I looked at the woman beside me. Most women I slept with had one motive or another; however, she wanted nothing but my time. It was a strange feeling, like she was twisting my heart all up. No, I couldn't let that happen. Emotions were too risky.

I checked to make sure she was sleeping before I got up from the bed. After a quick shower, I dressed silently and left the room. I felt bad leaving her like that, but I couldn't push

this any further. I left instructions that no one should come to the room and left.

I had to get back home and see Jason before it was time to head to the office. He and I had a special bond, and although I wasn't always around due to the nature of my job, I made sure to create time for us. It was a pity I couldn't find his mother. Who was she? I've thought about this for so long. I thought about it again as I drove home.

When I got home, I parked in front of the large oak doors and walked to the door. I passed the passage with the potted plants and strode to the parlor. It was dimly lit by the morning light filtering in through the curtains. On one of the couches close to the windows, I saw someone illuminated by the light.

Laura walked up to me, a cocky smile on her face. "Baby, you're home. The servants won't let me see our son. That's beside the point. Why are you coming home at this time? I've been waiting for you since yesterday. You don't know how worried I've been." I batted her hand away when she tried to reach for me.

"What are you talking about, and why are you here? I don't recall inviting you."

She pouted, keeping her hands to herself. "Why? I'm here for Jason and for you, my one and only love. I was a fool for ever letting you all go."

Oh? She must be mad.

Chapter 3



MARIE

I rolled dreamily on the bed, feeling sore but warm and energetic. Remembering who I was with, I opened my eyes to see him again, only to see an empty bed. I felt it with my hand—it was cold. Shocked, I sat up and looked around. The room was well furnished and cozy; nothing was disturbed. I saw my scattered clothing and not his. What had happened? I opened my mouth to call to him but stopped. I didn't know his name. I clenched my jaw in frustration. How could I have let him slip away without getting his name?

Regardless, I felt something—a connection I believe existed between us...but what it meant still eluded me. My phone rang, and I reached for my purse on the floor. Finding my phone, I saw it was Morrison calling. I sighed, looking at the time. I would be late for work. I answered the call. "Morris, Good morning. Is there a problem?"

He replied with a calm voice, "No, ma'am. It's just that you are rarely this late without a reason, and you're currently

behind schedule.” Of course, why else would he call? I got out of bed, the phone still to my ear.

“I’ll be there soon. I just need to sort some things out here.” I ended the call and dashed into the bathroom. I took a quick shower and left. Before I exited the building, I asked after the stranger, but they said they could not give out such private details about their customers.

I was frustrated. I took an Uber home. Once I arrived, I took a more relaxing shower and prepared for my day. I donned a wine-colored suit and pulled my hair back in a tight ponytail. I felt free and comfortable; my designer got it right every time. I finished the look with light makeup and pink lipstick.

I left the house and drove to the company. I left my other car there yesterday, why didn’t I think to take an Uber? I’ll have to find a way to send one of them back home. Morrison could help. When I parked in the company parking lot, I was shocked to see how high in the sky the sun had gotten. I was rarely ever late for work and hurried inside the building. The company was bustling with people, busy on different projects. I took the private elevator and rode to the top floor. The door opened to show Morrison waiting with a file. “Welcome. Sorry but I’ve stalled the board of directors for as long as I can. They’re going over the budget they had previously agreed to and are currently discussing how to integrate your added proposals.”

I took the file from him. “You’ve done well. Send someone to take the car that I drove to work home. I’ll deal with this.” I

took the elevator and I headed to the directors meeting. They were like vultures; however, they were birds I knew well and could manage them. As I had predicted, they all folded and agreed to the addition to the previous budget. In fact, they gave me more than expected. They always complain before it is approved and smile at their profits. I put that thought to the side and entered my office.

The windows were open, letting in natural light. The room was familiar and comfortable. However, an annoying bug was sitting in my chair. I narrowed my eyes in annoyance but stayed composed. I closed the door behind me without thinking and walked straight to my desk. The look on my face made him take his legs he had propped on my desk off, but he sat tight, with a foolish grin on his face.

“How did you get in my office, Howard?” It came out like a growl. Somehow, he got past Morrison, who wasn’t around.

He sniffed and rubbed his hands together sheepishly. “I missed you and wanted to see you. After what happened yesterday, I felt I should give you the space to think. So, what is your decision?”

What! The! Hell?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and you’re getting on my nerves, Mr. Howard Spencer. Get out of my seat and my office this instant!” I ordered, already tired of the episode.

“I won’t until you answer me. I know you went to some other guy yesterday, but I don’t care because I love you and

will forgive you. Just accept my offer and become my girlfriend. You know I'm the best one for you."

This had to stop; otherwise, I'd go mad. Yes, he had asked me this yesterday, but I ignored him. I was focused on the stranger, but he obviously was not getting my disregard for him, or he was immune to all my rejections.

I reached for the telephone and dialed an emergency number.

"Hello, ma'am?" A security guard answered with a hoarse voice.

"I have a pest I want to get rid of—now!" I slammed the phone down. I fixed my gaze on Howard. His smile was gone, knowing what was about to happen to him.

"You can't do that! This is why women like you live long and die sad and alone. You don't appreciate men like me!" He jumped up, snarling in rage.

I was no longer going to waste my breath on him. He tried to walk to me, but the door opened and five muscular and armed guys walked in.

One of the guards spoke, "Ma'am, where's the threat?" I think he was looking for someone more threatening.

I waved my hand at Howard and with a sneer I said, "Get this thing out of my sight; and on your way out, send in someone from housekeeping." They got to work, immediately restraining Howard and dragging him out despite his protests. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, annoyed at how things had turned out.

Housekeeping came in a second later, and I motioned for her to clean off my desk. She left after she was finished. I took my seat, opened my laptop and began my work.

I was about to give my time to company work when I recalled the stranger at the bar. I pulled up my social media pages and searched, using different criteria but not really knowing what I was looking for. Without a name, it would be nearly impossible to find out anything about him. I stopped searching and leaned back in my seat.

For a moment, I closed my eyes and tried to remember him. His face was vivid in my imagination, and I smiled at the intensity of the emotion I remembered in his eyes. At the back of my mind, I saw a vague image of someone who might be him. It was a memory I had suppressed during a wild night out. I had drunken sex with someone at a club, losing my virginity. It wasn't traumatic. I just couldn't remember anything about it-or the man.

However, the pregnancy that came out of the encounter was real. I was so stupid five years ago. It was a dark period in my life. I was so overwhelmed with embarrassment that I hid the pregnancy from my overprotective brothers and friends.

When I was in labor, the thought of calling up my brothers or their wives was tempting. What could I have said, *I am sorry I didn't share the news with you*. In the end, I was alone and almost went mad from the pain.

Sadly, when the child was born, the joy many spoke of when they gave birth didn't happen for me. I felt hollow and spent. I

had to have the nurses help me feed him. I felt like a shell of my former self. Annoyed and frustrated, I decided that I couldn't keep him.

I left the child at the club Ithaca. The same club that my brain associated with the root of my issue. It was at club Ithaca that I lost my virginity and became pregnant. I didn't hate the child; I was just ashamed of myself—young and dumb and not ready to be a mother.

He wouldn't stop crying and every time I looked at him, the urge to shake him until he stopped was overwhelming. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. I just existed. I sought the help of a psychologist. I later learned that I had suffered from postpartum depression.

Even after that, I could not completely absolve myself.

I wish I had been wiser; maybe I should have given him to a childless couple or a nanny to raise him—then I'd be able to see him again. I could slap myself, my brothers would have done everything in their power to find the father and take care of my son. However, at the time, I was too ashamed. He should be four years old by now. I wondered where he was and if his life was good. My heart ached with pain and the guilt was overwhelming.

I absently wiped my cheeks. My hand came back wet—I was crying. I had to do something, right the wrong. I forgot about the stranger and reached for my mobile to call a private investigator I know.

“Chris, thanks for answering. I have a very important case. I would appreciate it if you could drop everything and focus on it. Please, this is very important. I should have done this a while ago.” I struggled to keep the desperation from my voice.

“Okay. What’s the case about? Let’s hear it.” I let myself feel relieved for a moment. The next moment, I told him all I could remember about the incident five years ago. He promised to work on it and get back to me. I just had to wait, something I hated doing. Remembering the situation of my brother Lorenzo, and his wife, Crystal, I wondered if having a child out in the world was a trait or a family curse.

A call came in, and I answered without looking, “Marie! missed me? Girl, believe it or not, I will be coming home soon and would love to hang out.”

“Shut up, Lena! My God, that’s great news. We must meet; there’s so much I have to tell you.” I exclaimed with emotion. If there was anyone I needed right now, it was her.

Selena was my best friend. We met about four years ago when she helped me through a difficult period. I think of Lena as my sister. It feels like we have known each other all our lives. I miss her something fierce. She always knew what to do, how to solve a problem, or just the right words to say.

“That’s the spirit. Keep the tea hot, and I promise I will bring you some of the goodies from my travels. They’re to die for.” I shared in her enthusiasm. She always brought back great gifts whenever she was out of the country.

“Truly, Lena, I have missed you. Welcome home in advance.” I sighed into the phone.

Chapter 4



KARL

This was a strange scenario. I found it hard to believe she of all people would appear in front of me, claiming Jason as hers. She tried to look bold under my gaze, but I saw how her hands shook.

“Come on, don’t be stuck up. It’s me, remember?” She spoke indignantly, spinning slowly for me to see the dress she wore. I looked away wondering why no one told me of her arrival. I turned around at the sound of someone approaching.

“Good morning, Sir. Miss Laura came late last night, and I tried reaching you; unfortunately, I couldn’t reach you on your cell phone. Since she is a family friend, I let her in. However, she was determined to wait.”

She looked apologetic. Sighing, I rubbed my temple. It was true. Laura was a regular visitor when she and I were dating. We were on again, off again over the years. I never gave the order not to let her in after our breakup. I discovered later that she put an aphrodisiac in my drink, forcing me have sex with her without a condom. Still thinking about it now made me

clench my jaw until it hurt - I was always careful to use a condom. I sighed, remembering that last night I had failed to do that. If she was right about Jason, then she must have succeeded. Why then did she drop him off at club Ithaca.

“Laura, you should go back to where you came from. If your claim is true, I’ll consider a favorable arrangement.” I had no intention of being in a relationship with her again, even if she was truly Jason’s mother. What happened between us five years ago meant nothing to me. I never felt any connection to any of the women I’ve bed, except one.

I was on another of my regular benders when she walked into the club. I felt her more than saw her and when our eyes connected across the crowded dance floor, well what happened next was inevitable. Tall, petite, cute as a button. I was a goner. It was, in six words, *the best night of my life*.

I turned away from Laura, about to make my way upstairs. I expected her to leave after I had turned her down.

“You can’t do that. I came all this way to see you and my child, and you’re just going to throw me out. Look, you don’t have to be cold to me. I have good intentions; that’s why I’m here. Please, I want to see my son and hopefully rekindle the flame between us.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. I had no time to deal with her. I didn’t believe her for a moment, yet I considered what she said. I had to give her a chance if she was truly Jason’s mom.

She has never been so emphatic in her claim before and that caused alarm bells to go off in my head. Jason was mine, of

that, I am sure. I have a DNA result to prove it, although a part of me knew that the moment he was left at the club, with a note in his meagre belongings that read “*He was conceived here on July 15th 2018.*”

“Fine. You may stay but don’t dream of coming near me.”

She smiled and winked. The look she got back made her look away, ashamed. Never again was I going to get involved with her. I said what I truly felt about her presence. She wasn’t welcome, but I could tolerate her for a while.

Rose has been my live-in housekeeper for over 10 years, and often doubles as Jason’s nanny sometimes. I motioned her over and asked... “Rose, show her to one of the guest rooms. She’ll be our guest for a while.” I walked up the stairs, a plan forming in my mind. One that I will execute without Laura’s knowledge.

At the top of the stairs, I made my way to Jason’s room. His room was opposite mine, which made it easy to get back to my room when I was done with him.

I opened the door and entered, making sure it didn’t creak too much. The room was dim with illuminating blue and purple night lights lining the walls; they gave the room an ambient feeling. Jason liked them a lot. I walked to his bed and saw that he was asleep. For the first time today, I smiled warmly seeing a copy of my face sleeping peacefully.

Jason was already four years old and looked more like me each day. What made him different was his auburn hair, which was different from my black hair—he must have gotten it from

his mother. I smiled, thinking about the lady from last night with the beautiful auburn hair. What were the chances that I could make her become Jason's mom. I snorted at the thought, which made Jason open his eyes.

"Dad, you're back!" His voice was sluggish, but his eyes were bright with joy.

"Hey, buddy, yes. I'm sorry I missed dinner with you yesterday. I was very busy finalizing a last-minute deal at work. I hope you can forgive me?" I asked as he hugged me. I rubbed his hair slowly, letting him come into my arms. I had never had this kind of relationship with my dad before he died, he was a cold man through and through. I didn't want that for my son. Selena, my little sister, was the only reason I stayed with my dad for as long as I did.

"I forgive you Dad, but, Dad, you missed out on so many fun things. Like..." I put a finger to his lips to stop him. He grumbled affectionately.

"We can talk about it later. Now, sleep a while before breakfast." I tucked him back into bed and watched as he winked before closing his eyes to sleep. He slept easily, something I found hard to do. Sighing, I left his room and went to mine.

I took off my clothes and got into the shower. When I was done, it was eight in the morning. I picked a navy suit and dressed quickly. I had slightly curly hair, which I smoothed back to give my face a sharp look, then I added a vintage classic watch on my wrist. After dressing, I left my room and

headed for the dining room. The cook, Ruiz, had already set up my breakfast: French toast, scrambled eggs with a cup of espresso. The staff knew my routine by now, so I didn't have to tell them everything. I was also glad I didn't have to see Laura before I left.

I finished eating and cleaned my hands with a napkin. It was a few minutes to nine. I looked up to see Jason running to me, "Dad!" he screeched as he crashed into me with a hug. Behind him was Rose, standing at a respectful distance.

"Sit and let Rose get you something to eat. I have to go to work, buddy. How about I get you something on my way home." I pinched his cheeks as I led him to a seat. Rose took the cue and brought him his food, which included fruit, pancakes, and a glass of milk. I left him to eat his meal and headed to my study to get some important files.

Walking past the sitting room and the hallway leading to the recreational rooms, I saw the door to my study opened on its own. Laura walked out and looked around. When her eyes caught mine, she jumped in shock. "My god, you scared me!" She patted her chest in relief.

"Why are you here?" It was a layered question. She looked embarrassed.

"I wanted to try my luck at finding you when I couldn't locate your room." I huffed as I walked around her and entered my bedroom.

Before I closed the door, I said, "Be careful, you're currently on thin ice. I do not want to see you around here; you have no

business being up here. Stay where I asked you to. Your room is on the other side of the house. If you don't want to, then by all means, get out."

She flinched and walked away quickly. Closing the door, I looked around the dark room, flicking the lights on to see if anything was out of place. Satisfied, I shrugged; there wasn't anything here that she could steal or use.

I went to my desk, and as I pulled out the files I needed, I noticed that some papers in the drawer were scattered. What was she looking for? I had to keep my guard up, as Laura was after something. I shouldn't dismiss her so easily. Now she has gone too far. It is time to implement my plans,

My phone rang. I answered immediately seeing that it was Selena. She was a busy body, always traveling and posting pictures of her adventures to exotic locations around the world. I sometimes envied her freedom. "Selena, how are you?" I asked, cordially.

"Fine, fine. Karl, I'll be home soon. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Also, I miss my nephew. I've been away for too long." There was nostalgia in her voice.

"That's right. I'll be expecting you soon. Should I come pick you up?"

"Nope, I'll be at my best friend's place for a while. Then, I'll come home."

"Anyways, just keep me informed. Bye, Sel."

I looked around the room before I stepped out. It would ease some of my burden to have her around. Anyway, who was the best friend? She had never mentioned her before. It wasn't like I kept up with her private life. We'll see when she gets back.

Chapter 5



MARIE

Earlier in the morning, Selena informed me that she had arrived at the airport and was waiting for me. I canceled my schedule and drove to the airport to pick her up. When I arrived, I parked and stepped out of the car to go find her. I entered the airport and checked the lobby.

“Marie! Over here!” I saw her immediately. She wore a white faux fur coat and black gloves paired with a fitted silver dress. It had a slit that showed off her toned leg. Around her were several pieces of luggage and more bags than I could count. Her raven hair fell lazily behind her back.

She smiled brightly at me. “You came.”

“Of course, I did! You look great, Lena. Might I ask what you’ve got here? This is a lot!” People were walking around her to avoid bumping into her stuff.

“Help me get these into your car. I didn’t arrange for pick up as I wanted to hang with you for a little while. I’m ready to leave here, let’s go” I nodded, and together, we got all her stuff

into the trunk and the backseat. On our journey home, she described beautiful places, foods and the animals she had encountered on her journey. I was happy for her, and our conversation was something I had missed.

I got back home and got out of the car. “You know, you should get less stuff next time. This is more than a handful” I was now taking her bags out of the trunk while she took the ones in the backseat.

“Great advice, but I won’t listen. Wait till you see what I got for you.” She laughed. We’ve had this conversation so many times that it was already a joke between us. We successfully brought her things inside but left them piled in the corner in the foyer.

Selena took off her jacket and heels and walked barefoot to the bar. I went to the living room and picked a perfect spot by the window that revealed the pool with swan pool floats floating on it. Selena returned with two glasses and a bottle of red wine. She popped the cork and served us. Taking a sip of the wine, I was grateful for the warmth.

She settled into the chair beside me. “This is great, isn’t it. Friendship, wine and relaxation. Nothing to worry about...” she said with a sigh.

I looked out the window in a daze. “Well, I met a man a few days ago, and ever since he has been on my mind. Can you imagine he left me without giving me his name or contact!” I huffed a breath in annoyance. I had already given up searching

for his identity. I found nothing, and I just had to let it go. No hard feelings, right? Wrong. I kept dreaming of him.

“Hey, I know that look. He was that good, huh? Never mind that, forget about him. If he is yours, even the devil will fail to take him from you. Come on, cheers to us and to a good life!” We clinked glasses and enjoyed the moment.

Later, she showed me the beautiful dresses she had gotten for me. Lena knew what I liked, and they fit perfectly. She knew I could afford anything I wanted, but this was her way of showing she cared.

I remember the day we met. It was a year after my pregnancy. We had bumped into each other at a boutique and picked up the same dress at the same time. I allowed her to have it, and she offered to introduce herself with drinks. We bonded over our love of fine wine and fashion. Her charm and energy brought my life back from the old monotonous activities.

She was about to leave, mentioning her brother, Karl, and Jason, her brother's son. I'd seen a few of his pictures-a cute child who looked like Karl. She rarely spoke of him over the course of our four-year friendship. Only that he was secretive and a man-whore. In my mind, the two don't go together, but I chose not to comment. I always got a faint hurt in my heart whenever I saw the child because I had lost my own son. I had not even given him a name or got to look at him properly.

I'd seen some younger photos of Selena and Karl when they were teenagers; however, Karl insisted on not taking more

recent photos. On a few occasions, I tried to meet with him, but he always called to say he couldn't make it. We always gave him the benefit of the doubt since he owned Vance Styles, one of the most renowned company in the fashion industry. He was always traveling or stuck at one fashion event or another. Thinking about it now, the mystery man did look familiar—an older and more mature version of Karl than what I'd seen in the old photos. I laughed it off, thinking it was impossible.



The next day, I got to the company and headed straight to my office. I was glad no one bothered me. In fact, I was feeling chipper without Howard or his antics. Going over the latest cable TV metrics of the company, I responded to the knock on my door. Morrison, looking composed and elegant as always, walked in with a smile. “Ma’am, good news. Vance Styles just reached out to us about a behind the scenes operations of their company, and a lot more. They agreed to our terms. However, before anything is set in stone, they said their CEO would like to meet with you to be sure of our cooperation.”

His voice hinted that I should agree immediately. It caught me by surprise. This would be my first time seeing Karl, the CEO of Vance Styles and it would be in a professional capacity. Vance Styles was a major fashion brand with headquarters in New York. Although relatively new to the scene, they had made a name for themselves and were competing with the top brands. From fashion to textiles, the

brand had cemented itself as the people's favorite while also maintaining a reputation for modern luxury clothing. However, Karl was something of an enigma. No media coverage of him—not even images or a social media handle. I had once joked with Selena that her brother might actually be a long-lived vampire in hiding.

“Morris, that would be great. I'd like to meet with him and get the ball rolling.” This was an opportunity for my company to get an exclusive interview and a behind the scenes look at who the public knows as the mystery CEO. I imagined Karl to be somewhat of an eccentric, who liked to stay away from the public eye. At least, in Selena's own words, *he loved his privacy*.

“Umm, Mr. Penfield has already set the time for the meeting for today at one p.m. He mentioned that if you didn't come, it meant it wasn't meant to be.”

Eccentric indeed. “That's fine. Get back to them that I'm available, and we can meet. Update my schedule and forward the location to me. I'd like to get there early.” Morrison nodded. He swiped on his tablet, and I received the address. It was a French restaurant situated at the top of a corporate building, open only to those with an exclusive card, purchased at a high cost. I'd been to a few meetings there with some clients. As long as someone had the exclusive card, there'd always be a reserved table.

I prepared to get there early to set a professional tone for the meeting. In no time, I was out of the building. I got into my

car and drove out of the parking lot. It was a long journey, and with New York's traffic, it took longer. When I parked outside the building, I saw that I was thirty minutes early. I headed over to the glass door.

There were two security guards at the entrance. One of them opened the door to let me in. Familiar with the building's layout, I passed the ornately adorned lobby and went straight to the elevator. I was the only one getting in, so I rode up alone. I was already thinking about how I'd tell the tale of this meeting to Selena.

The doors opened, and I stepped out. My heels made soft clicking sounds on the glass floor as I walked to the entrance of the restaurant. I passed the door and went to the desk, where a young blonde woman was waiting with a smile.

"Welcome, ma'am. May I see your card?" Her voice was professional but amiable.

I showed her my card. You can only access this meeting if escorted or showing exclusive proof of membership. She looked at the card and nodded. "*This way ma'am*" "I have a meeting here with Mr. Penfield. He should have a table reserved for us. I'm Marie-Ann Rosii," I said effortlessly. Her eyes shone, and she smiled more warmly now.

"Miss Rosii, that's right. Mr. Penfield is waiting for you. I'll lead you to his table." I hadn't expected him to be here earlier than me. Shrugging mentally, I followed the waitress past several tables till we reached one occupied by a man whose

back was to us. Wait, I recognize that back. “Mr. Penfield, your guest has arrived.”

“Quite early,” a familiar voice said. He turned to face me, and the shock I felt must have been vivid on my face. He was the no-name stranger. Well, right now he had a name; he was one of the most powerful people in America and my best friend’s brother. I cursed inwardly. I should have known that he was Karl. How could I be so blind?

I kept the shock off my face as best I could and tried to look composed. He waved the waitress away and eyed me curiously, with eyes so deep and black that I felt like I was being sucked into them.

“Miss Rosii?” he called softly. I regained my composure and walked to the seat. He gave me a sly look, although I could see the shock he was trying to hide. “Please, sit.” I did, wondering if he had planned this all along.

Chapter 6



KARL

She sat stiffly in the seat in front of me. I could understand her shock. I didn't expect this—to see her again after what had happened between us. I recalled my sister telling me that she had a friend named Marie from the Rosii family. I wasn't too interested in getting to know her. It was stupid not knowing anything about her before this meeting. I really didn't know how Selena would react to our relationship if that's what we have. I looked at her curiously. I still felt like the familiarity was deeper, but the memory was stuck in a fog in the back of my mind.

She looked like she was relaxing. I smiled a little to ease her nerves. “What would you like to have?”

“Anything, as long as it's edible.” She held my gaze, a challenge in her eyes. I remembered that look. Her brown eyes lit up with amusement as she looked at me approvingly. I waved my hand, and the waitress came immediately.

“Get us two plates of beef bourguignon and a generous serving of your vegan salad. Also, bring a bottle of Roagna

Crichet Paje, 1998.” She nodded and stepped away. I brought my attention back to her and saw that she was still staring at me.

“You’ve known I was your sister’s best friend all this time?” She looked perplexed. I shook my head.

“No. And who said it was wrong getting together with my sister’s best friend?” I stopped, chuckling when I saw the dark look on her face. “Easy. I’m just as shocked as you are. I rarely pay attention to anything other than my work. I heard Selena mention your name on a couple of occasions and during a general meeting when we needed a competent company for our upcoming project. I like to meet with the CEO of a company I am about to work with to get an impression.” For a minute I thought she wouldn’t respond, but I saw her relax more.

“And do I surpass your expectation?” She rested her back on the seat and crossed her legs. I stared unabashedly at the slight curve of her shirt, revealing pale soft breasts. Although she looked unconcerned, I could see the blush across her cheeks. She was a beautiful woman with an expressive face. I was stunned, seeing her in the full light of day, because I could see a resemblance with Jason. It was just me over-thinking probably. I stopped myself. Though I joked about what happened. I couldn’t move forward with her romantically until Selena knew of this.

“That’s inconclusive. So, DRP media house? That’s quite huge. I’m aware of the Rosii empire and its extensive network,

but you being at the helm is quite surprising,” I noted with pride.

“You think I’m too young or what? Don’t look down on me Karl,” she scoffed, scrunching her nose.

“I like my name on your lips. Marie, a beautiful name. I wish I knew it earlier. Marie, Marie...” I said it repeatedly like I was tasting the finest wine.

She put a hand under her chin and watched me with a lazy smile; the question she asked next made me pause. “Why did you leave? I thought we had something great going on. Then I wake up to an empty bed and no contact information. Is that the kind of guy you are?” There was a hint of bitterness in her voice.

“Sounds like you missed me. And...” I stopped as the waitress arrived with our order. She served the food and poured the wine into our glasses and left. Marie glanced around and inhaled the aroma.

“You’re full of yourself.” She still didn’t smile. “You can’t just leave a woman like that, Karl. An apology would go a long way and then maybe I could forgive you.”

I chuckled, “I don’t remember asking for one. However, after this meeting, hopefully your opinion of me will change.” I raised my glass to hers; she begrudgingly raised hers and we toasted. A comfortable silence settled between us. I watched her as she ate slowly and elegantly, tasting the meal delicately. I kept on recalling how soft her lips had felt on mine. She saw me staring and raised her eyes.

I winked at her and ate from my plate, savoring the bursts of flavors in my mouth. I caught her watching me and licked my fork slowly. She let out a sound like a moan and rolled her eyes at me. I stopped teasing her, and we ate together. When we were done, I called the waitress over to remove the plates.

“From what I see, my meeting with you is better than the one you had with that guy,” I said, grinning.

“Are you always this cocky? Get a grip; you still have more to prove.” She laughed despite trying to hold it in.

“I don’t need to prove anything. I have done that and am willing to do that again, only if you’re ready.” I winked; she rolled her eyes, blushing. On a serious note, I told her the truth. “I did think of you all this while. We had something magical,” I confessed.

“I didn’t expect you to acknowledge it. I guess you’re not that bad yourself.” We were now feeling relaxed in each other’s presence. I was once again captured by her smile and the challenging look in her eyes.

“I’m better than that. About our meeting today, I guess you have been briefed. However, I want to discuss it in depth and how to make this project a success.” I was serious now.

“What’s this project about?” She had a focused look in her eyes. I nodded appreciatively.

“It’s going to be a new fashion season next month, and my company is going to be showing our new collection. What makes this special is the fact that this is not just new; it will be

revolutionary. I want your team to record the creative process and conduct interviews with the designers, models, and other important figures behind the scenes. When fashion week is over, we will release this as a documentary to ramp up the impression of our collection in the public eye.” She nodded thoughtfully.

“I hear you’re a great designer yourself. Are you planning to reveal any of your work? Few people have gotten to wear your looks in a while.”

“Yes, that would be the highlight of the show.” I had put time into making this something to be remembered for a long time—fashion and its impact on culture had long been a dream of mine.

“Then, we’re going to have to interview you and get to know your creative process in more depth.”

I hadn’t thought of that. I rarely appeared in public or did interviews. I consider myself a private person. The less people and the public knew about you, the better. I have watched the media tear apart people’s lives with lies and half-truths and I have vowed never to find myself in that situation. I prefer to operate in the shadows and allow the public to speculate on the real Karl Penfield.

However, since discovering that I am a dad, I’ve had to change my lifestyle and buried my playboy persona. This would be my first in a very long while.

“I agree, but I want you to do the interview,” I said and winked. I guess that was a yes.

“After this is said and done, I’d like to get my own exclusive outfit made from one of your designers. Karl, this is another condition of mine. Agreed?”

She’d look great in any of my designs. I had something in mind. “You would do my designs justice. That’s all for now. We can settle the other mundane issues about the cooperation later with our lawyers. I’d like us to get started soon. When would you be ready for the contract review and signing?”

“Tomorrow would be perfect. I’ll get my people working on it today. I’ll forward the time of the meeting to you.” She looked satisfied with the arrangement. She was an interesting woman. I was tempted to pursue whatever we had between us further, but I held back. Flirting and sex were one thing, but when emotions were involved, it could get tricky.

“Fine by me. I’ve spent more time than I ought to. I must get back to work. Can you get back safely?”

“I can and I will. Thanks for the concern, though.” She rose, putting on her coat.

“Hold on, let me escort you to your car.” She held her bag in her left hand and came to me, giving me her right hand. I took it and stood up. We linked our hands. Even with her heels, she was considerably shorter than me. The waitress came for my card and returned it as soon as she was done.

We walked together to the elevator. The doors opened and we entered. We made small talk about the restaurant and its appeal. I was impressed by the breadth of her knowledge when

it came to architectural design. There was more to her to know, but I held back.

We got out of the elevator and left the building. The sun filled my body with warmth. She rubbed my arm and motioned for us to continue. We got to her car. The black Audi sat comfortably away from the other cars; we had a clear view of the road. A few feet away, my car was parked.

“Here we are. I must go now. Thanks for the meal and great conversation.” I brushed her hair out of her face tenderly. “We could try this sometime later. For now, I must see you off.”

Her hand was on my chest, directly above my heart, a steady beat answered her touch.

“Fair enough.” She opened her car door. As she turned to enter the car, I tried to kiss her cheek. Rather, our lips met. Her eyes flashed with mirth, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. Our lips separated for a moment. “Nice play, Karl.

“My pleasure,” I offered and wrapped my arms around her. I leaned in to kiss her again. This time we made sure to kiss slowly with more tongue. I breathed in her scent and enjoyed the feeling of our lips pressed together.

We stopped kissing, and I watched her enter her car. “Bye, stranger.”

“Bye, Marie-Ann.” She blew me a kiss, closed the door, and drove off. I adjusted my jacket and walked to my car. I still wondered how Selena would react once she heard about this.

Chapter 7



MARIE

I finally could look forward to another meeting with Karl. I was excited, seeing as he hadn't refused my advances. Though he acted like a tough guy, underneath all that, I was sure he had a soft and caring side. These thoughts swam in my mind as I prepared to go to work.

I picked out a tan suit and pink shirt, a gift from Selena. I hadn't had the chance to tell her about Karl and our meeting. There'd be time for that, I thought. I quickly straightened my hair and finished my makeup. I did my best to look professional and even a bit sexy since I was meeting with him today. I wanted his eyes on me alone. Looking at myself again in the mirror, I smiled brightly, assured of my charms.

I took my bag, my laptop inside, and turned on my phone. As I was going down the stairs, notifications from several news outlets flooded it. The headlines were all sensational, they were all talking about me and Karl. Of course, they didn't know his identity and kept on referring to him as a "mystery man". Images of our parking lot kiss made me smile. *I have*

you now, I thought happily. I had kissed him on a whim yesterday, but I also knew this was going to catch the attention of the media. A Rosii kissing someone? They loved that.

I went straight to the kitchen and made coffee, which I poured into my to-go cup. Even with how big my house was, I rarely had visitors or staff working at all hours. I liked it that way. I grabbed my coffee and left. Getting into the car, I drove past the automatic gate and made my way to the company. I felt lighter and happier today. What could go wrong?

Parking in front of the company, I gave the security guard the key to drive my car to the executive parking lot. As I entered, Morrison walked over to me, a bit of haste in his steps. I raised a hand to silence him.

“When we get to my office.”

He nodded and followed me past the lobby to the elevator. The staff struggled to keep their eyes away. They wanted to know more, but whatever I told Morrison would never leave his lips—unless I wanted it to.

We reached my office a few minutes later. When I set my bag down on my desk, I turned to Morrison with a smile.

“Ease up, Morris. I’ve seen the news. No cause for alarm.” In fact, I wanted more people to talk about it, thereby tying Karl to me.

“It’s not about that, ma’am. I just wanted to know if you want to make a comment or control the narrative. This could turn out to be a PR nightmare.” He showed me some scathing

headlines, with worry written on his face. That made me think about Selena. I hadn't had a chance to tell her about the situation. She'd feel ambushed, and I hoped that Karl would do a better job.

I waved it off. "Let them talk. I want to keep the air of mystery. After a while, they'll calm down. How is the contract coming up?" I switched the topic and went back to my seat.

Morrison sighed and replied, "The contract is ready. I have sent it to your email. You can set up the meeting anytime you want."

"Thanks. I'll go over it. Make sure the conference room is available this afternoon. You may leave now." He gave a slight nod and left. Enjoying the warm caffeine, I went through the contract and was satisfied. I picked up my phone and dialed Karl's number. It rang for a while; before the call dropped, someone answered.

No one spoke. "Karl? Hello? What's going on?" I thought it was a connection issue. Then something made a loud noise over the phone.

"Karl is busy. Don't call again, understand me?" I was shocked by the female voice coming from the other end of the line. I was in utter disbelief as I moved the phone from my ear to make sure I had dialed the correct number. I broke out in a cold sweat. How could I have been so stupid. *Of all the crazy things I've done. How could I have slept with another woman's husband. A married man.* I wasn't aware of Karl being married, but what did I know? I barely knew him or if he was

in a relationship. *My heart was beating so hard, it felt like it was going to jump out of my chest. What have I done.* I felt like a fool. What if he was just using me? Suddenly, I heard Karl's voice berating the woman. The phone changed hands.

"Hello, Marie. I'm sorry about that. Why did you call?" I could hear his breath like he had just finished a strenuous job. I wanted to hang up the call immediately but remembering why I had called, I stopped myself.

"Today at two p.m. Don't be late. Bye." I ended the call before I said what I was truly feeling. I set the phone down on the table, my hands trembling. I clenched and unclenched them trying to understand what had just happened. Maybe I was overthinking it, but that woman threatened me not to call again, and Karl was breathing fast.

I buried my face in my hands, feeling sick. It ought not to have been this way. Taking in a steady breath, I focused on anything to clear my mind. I would not let this break me down. Who was he? Just some guy. I'd get over him soon enough. I typed on the computer with a furious speed. Morris dropped by to hand me my breakfast. I didn't touch it, having no appetite at all.

A few minutes before the meeting time, Morrison came to get me.

"Go ahead of me and set things up. I'll be just behind you." His eyes searched mine. I could see the concern in them. I looked away not wanting to share what I felt. He left quietly. I pictured Karl's face and everything that had happened between

us. I rationalized that, that shouldn't be enough to make me feel this way. He was just a player, and my heart was just soft. I clenched my jaw and walked out of my office before I lost my confidence.

I was surprised to see him come from the opposite direction to the conference room. I sped up to reach the door, but he had longer legs and covered more ground than I could. We met at the door. I was breathing faster now. He was tall and imposing, blocking my way in. He looked confused and reached for my arm, I flinched.

"Karl, we have important business today. I don't want us to make a fool of ourselves. Step away from the door."

"We have to talk later, alright?"

It was a question, but the way he said it felt like a command. That infuriated me. He stepped in and I followed. None of the people present said anything. I took my seat and Karl asked Morrison to sit elsewhere. He took a seat beside me. I didn't want to cause a scene, so I let him have his way.

The meeting started. There were a few directors around to serve as witnesses. We went over the contract a few times, clarifying some clauses and adding context to others. It was a long but tedious process, but I allowed the work to take my mind away from the attractive presence of Karl, sitting beside me. When both parties were satisfied, I turned to Karl to speak. His eyes were on me. I couldn't read the emotions in his eyes—still a dark pool.

My chest tightened, thinking about that woman possibly having her hands on him. It was a ridiculous thought. He wasn't even mine to claim. Would he think I was jealous? Why should I even care? "It's time we finish this. Here, I've signed. You?" I spoke with a detached voice. He shook his head sadly, looking as if I had hurt him.

He took out a pen and signed with a beautiful signature. "Nice," I commented. He shrugged. Morrison quickly went to make a copy of the contract. Now, we each had one.

"Looking forward to our cooperation, Mr. Penfield." We both rose, and I reached out to give him a handshake.

He took my hand in his large one and shook it firmly. His gaze was hard. "Same, Miss Rosii. Cooperation indeed." He held my hand for a minute longer, creating an awkward air in the conference room. He let go, and I drew my hand back.

"Give us this room for a while, ladies and gentlemen." He spoke with such authority that his request was not denied. Everyone left, leaving us alone in the room. "Now are you willing to talk?"

Really? He wasn't going to make me break that easily.

Chapter 8



KARL

She left my side and went to the window. She stood there, peering out into the sky. I left the desk and went to her side. She looked frail and lost. I wanted to hold her in my arms and make her feel better. Gazing out the window at the city's skyline, I spoke softly, "I know you're angry, but whatever you're thinking, it's not true."

She scoffed, "You now presume to know what I'm thinking?" She turned to me, her eyes ablaze with anger, "Karl, please tell me what I'm thinking and why I shouldn't be mad at you right now!"

"Don't raise your voice at me! Be reasonable. A word from a woman on my phone and you're suddenly like this?" He snapped. I didn't mean for that to come out that way. Marie looked hurt and turned away. I cursed under my breath. I grew frustrated with the situation. I ought to have sent Laura away. She was proving to be trouble back at home. Jason didn't like her, and she didn't care about him. She only acted like that in front of me. I always made sure Jason was away from her; and

with Selena back home, I was increasingly convinced that she wasn't Jason's mom.

This morning, I was exercising in the indoor gym and didn't know that Marie was calling. I was furious seeing Laura on my phone.

I stepped toward her, placing my hand lightly on her shoulder. She shrugged my hand off. "Marie, that woman is nothing. She meant nothing, and I have nothing to do with her." I wanted to assure her. I wasn't ready to put into words Laura's reason for being in my house until I was sure if her claim was true or not. Even though Marie and I were not official, I still cared about what she thought.

"That woman? Imagine, you can't even say her name. Is that what you said about me to her after you were done fucking her? Am I just some pawn in your hand that you use to enjoy yourself? Tell me, Karl! Am I the side piece or are you just a natural cheater?" She glared at me, her eyes red.

I clenched my jaw. Why was she so unreasonable? "Marie, think what you will, but I'm telling you the truth."

"What truth is that? That she means nothing to you? Is that supposed to make me happy? Answer this, why was she around you?" I stepped away from her, trying to arrange my thoughts. Damn, women were trouble.

"Can you not be like this? She is just some ex I want to do away with. Believe me when I say that she is in the past. You keep accusing me of being a player and using you. Don't be a

hypocrite, you were the one who walked up to me at the bar, and the one who kissed me. It was all you.”

“So now it’s my fault? Be a man and own up to your action, Karl.”

“Fine! I’m a cheater, a player, and a bad guy. Is that what you want to hear? I played you to pass the time. What we had between us meant nothing. Get over yourself.” I was the one yelling now. I was angry at her being so stubborn and her not believing me.

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she looked eerily calm. “Get out. Get out! I don’t want to see you. As for the contract, it still stands. I will be working with you in a professional capacity. That’s all.” She turned away.

I said nothing more and walked off, feeling as if I had lost something dear to me. Marie has well and truly embedded herself in my heart. Thoughts of her circle my thoughts nonstop. *Her voice on repeat in my mind.*

When I got to my car, I drove swiftly, not paying attention to the speed limit. Fortunately, I didn’t come across any cops. At work, I couldn’t keep my mind off her. I kept thinking that things could have gone better. I could have given her the truth. Told her about Laura and absolved myself of guilt, but she was adamant about believing her own interpretation of things. I wasn’t the type to beg and grovel before a woman. She was free to believe what she wanted...though it still hurt.

Not being in the mood to continue anything else with the designing team, I decided to head home early. Most

importantly, I was mad at Laura and wanted to do something about it. Of course, I could throw her out. However, I was convinced she came here for something, and I wanted to find out what. And though her claim to Jason was tenuous, I wanted to be sure before I did anything drastic.

I left the office and drove home. Within the hour, I was driving into my compound. I parked in the garage and walked to the door. I passed the gardens and didn't see Jason out playing. He should be inside. I entered the house and saw Selena sitting on the sofa with Jason, watching a cartoon. They turned at the sound of me entering.

"Daddy!" Jason was more than enthusiastic to see me. I approached him halfway and lifted him up.

"How's your aunt treating you?" I asked, walking to the sofa with him in my arms.

"Don't you dare lie young man!" Jason giggled at Selena's warning.

"Aunt Lena is good. Cool gifts for me and you, Dad." I sat in the armchair beside Selena. Jason used my thigh as a chair and watched his film. Selena watched me from the corner of her eye.

"Where's Laura?" I asked, seeing as she was not around to pester me.

"She went God knows where. I still wonder why you let her in. Despite her claims she ought not to be in this house. You promised me that you were done with her."

“And I am. I have something planned, and it will all work out. I’m glad you’re home. Things have just been a little crazy lately,” I responded, looking up at the ceiling.

“Oh, like you kissing my best friend in a parking lot? That’s a new one for you.” That caught my attention.

“I’m sorry, believe me; it all happened so quickly that day. Besides, you don’t have to worry about her. It was silly to ever imagine anything happening between us.” It troubled me how the conversation wound up being about her. I wanted to stop thinking about her today.

“Marie is someone dear to me, and I won’t stand to watch you play her like those other girls. Just stay away from her. Look at the media circling like vultures. If you had taken time to know more about my life and friends, you could have avoided this. Now, look at where we are.” I could see that she was angry. It made me wonder what Marie had told her.

“Not from you too, Lena. I get it, I’m a bad influence and whatnot. She’s free and far away from now on. You should let me be.” I had seen the news but wasn’t bothered by it. Before, I was excited about having a new chapter in my life. Not anymore though. I didn’t even want to see one more article dissecting our kiss again. It didn’t matter anymore.

Selena noted the sourness in my mood and stopped talking. I watched the cartoon without really paying attention. Finally, I left them in the sitting room and went to my study. I sat in the dark room with a glass of bourbon in hand. Though things with Marie had fallen through, I could still look into the

situation with Laura and solve it. It was time to give it my full attention.

I fished out my phone from my pocket and called Norris, a private investigator I trusted. “Mr. Penfield, it’s a delight to receive your call. How may I be of help?”

“Norris, nice to hear from you. I want you to do a thorough background check on Laura Beckham. I want everything on her, including her recent movements and associations. If you notice anything suspicious, inform me immediately.”

“I can do that, sir. Anything else?” I could tell he was excited to start digging. “Finally, I’ll send you some sensitive materials. Give it to Doctor Williams; he’d know what to do.”

“Yes, sir.” I ended the call. Immediately, I called Rose to my study. The door opened and she entered. I didn’t mince my words. “Go to Laura’s room. Find her hairbrush and get her hair into a ziploc bag.” She listened intently and went to carry out my orders.

I closed my eyes for a while, then the door opened. Rose returned. “Sir, I’ve gotten all you’ve asked for.”

“Good. Leave it on the table, thank you.” She did as ordered and left. I rose from my seat and picked up the bag. Well, Laura, I’m coming close to your secret. She must know that I would order a DNA test, what she didn’t know was that she wouldn’t be aware of it. If it came back positive, no worries. If negative, she’d have to answer to me.

Chapter 9



MARIE

I struggled to remember when I had last cried this hard; it felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest. After our argument yesterday, I felt too sick to move or do anything. I went back home early and ever since; I've been in my room. I hated how I felt. Karl was right. I was the one who made the first move, and he had no obligation to tell me the truth. So, what if he was a cheater and had a girlfriend? It was none of my business. I should have been strong and impervious to my jealousy. Yet, I felt so weak.

Recalling the cold look on Karl's face, I knew that I had destroyed my chance with him. Maybe if I had been softer and willing to listen, we could have moved past it. Still, he was hiding something from me, and I couldn't stand that. My phone rang again for the third time this morning. It was Morrison, always checking up on me. I didn't want to talk, so I sent a message.

I wasn't in the right state of mind to go to work today. I knew if my brother heard of this, he'd be disappointed but he

wasn't here, and no one was going to tell him. Willing some strength into my body, I put my feet on the floor and stood. I steadied myself and walked to the window. Opening the curtain, soft natural light crept in illuminating my room. From my point of view, the sun looked sad.

My eyes felt itchy. When I touched my cheeks, I felt the dried tears. Sighing, I passed my bed and walk-in closet to enter the bathroom. I faced the mirror and saw my disheveled look. My eyes were red and puffy, the bags under them made them look droopy. "This is not you. Forget about him, he means nothing to you," I whispered to myself, watching my lips move mechanically.

I didn't believe what I said, but I had to. It frightened me how quickly I had fallen for him, but did he feel the same way? I didn't ponder the question too long.

I went to the tub and submerged myself in the water, feeling it bring warmth into my body. My hair floated in the water like tentacles. I stayed like this for a while. Afterward, I took a shower, brushed my teeth, and returned to my bedroom. I got to the bed and sat with my bathrobe on. My hair was wrapped in a towel to absorb the water.

After my bath, I felt refreshed and tired in a good way. I moisturized my skin and slept naked, catching up on the sleep I had missed last night. I woke up some hours later, seeing the sun at its peak. I stretched, feeling better than before, but with a raw feeling in my chest. I decided I needed to talk to someone about this. I couldn't let it eat me up this much.

Selena was the one who came to mind. I picked my phone and called her. She picked up after a few rings.

“Marie, how are you?” Her tone was colder than before; my heart fell thinking about what she must have heard from Karl. I pushed on.

“Heartbreak issues. It ought not to hurt this much, considering that it was a short fling. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I didn’t know it was Karl, and I was blinded by my emotions. I’m losing my mind over this.” I rose from the bed and went to pick out something to wear.

“You needn’t apologize. Karl was wrong for hurting you this much.” Her voice was subdued.

“We hurt each other. I said some pretty harsh stuff to him. I know this must sound ridiculous, but for the little time I knew him, he was the best man I ever had in my life...other than my brothers.” We chuckled, diffusing the dark mood taking over me. I picked out a comfortable brown jogger and black hoodie. I set my phone down on the island in the closet and dressed while waiting for Selena to respond. “Lena?”

“Though, I’m not on board with what has happened between you and my brother, I can’t really be mad at you. What happened was an unfortunate situation.” I brought the phone back to my ear.

“That’s a word for it, but...I don’t want to call it love, though I’ll say it was a deep connection. I felt it; it was real to me. Something I never had before. However, I just feel played. Am I naïve?” I asked sullenly, walking back to my bed.

“You are not. Our emotions make us act like fools. You said there was a connection, regardless of what has happened, I want you to hold onto that and confront him. I must admit that over the past four years, Karl has changed. Ever since he found out he was a dad, it is as if he has morphed into completely different person. He lives for his son now. *Setting an example, he says.*

Try to get him to be honest with you about his feelings and give him a chance to explain himself. Marie, I know you can be forceful and stubborn when you believe something, but you just need to listen to him. Don’t destroy a good thing before it happens. Promise me you’ll talk to him?”

“You’re right. I’ll talk to him, but I can’t promise I won’t be disappointed. I’ll keep you posted on how it goes.” After a short goodbye, I ended the call and let out a long breath. What Lena said gave me a little hope, but I was scared to put my trust in that. Still, I was going to try.

I dialed Karl’s number the first time, dreading that woman would be the one to answer. The call ended with no one answering. I tried three more times. Still, no reply. He might be busy, I thought, but the paranoid side of me said he was deliberately ignoring me.

I left my room and prepared myself a light meal. I ate without much enthusiasm as I watched TV. My home felt too big for me—alone. I kept looking at my phone and jumping at every notification, waiting for Karl’s call.

By evening, when there was no reply whatsoever, I went to my room and grabbed my keys. I had to meet with him for my peace of mind. Within a few minutes, I was out of the house and driving through the gate. Karl should be home soon, I mused. If he wasn't, I'd wait for him. Lena had mentioned his location before. She stayed there sometimes but had a place of her own. I left my neighborhood and drove straight to upstate New York. His home was located around beautiful lakes laden with well-tended trees and greenery.

The gate was locked, but through the bars, I could see inside. I parked and got out of the car. I wasn't sure if I was going to be let in, but I had to try. When I reached the gate, I saw a woman dressed in a flamboyant, colorful dress walking out of the house with a child in tow. Behind her was Karl, finely dressed as well. They looked like a family going out for a celebration. My heart tightened in my chest. I had been right all along.

Though I didn't get a good glimpse of the woman and the child, I knew I was right. He was keeping this a secret while he used me. They got into the car. I went back to mine and stayed there until Karl's car drove out. Then I drove back home. This time, I had no more tears to cry. I promised myself not to put myself in such a situation ever again. I didn't need Karl.

As I was driving home, I saw Selena's car driving behind. We both parked by the fountain. I got out of my car to welcome her. She stepped out of hers in denim trousers and a

silk shirt, covered with a black blazer. I hugged her warmly. Her hug was comforting.

“Let’s go inside. I have much to tell you.” I led her into the house. She took off her jacket and followed me to the balcony overlooking the pool below. We stood there for a minute, silent.

“You didn’t tell me he had a woman in his life.” I said out of the blue. That concerned me. Why would she ask me to talk to him when he had someone else around him?

She saw the confusion on my face. “Oh, that? She’s Laura, an inconsequential inconvenience—at least that’s what Karl told me. She came around to claim Jason is her son. That’s beside the point, Karl is not in a relationship with her. Not ever again. She’s just staying for a while until we can prove she’s actually Jason’s mom—or not.” She placed her hand on mine, and I felt oddly relieved.

I sighed and sat on the cold floor looking dazed. Selena settled down beside me. The silence hung like a shroud of darkness around us. “Tell me about Laura, why would she come back now? After leaving her child for so long?” I shut my mouth immediately. What did I know? I gave up my own child, if he saw me today, would he even accept me? At least Laura was trying.

“It’s a long story, but you should know that Laura was madly in love with my brother, but she was a bitter two-faced person who wanted to control him, to have him for herself only. My

brother broke up with her when he discovered her manipulations...”

Chapter 10



KARL

I walked slowly around my office, thinking about what had happened these past few days. Mostly me going out with Jason and Laura to distract myself from the thought of Marie. I thought I saw her around my house, but I couldn't be sure—I must have been seeing things. I had ignored her calls, not wanting to get into another argument. However, now I had to meet up with her today.

We had discussed during the signing of the contract that she and her team would get a tour of the company before the filming began. Looking at my watch, I saw that I had a few minutes before she arrived. I stopped pacing and adjusted my suit. There was no need to fret. This was just a business meeting with professionals.

The door to my office opened and Blake, my assistant, came in. "Sir, Miss Rosii and her team are here. Would you like to meet them in the lobby or elsewhere?" He was a short thin man, but his deep voice made him seem taller.

“The lobby. Let’s go.” I took the lead, leaving my office. We both took the elevator to the lobby, and when we got out, I saw Marie walking through the doors. I walked to her while taking in her composure. She had sunglasses on and a large cream coat hanging off her shoulders. Her walk toward me was runway worthy. We met each other halfway.

She used her right hand to take off her sunglasses and put them in her bag—a limited edition. We stood there waiting for each other to speak. Her face was a mask of indifference, but her hazel eyes were scrutinizing me.

“Welcome, Marie. Let me take you around. My assistant, Blake, will give your crew the tour. May I?” I stretched my hand out to her. I expected her to turn me down, but she didn’t.

I took her hand and gestured for Blake to do as I ordered. Hand in hand, I took her past the expansive lobby away from curious eyes. Blake took the crew to the fitting room. We passed the lobby and entered the inspection area.

“Quite a lot of work goes into this,” she said as she took her hand away from mine to survey the room. Employees were busy counting and checking the textiles for quality. All around the room, from table to hangers, were materials from around the world.

“This is where the job begins. When we receive the materials, they have to be thoroughly inspected before they go to the other departments.”

She nodded, inspecting a deep blue cotton fabric on the table. The working staff stayed out of our way. I wanted her to

talk and look at me.

“These people don’t seem to recognize you. I’m wondering how you kept your identity hidden from the public eye for so long.” Her question was unexpected, but I was glad she took the initiative to talk to me.

“I am not open about my identity and a few people in the company have signed an NDA not to discuss it with the media unless I say otherwise. Although with our recent action in public, many have already dug up everything they can on me.”

She just nodded at that. Was she truly over me so soon?

I placed my hand on her waist and led her through a door to the design room. Here she got to see the designers at work, sketching and pinning materials to mannequins. I could see she was truly invested in what she saw. From there, we went to the tailors’ area—a large airy room filled with hundreds of tailors. We left the production room and stood again in the lobby.

“I have something I want to show you. Come.” This time, I took her hand before she put it behind her and led her to the elevator. Being stuck in the elevator together gave her no chance to ignore me, although she tried to. “Marie, will you talk to me now?”

“You ignored me, Karl. What we had or didn’t is in the past, just show me this something,” she said dismissively.

“I was dealing with a lot and needed the space to think. Are you willing to listen to me now?” I asked, hopeful.

She sighed and looked at me. "I'm tired of all this. Do you really want me in your life? I saw you with a child I'm sure is yours and that woman you were with. There's more going on, and I'm not about to put my heart on the line here." She looked at me, aggrieved.

"So, you did come to my place yesterday." I smiled despite the situation. She wasn't over me. "Yes, there's much you still don't know, but I'm being honest when I say it's not what you're thinking. After this, we can talk about it later to clear the air between us and just maybe I can win your trust."

We were now face to face. I saw the hopeful look in her eyes, and it made my heart feel soft. I pushed away the stray hairs around her face and trailed a finger over her lower lip. Her hands went around me and we almost kissed. It was what I wanted, and so did she.

The elevator doors opened, and someone let out a squeak in surprise. Marie moved away from me, her face a bright red. In front of us was a young woman, who looked frightened to see us. *Surprised to see her otherwise private boss kissing a woman.* I took Marie's hand and walked out of the elevator.

"Here we are..." I opened the large door and let her enter first.

"These dresses are beautiful." She gave me a small smile. I smiled at her words. We were in a large room with most of our finished looks. Some were in glass cases to protect their delicate designs while others were on mannequins standing in front of tall mirrors. A few people were around dusting and

going over the dresses, inspecting them. Everywhere you looked were several dresses and mirrors.

“May I see some of your completed designs?” Although these dresses were good, they couldn’t hold her attention for long.

I touched her hair and spoke softly, “Yes. They’re further in. Stay close.” She nodded, and we began going deeper into the room passing several glass shelves and mirrors along the way. Finally, we reached a section closed off by a glass panel locked from the outside. There were five pieces of clothing in there: two menswear and three womenswear. “These suits were as a result of a spark of inspiration I got from ancient Chinese clothes. Look at the embroidery and details. These were all done by hand. And these gowns follow special themes from medieval British aristocracy. They were all worked on by hand for many hours. I truly appreciate them for bringing my work to life.”

“I never realized how much magic goes into this. These are fantastic. Are the looks for the fashion week also here?”

“Some are still in production while others are hidden. They’re a surprise...although you’ll get a sneak peek soon enough...” I was cut short by a voice filled with mirth. My jaw clenched as I spied Laura.

“Karl, come see this. Look at me? I look just like a princess.” Laura, dressed in a glittering crystal studded gown ran to me while carrying the train of the dress. I was mortified.

It was an unfinished look, and I could see the unfinished seams and stitches in the dress.

“Who let you wear this, and why are you here? How the hell did you get in here?” My voice echoed around me, showing how annoyed I was.

She stopped, panting a bit and gave me a weak smile. “Come on. I wanted to surprise you with a visit today. However, one of your designers needed someone with my body type to try out the dress. Seeing how great I look I wanted to show you. Don’t I look pretty?” There was a wide brimmed hat on her head and a purple scarf around her neck. It was a sacrilege to my sight.

“You have just a few minutes to get that dress off of you and get out of this building.” Beside me, Marie was silent, watching the scene. If it wasn’t for my anger, I would have been embarrassed. Laura was grating on my last nerve.

Laura bit her lip and looked like she was going to cry.

“Now!”

She jumped and ran away into the sea of clothes. I sighed and turned to Marie, “Excuse me for a moment.” I didn’t wait for her response and walked away quickly. I was getting too angry, and I didn’t want Marie to see me like this.

Chapter 11



MARIE

I sighed deeply, feeling sorry for Karl. This woman, Laura, seemed phony, it boggled my mind why he'd have her around if he didn't have a good opinion of her. Selena told me Karl was only biding his time with her. I stopped myself from thinking more about this—it wasn't my business; Karl could take care of his own troubles. Looking around, I was alone. I checked my watch to see that I had spent more time than I intended. I had to leave now. Before that, I needed to say some final words to Karl.

I turned away from the dresses and walked to the exit. While I was walking, I was thinking about where I'd find him since he had run out in anger. Abruptly, I felt a tug on my bag.

"What?" I was surprised to see Laura tugging on my bag with a hateful expression. "Excuse me?" My voice was low and threatening. From the look on her face, she knew I was serious. She let go of the bag.

"Who are you to him?" She began fidgeting with the scarf around her neck. She clearly lacked confidence and looked

more ridiculous with the hat on her head. I could understand why Karl was pissed off with her, the lovely dress looked exquisite on her.

I shrugged and continued my walk to the exit. “Don’t ignore me. He’s mine, and I’ll do everything to protect him from you!” Her voice drew the attention of everyone in the room. She flushed with embarrassment. Now that I thought of it, she was the one who spoke to me on Karl’s phone.

Seeing as everyone’s eyes were on her, she ran to the exit. I trailed behind her. When I left the room, I stopped a staff member to ask for directions to Karl’s office. It wasn’t far and within a minute, I was at the door. I knocked and got no response. I wanted to leave but stopped when I heard a muted sound from the office. Then a click came from the door.

I turned the knob and the door opened. Karl was walking back to his desk, filling a glass with whiskey. He didn’t seem to notice me or didn’t want to look at me. I stepped in and closed the door behind me. I heard a click from the door—it was an automatic lock. I tried the door, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Don’t bother...” Karl’s voice reached me. He was by the window, slowly sipping his drink. “Stay with me for a while...” He looked at me and uttered, “please.”

I left the door and dropped my bag on an armchair. He downed the rest of his drink and set it on the table. I reached him and stopped him from filling his glass again.

“Stop. Don’t do this to yourself.” I placed a hand on his cheek to make him face me. His skin felt hot, and his eyes had

an intense light. I shivered and quickly pulled my hand away.

His arms went around me, and I had to face him. His eyes now had a softer look—it made me feel weak. I anticipated his actions but also feared what was going to happen.

“Karl...I...” My words stopped in my throat as his lips touched my forehead, my nose, then my lips.

His breath was hot and smelled of whiskey. I breathed it in and sighed into his kiss.

“I need you, Marie...”

With that, I pressed my lips against his and we kissed. I wrapped my hands around his waist and held him close. His hands held my face steady as our kiss intensified. When we stopped, I gasped for air. He smiled and put me on the desk.

I gasped and laughed, “What do you want to do?”

“Anything to please my lady...” He knelt, his eyes hot on me, and kissed my legs. I was feeling ecstatic with his kisses. My heels came off, and he pulled my skirt down, kissing my skin from my toes to my thighs. He rose and came to me, pulling me in for another kiss. I shut out the doubts in my mind and focused on the moment.

I moaned as his fingers shifted my panties away from my core. He rubbed up and down and slowly put two fingers in. I bit my lip so I wouldn't let out my scream of passion. He chuckled darkly. When he took his fingers out, he put them in his mouth and sucked. “Oh, Karl...” I pulled his tie and kissed him feverishly.

“Naughty...” he growled, pulled my hands away, and held them tight in his hand. His other hand unbuttoned my shirt. He fondled my breasts inside my bra, rubbing my nipples.

“Please, I want you.” I took deep breaths in order to speak.

He smiled, letting go of my hands with a wolfish grin on his handsome face. I got off the table and pushed him against the wall. Quickly, I took off his belt and went on my knees. He was hard and straining against his trousers. I pulled them down, then pulled down his boxers. His length sprang free, hard, and angry, hitting my cheek. I held it fondly, jerking back and forth, enjoying the way he tensed and cursed. Holding his gaze, I slowly put the tip into my mouth, then ever so slowly, I looked into his eyes as I took in more of him. I stopped, gagging and gasping. He was too big to take him all in. His hands were in my hair, controlling my movements. After a while, I found a rhythm. I went up and down on him, my body heating up.

“Marie... hold on.” He was breathing fast, he was close. Shakily, I got up. He pulled me close, kissing me slowly.

I could feel his erection hard on my abdomen. I used my hand to guide it between my thighs trapping him. He gasped, “You are driving me crazy, woman.”

“I want you to rock my world, Karl. Please...do it!” I was tired of the teasing. I needed him. He led me to the table and made me show him my back. I felt exposed but I could feel the appreciation he had for me. He took off my panties and put his fingers in my leaking sex, drawing gasps and moans from me.

As soon as he took his fingers out, he put his length inside me. I cried out in pleasure and gripped the edge of his desk.

He pulled out and pushed in, saying things I wasn't hearing clearly. He hugged me from the back and held my breasts in his hands. He squeezed and pinched them as he thrust into me hard and fast. A whole lot of sensations flooded my mind. His hot, muscular build enveloping my body and his length thrusting in and out. I could feel his lips on my neck. It was romantic even as he pounded me so hard that my legs felt weak.

He pulled out, carried me, and took me to the couch by his shelf. He laid me down, pulled my hair out of my face, and kissed my forehead. "I don't regret this, Marie. You make me feel like the luckiest man in the world..." He didn't wait for me to reply. He kissed me as he spread my legs. I wrapped them around his waist and felt his member slide in. I sighed and wrapped my arms around his torso.

His thrusts were slow and tender. We locked gazes, not daring to look away from each other. I had words I wanted to say to him but stopped myself. This man wasn't just rocking my world, he was shaping it. Every thrust brought me closer to him. He smiled endearingly, then he lowered his head and kissed my breasts. I winked at him and brought them to his lips.

When he sucked on them, it felt like heaven. He alternated between both of them, sucking on them delicately.

“Oh, faster... keep going!” I tightened my legs around him and begged him while I soared to heights unknown.

When he stopped sucking, he narrowed his eyes and thrust in and out rhythmically. The sound from our bodies echoed. I could not stop myself as I let out a yelp. My fingers dug into his back, and I twitched for a while. Karl stopped thrusting and pulled out. He sat on the couch. Languidly, I turned to wrap my arms around him. We kissed as he jerked for a while. He grunted as he released his hot cum on my abdomen.

“That was hot.” I smiled trying to regain my breathing and rested my head on his shoulder. He was also breathing in slowly to catch his breath.

“You know how to undo me. Look at us...” He held me close, resting his head close to mine. The smell of sex and the heat of our bodies filled me with contentment. We stayed silent for a while, not thinking, just feeling.

After a while, I realized why I came. “Oh shit.” I got to my feet, checking the time. I went to my bag and checked my phone. I had missed calls from the crew leader, James, who I had brought along.

“What’s wrong?” Karl asked from the couch. I was about to reply when a knock came from the door. We both froze. *Uh, oh.*

Chapter 12



KARL

“Who’s that?”

I got to my feet and walked to Marie. I placed my hand on her shoulder to reassure her.

“We’re naked. We should get dressed.” She pushed my hand aside. I trailed her form with my eyes. She walked lightly, her curvy form grabbing my attention.

“Sir, Mr. Norris would like to meet with you and Miss Rosii’s crew are waiting for her at the lobby.” Blake’s voice suddenly reminded me of all I had put on hold, waiting on Norris’ findings. And his presence now, meant he had found something on Laura.

“Keep Norris busy for a while. I’ll call you in as soon as I’m done.”

Blake responded with an affirmative and left. Marie went around the office, picking up her clothes. I did the same and dressed quickly. Marie took her time adjusting her hair and reapplying her makeup. I watched her with a smile on my face.

I could not describe how I felt at that moment, but I knew I loved having her around. She finished applying her makeup and smoothened her clothes with her hand. “This is dangerous, but I like it.” She smiled, walking over to me.

“You are special, and I’m willing to risk it all.” I pulled her into my arms and kissed her face. I was enjoying the effortless energy between us—something I haven’t had in a long time.

“Mmm... do you really?” She kissed me softly and winked at me. From her attitude, I knew she wasn’t ready for my reply and I wasn’t sure of what I was going to say.

“I better leave now. We have a lot to do. The door, please.” I nodded and went to my desk to take my card. I walked to the door and opened it with a swipe. When she reached my side, I kissed her cheek.

“I’m sorry I can’t escort you to your car. We’ll talk later.”

“Of course, bye.” She walked away. I went back to my seat and ordered Blake to send Norris in. A minute later, a tall middle-aged man with a shock of gray hair in his otherwise dark beard walked in.

“Welcome. Hope you have what I asked for?” I gestured at the seat in front of me. He unbuttoned his jacket, sitting. He placed a file on the table.

“Sir, I have all the information on Laura that you requested. Also, Dr. Williams gave me his report. I think you should check it out.” He pulled out an envelope within the file, placed it on top, and pushed it to me.

I broke the seal on the envelope and scanned it. Immediately, it confirmed my suspicion that Laura wasn't Jason's mother. The result of the test proves 99.99% that the child's DNA had not been inherited from the alleged mother. I set it aside.

Norris began to explain his findings. "Over the past five years, Laura has been dealing with financial issues. She took a sizable loan from a loan shark. She invested in a phony crypto business that collapsed after a year. Since then, she has been trying to pay back the loan sharks. Recently they had amped up their threat level so she is running scared. She has been living at a friend's place or in cheap motels. Sir, she's in a lot of trouble. These guys don't play with their money."

"Has she ever been pregnant?" I needed to know. Her issues with the loan sharks weren't relevant. Laura would go to any lengths to achieve her goals. Although she wasn't Jason's mom, I wouldn't put it past her to get pregnant to spite me.

"She was never pregnant. Other than an abortion she had when she was younger, there are no records that she had a child. From my findings, I can conclude she is not who she says she is." I saw the evidence in the pictures and receipts.

"Anything else noteworthy?"

"It's not noteworthy, but you might want to know this. She has been communicating with several burner phones, and before this she met some men as an escort. I could not get any other information from that." He opened out his hands to show his helplessness.

I set the file down and leaned back in my chair. “Thanks, Norris. This was very helpful. I’m impressed. I’ll get back to you soon. Send in Blake on your way out.” He nodded and left the office.

A moment later, Blake came in. “Sir?”

“Is Laura still in the building?” I asked.

He nodded. “She’s waiting in my office. she said she has something important to say to you.”

I scoffed. “Send her in.”

He left in a flash. Later, the door creaked open, and Laura walked in. She was out of the dress and now in a black shirt and skirt.

“Karl, I—”

“Why are you really here, Laura? This is your last chance to tell the truth.” She flinched and looked about, afraid.

“What are you talking about? It’s me, Karl.” She tried walking over to my desk.

“If you take another step, you’ll be thrown out of this building.” She stopped, tears rolling her cheeks. “You came into my home, told lies, and took advantage of my family. This alone is enough to get you arrested. For the sake of our past relationship, I’m giving you this grace. When you get back to the house, your luggage will be waiting for you outside. Take it and leave.”

“What have I ever done to you to deserve this? I’m the mother of your child! The only woman you ever loved!”

“Lies! How dare you have the courage to tell me these lies? Here, look at the truth!” I threw the file at her feet. She looked from her feet to me and back again.

“No. I don’t believe this. Someone is lying to you. These are lies...” She was shaking like a leaf in the wind.

“Look at it!”

She fell to her knees and opened the file. She kept shaking her head as she saw the evidence against her.

“Now, stop all this and get out of my sight.”

“Karl, please. I never meant for things to come to this. I need your help. My life is in danger and only you can help me. I need money; it isn’t much to you. In fact, if you give it to me, I’ll never bother you ever again.” She rose and tried to come at me.

The look I flashed made her freeze in her steps.

“Don’t be callous! You have all this money and an easy life, yet you won’t even help me. Is this how much you hate me? Karl...”

“For Christ’s sake, shut up. I’ve heard enough of your blabbering.” I chuckled in amusement. “Laura, if you had come to me the first time and asked me to help you, truthfully, I might have considered it. However, you just came in and proved who you are. The same old greedy, lying and

manipulating person you've always been. Enough with this drama. Get out this instant, or you are getting thrown out."

Suddenly, her demeanor changed. She wiped the tears off her cheeks and stared at me with cold eyes. "I was a fool for thinking anything good would come of this. You're still as selfish and problematic as always. You might think you have the last laugh now, but don't get too comfy. You'll regret this, I promise you," she snarled, breathing fast in rage. She saw she was getting no reaction from me and left with what little dignity she had left. I didn't pay her threats any mind.

I sighed, feeling mentally stressed. *Good riddance*, I thought. Remembering what transpired between Marie and me made me want to look into her life. I stopped myself. That was wrong, I would be unnecessarily invading her privacy, moreover, there was no need for that. If I were to have anything meaningful with her, I had to build trust. I cursed Laura for messing up my thoughts.

I brought out my phone and sent a message to Rose, instructing her to get Laura's things out of the house. Afterward, I called Norris. He answered. "Keep an eye on Laura. Though I believe she's not a threat, I want to be aware of any plans she makes against me or my family."

"I'll do that, sir." Satisfied, I ended the call and poured whiskey into a glass. Sipping it, I felt things were finally looking up. I could start preparing for the company's party, and, hopefully, it might lead to something special with Marie.

Chapter 13



MARIE

I woke up feeling light and happy. What happened between Karl and me gave me hope. However, I didn't want to push things too fast. I was sure I wanted him, but I wanted more than my heart to want him, I needed my mind to agree. Getting off the bed, I went to the bathroom and freshened up. I wore my sports clothes and shoes and tied my hair into a ponytail.

Leaving my room, I jogged down the stairs and left the house. It was a cool morning, perfect for a jog. I put on my air pods and jogged slowly off the grounds onto the pavement by the roadside. I let myself enjoy the workout music I had selected as the heat built up in my body.

There were others jogging, they waved as they passed. I took familiar routes around the neighborhood, going at a relaxed pace. The area wasn't filled with people jogging, as most were in their homes. I glanced behind me out of habit to see someone—a man jogging behind me. He was far away, so I

couldn't see his face. I shrugged it off, he could be another resident going for a run.

A while later, I glanced back to see the man had drawn closer, it was none other than Howard. I stopped in my tracks, stunned. I was sure Howard didn't live in the neighborhood, and it would be a weird coincidence if he did. Going over my past interactions with him, I could guess his motives. In no time, he reached me.

I stopped my music to hear him. He was breathing hard, very sweaty. "Come on, let's keep going. I'm enjoying this!" His voice cracked. He clearly was not used to such strenuous activity.

I wondered if he had been paying attention to me. It was weird for him to be jogging exactly where I was. It creeped me out. "Are you following me, Howard? I warned you to stay away from me," I said, exasperated. He stopped, clearly relieved to stand on two feet.

"I was just taking a walk around the area and saw you, so I decided to join you. Isn't this fate?" He flashed me a smile. I felt sick.

A walk? Who was he kidding? "You don't even live here! Look, back off, or I'll call the cops on you. This is getting out of hand. Stay away from me and jog somewhere else." With that, I took off. I looked back to see him standing there, looking befuddled. I sighed, relieved he wasn't following me.

"Wait!" he yelled, startling me. I turned around to see him running toward me. For a moment, I was scared. I knew what

scorned rejected men liked to do to women. I stood my ground, kicking away my fear. I wasn't defenseless. My brothers made it a priority for me to learn self-defense skills, and I wouldn't hesitate to use them. I placed my legs apart in a comfortable position in case I had to attack.

He reached me and spread his arms as if to stop me from running past him. "You're a fast one. Hey, you've got to give me a chance. I'm willing to bear anything you throw at me, just don't ignore me." He touched his chest with a proud look on his face. "I know you'll have me in the end."

"There's no end to your self-delusion. I am not playing a game with you. You are not worthy of my time, love, or attention. Get out of my way." He shook his head, acting childish.

"No, you'll stay here and hear me out. I'm tired of all your antics. It's enough! Your mouth says no but your body..." a disgusting leer appeared on his face, "is calling for me. It's undeniable."

I watched as his hand stretched to touch me. In a flash of anger, I took his wrist, twisted it, and stepping into his space I crammed my elbow into his abdomen. He groaned, staggering back.

"You... you are a crazy woman. How dare you!" I took the hand he was waving at me and brought it around to his back, forcefully. The pain was too much for him as he almost fell bringing me with him. I shoved him against the tree close to

us. I pressed the side of my arm on the back of his neck to keep him still.

He was at my mercy, and he knew it. “Don’t say another word. I’m going to be saying this up close and personal, so you better listen carefully. I don’t care whatever twisted fantasy you have about me, keep it to yourself. I am not interested in you, not even remotely. Don’t think I’m defenseless.” I gripped his arm tighter and pressed on his neck to heighten my point. He nodded weakly, a plea on his lips.

“Good, I’m going to let you go. Run and leave this neighborhood. I don’t want to see you around me or my home.” With a tug, I pulled and shoved him against the tree to disorient him. I let go of him and watched as he fell. He curled into himself holding his arm. *Pathetic.*

I slowly backed away and jogged away from him. He wasn’t going to follow me anytime soon. I was in no mood to jog again. I ran until I got home. When I entered the house, I was relieved. That encounter was dangerous. I had to be more careful. Entering my room, I took off my clothes and took a long shower.

I ate some breakfast and went into my sunroom to go over the files I wanted to cross check before next week. Although I tried to concentrate, my mind kept wandering from Karl to Howard and then...my son. With a start, I pulled out my phone to call the detective, Chris. He answered after a few rings.

“Hello, Chris. I wanted to check your progress on finding my son. Any update?” I asked, hopeful.

When I heard his sigh over the phone, my heart fell. “Nothing noteworthy as of now. Do not worry, I’m working tirelessly to find him. I won’t stop until I’ve exhausted every option.” I knew he was trying his best, but I was still disappointed.

“I understand. Thank you. Stay in touch.” I ended the call and looked up at the domed ceiling. I felt incomplete and lost. I desperately wanted someone to hold me and comfort me.

I looked at my phone wanting to call Karl. I shook my head. I shouldn’t distract myself and Karl wasn’t going to solve this. I was still waiting for him to get back to me. *Why hadn’t he?*

Chapter 14



KARL

I heard the soft sounds of someone's heels as they drew close. Selena stopped beside my seat and gave me a reluctant smile. She wasn't happy with my *relationship* with Marie, which made her act aloof around me. I didn't expect her to come to see me today.

"At last, she's gone." Selena laughed and took a seat beside me. I set down my cutlery and faced her. "Come on, tell me what happened?"

I sighed. It'd been two days since I had sent Laura away, and I was enjoying the peace of mind it brought. What I didn't expect was for Selena to ask about her.

"I found out she was lying, and she had plans to dupe me." I cut into the steak and brought it to my mouth. I chewed, remembering Laura's spiteful face.

"It was obvious. I'm glad she's gone. Where's Jason?"

"Probably watching cartoons in his room. The real question is why are you here?" I was sure someone, perhaps Rose, told

her about Laura's absence.

"Can't I visit big brother and nephew anymore?" I stared pointedly at her. She rolled her eyes and blew on her fingers. Rising from the seat, she tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'll go hang out with Jason. Excuse me."

She walked away. Selena wouldn't open up until she wanted to. Having sex with her best friend wasn't helping my case.

I finished my meal and left the dining table; I had other things to deal with. It was a Sunday, and I had gotten enough rest. I entered my office and opened the curtains to let in fresh air. I checked my schedule and noticed that I had a party to attend during the week.

Fashion week was near, and I wanted to host a party to drive publicity for the fashion show. Crucially, I hoped it would bring new clients and fresh eyes to the show. My company had been sending out invites. However, the person I wanted there the most wasn't invited. It was partly because I had avoided calling or thinking about her. What happened in my office was not necessarily a mistake. I just went too fast and felt my heart soften around her. I was wary of the feelings growing within me. Was I ready for it?

I scrolled through my contacts and stopped at Marie's. With a deep breath, I dialed her number, my heart beating slowly in my chest as I listened to the ringtone. A moment later, the call connected. She didn't say anything.

"Hello, Marie. How have you been?" I tried to break the ice even when I was unsure of how to start the conversation.

I waited for her reply, my fingers nervously tapping on the edge of the table. Sometimes, I forget how cold she could be. I could make up any manner of excuse to appease her, but I didn't want to lie. She deserved better than that.

"I wasn't sure what to say to you. I know I'm calling late, but I'm working things out. Though I might be slow to understand my feelings for you."

Marie was the only woman in my life to whom I felt comfortable acknowledging my uncertainty.

"Is communicating so hard? Karl, sometimes I wonder why I'm attracted to you. I thought we were making up a few days ago, then all I get from you is silence. Now, you're calling me out of the blue, what for? You want to hook up?" Marie replied, her tone distant and guarded.

I looked at the ceiling and thought about my next words. "No, never that. Listen to me...when my heart beats too fast in my chest, it is for you. It's hard to keep my thoughts straight and talk to you, like I'm walking on ice. I might sink anytime if I'm not careful." I surprised myself—and her. Saying that out loud felt freeing.

"I didn't know that. I...am sorry my doubt hurt you. I'm insecure about some things, especially new territories like this. You make things so hard, Karl, though I want...forget it. Why did you call?"

I wanted to push further to hear what she had to say. I shook my head slightly, a sad smile drawing up my lips. "I want to invite you to a party." I paused, waiting for her reaction.

Marie scoffed at the other end of the line. “A party? You expect me to drop everything and go to a party. That’s a little presumptuous, don’t you think?”

I winced at her words but understood her frustration. I had let her down, and now I had to face the consequences. “I understand why you’re upset, Marie. However, this party is integral to the upcoming fashion week, and I’d like to have you there.”

“As what? You can’t just have me around whenever you want. Is my presence really that important? I could send someone else in my stead.”

“No. I need you there, either in a professional capacity, a friend or as a date.” Frustrating how we haven’t defined our relationship yet, it wasn’t like we had much going on at the moment.

Silence lingered for a moment before she sighed. “Karl, which is it? I could come as your guest, but we both know I’m not that.”

“Will you be my date then?” Although I liked to stay behind the scenes, having Marie in my arms would certainly be a good look.

“No. I’m busy. I’m sorry, I won’t be able to make it. Maybe next time.”

I felt a pang of pain in my chest. She was rejecting me; I wasn’t used to this.

“Is that so? You don’t even know when or where the party is taking place. Be honest and tell me why you don’t want to come?” I pressed on.

“Must I give a reason? I am a busy person and would most likely be unavailable whenever that is.” A giggle escaped her lips. It confirmed she was joking. I smiled slightly as I fell for it.

“Honestly, I know things could be better between us, just come. You can leave whenever you want. The party won’t be the same without your presence,” I said that more for me than anything else.

“I hear you. I’ll think about it. Send me the invite, I’ll get back to you when I’m done sleeping on it.” She wasn’t joking this time. It made me feel like my sister was talking to her.

“I’ll do that. Consider being my date as well.” While I was talking, I picked out my sketchbook and other drawing materials. I had a sudden inspiration.

“I will try. Bye, Karl. I’ve got to go.”

Relief flooded through me as I heard her words. It was a small victory, a step in the right direction. Bidding her farewell, I ended the call. *I won’t lose you, Marie.*

My inspiration was still foggy, but I had Marie in mind. I began sketching. After a while, I left my study. I saw Selena leaving the kitchen with some snacks. “Hey, come join us. We’re having fun, and you could use some of it.” She waved packs of chips at me.

I shrugged. I wasn't in the mood for it; I might spoil the mood for them. "No, thanks. I need some time to finish some sketches. I'll come hang out with you both in a few."

I was about to walk past her when she said, "Marie?"

I sighed, shaking my head. "Not now." She took the message and left. Walking out of the house, I had no particular place to be, so I strolled around the premises. Marie made me like this, or should I say my feelings for her, which I'm fighting. I chuckled to myself. *There was a first time for everything.*

Chapter 15



MARIE

A knock on my door caught my attention. “Come in.” Morrison walked in with a bouquet of lilies. *What is Morris thinking?* He wasn’t the type of guy who expressed romantic feelings since he barely talked about anything personal. Such a move wasn’t what I expected from him. “Morris, what’s this?” Back home, I had received several bouquets of flowers from Howard, which I promptly disposed of. That man never seemed to learn. In fact, I was getting tired and nauseated with bouquets.

“Ma’am, this was delivered to my desk. I checked to confirm that you are the recipient. It didn’t say who, but I guess it’s from an admirer. Where should I put it?” He looked around and settled for my desk. I wasn’t the type of woman to keep flowers or vases around my office. I had no love for them. I guessed it would be Howard who had sent them again.

With disgust in my voice, I replied, “Throw it away and if you receive any more bouquets, you’re free to throw them away or take them home. Do with it as you please.”

Morris gave me a worried look, but I didn't care to explain.

"What if this is from Mr. Penfield?" He gave me a wink and brought out a card from the bouquet. He opened it and read it out loud.

Dear Marie. This is just me trying to apologize for my previous actions. I know I was out of line. Take this as a token of my love and remorse...." With a look of annoyance on his face he uttered, *Howard*.

"Now that your curiosity is satisfied, get that bouquet out of here."

He sighed, crushing the card. Before he left, he came closer to my table. "Ma'am, Mr. Penfield is hosting a party and it's the talk of the city. I'm aware you've received an invite, but you've not indicated if you'll be attending yet. Why?"

"Sometimes, Morris, it's best if you don't know everything. Anyway, I'm still thinking about it. Do what I asked of you."

He left. He tended to pry but respected me enough to know when to back off.

He wasn't wrong, though. I needed to make up my mind if I'd be attending or not. Moreover, it would be a bad look if I or no one attended this party, considering both of our companies were working together. Professionally, it was great PR, although I couldn't push past my mental barrier forcing me from making up my mind.

Karl was a complicated man; and even though I wanted more from him, I wasn't sure he was ready to give it. His

request that I be his date was just another thing to think about. *How about if I made him jealous?* It sounded ridiculous, but I considered it. I've been the one making the move, showing passion. I wanted to get a reaction from him. In part to be sure of his feelings and to make him fight for me.

Who could achieve that? I couldn't take Morrison as my date, and I needed someone on my level. Although I hated to admit it, Howard was a good candidate. He was a troublesome man, but I reasoned that he would be helpful in procuring my agenda of making Karl jealous and watching him squirm. I hope I won't regret it and I definitely do not want to stir the hornets' nest because Howard has done what I asked and left me alone. If I took him to the party, Karl would have no choice but to react. I didn't agree to his request to be his date. So, I why not bring Howard as my plus one instead. The thought of seeing Karl unruffled excited me.

I dialed Howard's number, and while doing so, I gritted my teeth. *Just this one time*, I promised myself.

"Marie! How nice to hear from you. I was worried you wouldn't accept my apology. Once again, I'm sorry."

I calmed my breathing and said, "I am yet to forgive you; however, I can still tolerate you for a bit. I have a deal for you: if I'm impressed, I might forgive you." Honestly, if he refused, I'd be relieved. Associating myself with him wasn't what I wanted, but I couldn't come up with another way to get Karl's attention, so I carried on.

“Really? That is just great. What’s this deal?” I could hear the sound of shoes—he was pacing.

“I have an important event two days from now. I want to take you along as a...plus one.” I could not bring myself to say *date*.

He laughed, deep and throaty. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Of course, I’d be glad to be your plus one for as long as you want.” His excitement just dampened my mood further.

“Don’t get any fancy thoughts, Howard. I am just asking you to do this for me as a professional courtesy. Nothing is coming out of it. You can choose to accept or not” Although I wanted to use him to make Karl jealous, I wasn’t going to give Howard the impression that I was in any way interested in him.

He sighed. “As you wish. Is there anything else I need to know?” I quickly went over everything in my mind, the plan was simple.

“None. I’ll communicate the time and location to you. See you then.” Ending the call, I made another call to Karl.

This was a call I was actually going to enjoy. “Hello, what’s your decision?” His deep magnetic voice made me shiver with excitement. Everything about him seemed to arouse something primal in me. Right now, the way his voice sounded, it was commanding yet endearing, threatening to undo me.

“A good day to you too...” I said, rolling my eyes, “I’ll attend.” I hoped my voice had the same effect on him.

“Hmm, I’m pleased. And?” A man like him usually had his way, but not now. He’d have to work harder. I suppressed a smile.

“Unfortunately, I can’t be your date, I already have a date.” I said in an aggrieved tone. *What are you thinking, Karl?* Whatever his reply was, I would win.

“Who?” His voice was low and edgy. A warm current of pleasure crept up my back. *Yes, more.*

“You may or may not know him. He’s a fan of your work, and it would be a pity if you don’t meet him.” I heard his labored breathing and smiled in triumph.

He was silent for a minute. I waited patiently. When he replied, I could hear the suppressed anger in his voice. “Yes, you both are welcome. I’d *love* to meet who you’ve been friend.” *The fan of my work.* He wasn’t so subtle with his jealousy. I wanted to play more into that but restrained myself.

“That’s great. We’ll be there. I hope to have fun then.” My tone showed that I was ready to end the call.

“*Oh, so much fun.* Bye, Marie.” When we ended the call, I released the breath I held. The fun was just beginning.

Two days later, it was a few hours before the party; it was a night event. I had communicated the time I wanted Howard to pick me up so arriving together, we would look believable. I took my time to get dressed. I wanted something both elegant and sensual. After going through my closet, I found a shimmering blue gown affording a view of my cleavage.

The gown accentuated my figure and gave me a ravishing and sultry look. After applying my makeup, I looked in the mirror, satisfied with what I saw. I checked my phone to see Howard was waiting outside.

“This is it, Marie.” I smiled at myself in the mirror.

Immediately, I left my room. When I closed the door behind, I watched Howard come out of his car. He must have been trying to impress me by driving one of the more expensive models today. I didn’t comment. He had stuck to the theme, wearing a light blue suit with silver embroidery. I hated to admit it, but he did look good.

“Good evening, you look immaculate. May I?” He bowed as he gave me his hand. I considered it for a moment.

Reluctantly, I placed my hand in his, to which he gave a quick kiss.

“Evening to you too. This is a lovely night.”

I took my hand back and walked to the front seat.

Hurriedly, he followed behind and opened the door. I got in. He joined me in the car in the driver’s seat. He gave me a confident smile before he started the engine and headed out. He was on his best behavior until we arrived at the venue. When he parked, he hurriedly left his side to open my door. I nodded my thanks, but I still didn’t take his hand.

The entrance to the party was enwreathed with vines and flowers. As we entered, we presented our invites.

“Enjoy your night, ma’am and sir.”

I gave attendant a curt nod and he returned to answering other invitees. The décor was otherworldly elegant and before I opened the door, I gave Howard a look. He gave me his arm and I linked mine through his. Putting aside my animosity, we smiled as we entered the room. *Karl, what will you think?*

Chapter 16



KARL

I lingered in a separate room, drinking a glass of wine. I wasn't ready to join the party yet. I knew if I did, I'd have to face the guests and talk to them. However, remembering Marie and her new *date*, my insides twisted. *Why didn't you tell her she mustn't bring someone else along?* I still debated whether she was actually joking or found some random man to bring along. *Humph, so what? He can't be better than me.*

A knock sounded. I reached the door and opened it. A young server holding a tray of champagne quickly spoke, "Sir, I was informed to tell you Miss Rosii has arrived."

I nodded, recalling I told the staff to inform me when she arrived. "Is she with anyone?" I kept my voice neutral.

"Yes. They look quite intimate."

She shook from the look I gave her. I waved my hand, which made her scamper off to serve the guests. *Marie was here, truly with another man?* I had to face her. She couldn't just

throw away what we have between us. I set my glass aside before I entered the party.

The floor was filled with sophisticated people, drinking and talking. I scanned the room for Marie. I saw her taking two glasses of champagne, giving one to a man beside her. I faintly recognized him. Selena joined them and they quickly struck up a conversation. I walked towards them.

“I see you’ve gotten yourself someone new ...”

Selena paused as she saw me. She arched her eyebrow.

Marie gave me an effortless smile, which I returned. She was breathtakingly lovely in her dress. I looked at the man beside her, he was of average height and good-looking. Marie saw me looking and at that moment, she linked hands with him, resting her head on his shoulder. The man looked pleased.

“Howard, this is Karl, our host. You’ve met his sister, Selena, my best friend. Karl, meet Howard Spencer, CEO of Horizons Estates.” There was a wicked grin on her face. *This is a game to you, huh?*

I stretched my hand to him, which he shook dismissively. “A pleasure,” I said to him, facing Marie, “You are trying, I can see that she’s a lovely lady” She frowned. Howard didn’t seem to notice the sarcasm.

“Yes, she is. We’re taking it slowly,” he replied.

“How about we take a breather and enjoy the party, huh? Come on, Karl. We’ll talk later, Marie.” Selena pulled my arm

lightly, and I followed her. I wanted to wipe the stupid grin off Howard's face.

I remember where I had seen him: back at the bar. *She must have brought him to spite me.* Even with that knowledge, I was still annoyed. We were some distance away from them when Selena stopped to face me. "What was that about?"

I shrugged and offered, "Enjoy the party, I have other things to attend to." I pulled away from her and went to welcome the other guests. There was a mini runway for the models to give the guests a taste of what was to come.

There was also dancing, which I didn't join—I refused anyone who asked. I wanted Marie and watching her dance with Howard infuriated me. I stayed away for most of the party.

As the party died down and the guests were leaving, I said my goodbyes. Selena left earlier than expected. There were just a few people left, enjoying each other's company. Beside one of the pillars stood Marie and Howard, her back was to the pillar and Howard shielded her from view. They seemed to be in a heated argument, which drew my attention.

I walked over, no matter what was happening, Howard couldn't treat her like that. As I got closer, I heard the hushed whispers of their conversation. Howard noticed me coming close and gave me a hateful look. She took that moment to shove him hard. He staggered and fell.

Marie's eyes were red, and when she saw me, she looked away. I wanted to touch her.

“No! Excuse me.” She sped past me. I watched her climb the stairs to the upper floor quickly. I faced Howard who was getting on his feet, an embarrassed look plastered on his face.

“What was going on here?” I advanced on him.

“None of your business. *That bitch!*” he murmured, adjusting his suit.

“Say that again and you’ll regret it,” I whispered in his ear. He froze. Ignoring him, I went up the stairs to find Marie. I found her in a dark corner by one of the doors. She looked to be wiping tears from her eyes. When I reached her, I impulsively pulled her into my embrace. She tensed then eased up. She hugged me tightly.

“I’m sorry, I was foolish.”

“Shhh, don’t say that. Howard is a fool. Why would anyone hurt you so?” I said comfortingly, patting her back.

She chuckled and looked up at me, “So you’re a fool?” She saw the frozen look on my face and laughed. “You’re cute when you’re flustered. Thanks for this. I needed a moment to myself.”

I held her close; I wasn’t ready to let her go. “Watching you with him tonight made me realize how much I have been holding back from sharing my feelings with you. I’m sorry, Marie.”

She touched my face, and I pressed my cheek into her palm. “I didn’t have as much fun as I wanted to. I ought not to have

brought him along. I just wanted to..." She lowered her eyes, looking shy. *Too late for that now.*

I let out a deep breath, "Would you like to dance with me?"

She didn't reply but began swaying in my arms. I joined her. It was dark, but I could feel her eyes on me. Our breaths joined and the proximity of our bodies made mine heat up. She was irresistible this close.

She tiptoed up and kissed me. I kissed her back, pressing our bodies closer together. She pushed her weight on me. I hit my back against the wall, but we didn't stop. In a haze, we kissed, touching each other hungrily. Her hands went to my belt, undoing it. I gasped as she grabbed me. Her warm hand made me feel hotter, I was hard and throbbing in her hand.

"You don't know how long I've wanted this since I saw you tonight..." she said breathlessly. She moaned when I kissed her neck. I pushed her against the wall and hiked up her dress.

"This might be sloppy," I said after we broke the kiss.

"I want you nonetheless."

I nodded, bringing her legs around my waist. She held her breath as I pushed into her, slowly.

"Oh, Karl.... yes!" She yelped when she felt my full length within her.

Her hands went around my neck as I started a rhythmic movement—back and forth. I wanted to have as much time as possible with her, but we were out in the open where anyone

could see us. I was thinking about changing our location. Her hands held my face.

“Focus on me. Forget about whatever you’re thinking.” The charm in her voice held me.

Growling, I thrust with rapt attention. I let her moans of pleasure wash over me. The sweat beading my face rolled down to her breasts. I wished to suck and feel them. I could not have everything I wanted.

I switched us to another wall and this time she took control, bouncing up and down with relish. My muscles kept twitching from the waves of pleasure coming from my length. She could feel me holding back. She clenched her smooth walls, sucking hard on me.

“Goddammit!” I grunted. I didn’t give in. She laughed, fatigue in her voice. I held her waist to stop her movement. We were breathing hard and shallow.

We both went to the floor. I placed my back against the wall and spread my legs so she could sit on me. I gazed at her face, feeling lucky to have this woman in my arms.

“You’re beautiful. Truly.”

She paused, looking at me in confusion. One of my hands went around her waist, the other pulled on her dress to feel her hard nipples. She bit her lip, biting back a moan.

“Go on.” I breathed close to her ear.

As if possessed, she went up and down in a frenzy, but I kept her steady. Her hair once bound in a bun loosened and fell

around her shoulders. I could no longer hold back, as she came back down on me, I held her from moving and kissed her as I climaxed. My body and mind were so hot, I was seeing white. I felt her shudder in my arms, calling my name dreamily. She rested her body on me, tired and satisfied. I was about to close my eyes for a moment when out of the corner of my eyes, I caught a camera flash. I thought I was seeing things, but it came again, rapidly.

Faintly, I saw the outline of a man. “Hey!” I called out. He was spooked, so he ran. Marie didn’t seem to notice. I gave up on chasing him, I couldn’t leave her now.

Chapter 17



MARIE

Giving Morris a file for him to go over, I leaned back in my seat, relieved to have cleared most of my workload for the day. It was getting late, so I packed up and prepared to leave. Morrison already had his instructions, I just informed him I was leaving and left the building. At the parking lot, I went straight to my car. I opened the door and set my bag on the opposite seat.

I was about to close the door behind me when I noticed an envelope stuck to my windshield. *What's that?* Furrowing my brows, I took it off. Written boldly on it was my name. A cold dread swept my body. Looking around, I saw no one suspicious. I rushed back into my car, my heart beating erratically.

Frantically, I opened the envelope. Several pictures spilled into my lap. My hands shook. Tentatively, I picked up one of them. I saw myself pressed to the wall with Karl. My mind spun. Someone caught us having sex and took these images. I checked several of them. There was no way I could deny it. I

was the one with Karl. If this got out, even if the company survived, my reputation would be ruined.

I began to doubt myself. Was Karl behind this? *Why would he?* Checking the envelope, I found a short phrase, *caught you, whore*. I shook with anger. Who could be out for me? I blamed myself for not being more careful. If I had been somewhere more private with Karl, this wouldn't have happened.

Throwing the pictures behind me, I drove out of the parking lot. I kept looking behind to see if anyone was following. I hated how paranoid I felt. When I arrived, I put the pictures back into the envelope. Inside the house, I went to the fireplace, started a fire, and threw in each picture individually. I watched it all burn with the envelope. I was too ashamed to keep them. I don't regret what I had with Karl but having pictures of it without my consent felt like an insult.

Of course, I could have gone to the police and given them the evidence, but that would have opened up a can of worms, and one I didn't want. I left the fireplace and went to bathe to get rid of the smell of smoke. I had lost my appetite and kept looking out my window to see if anyone was out there watching me. *How long has this been going on and just how much did they have on me?*

These thoughts haunted me in my sleep. The next morning, my alarm woke me up. I had woken up a few times throughout the night; I only got a few hours of sleep. I rolled out of bed feeling feverish and tired. My limbs felt heavy. With the way I

was, it was unlikely I'd make it to work. I dialed Morrison's number.

"Morris, clear my schedule for today. I'll be staying home. Keep me posted on important developments at the company," I said in a faint whisper.

"Noted, ma'am. You don't sound okay. Anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks. I'll be fine." I smiled trying to assure myself more than him. I ended the call and walked shakily to the restroom. I took myself to the living room and curled on the couch, watching what was playing on the phone's screen. Still, I couldn't focus. If this person had access to me, then they'd have other explicit images of me. I had to do something.

An idea came to mind. With hope in my heart, I called Karl. He answered on the second ring.

"Hello, Marie, miss me?" I could hear the breezy air with which he spoke. It confirmed my suspicion he didn't receive anything similar, or he was hiding it well.

"Yes, I do. However, I called for something more urgent. Yesterday, I received an envelope with images of us having sex at your party. I don't know who it's from, but I know if they were able to get those photos, then they would have been at the party. I need you to check the CCTV cameras to find out who looked suspicious." I stopped to catch my breath. I was banking my hope on this. If it failed, it would be near impossible to find out this person's identity.

Karl was silent for a moment. Did he know something? Or saw something suspicious?

“Karl?” I prodded him.

“I’m sorry, Marie. I ought to have told you. During that moment, I saw some camera flashes, but I couldn’t chase the person given the situation we were in.” He sounded apologetic, but that didn’t ease the anger I felt. I breathed in deep to calm myself.

“Karl, you ought to have told me. Right now, I fear for my safety and privacy. Whoever this was, they were there! We’ve got to find them,” I spit out.

“I assure you that I will find out who this is and bring them to justice. Tell me, what do you need to feel safe?” When he said that, my anger abated. Suddenly, I wanted him around.

I blurted out, “I’ll feel safe with you around.” I added, “You don’t have to worry, I can take care of myself.”

“Nonsense. I’ll be there soon.” He shut down my protests. Within an hour, I heard a knock at the door. I opened it to see him. Relief washed over me, and I rushed into his arms. I felt safe and protected.

“Thank you for coming.” I nuzzled his neck, happy for his presence.

“Come in.” I led him into the living room. It felt weird having him around, and with my current state, I felt inadequate somehow. He didn’t seem to mind. He pulled me into an

embrace on the sofa. I was lulled to sleep by his steady breathing.



I was relieved not to receive any more threats, although we were stumped as to who the mystery person was. However, going over what happened that day, I suspected Howard, but I had no evidence. He has been silent ever since that day, and in a way I was relieved to not hear from him.

My phone rang. I answered immediately when I saw that it was Selena. “Lena! How are you?” I left my seat and went to the window, looking down at the city’s bustling street.

“Great actually. The billion-dollar hotel I invested in at Dubai, Evergreen Continental is holding a launching ceremony. As one of the shareholders, I have to be in attendance and want to know if you’d like to join me as my guest.”

“I’d love to, but you know how swamped I am at the moment. When are you leaving?” Selena wasn’t the type of person to stay around in a place for too long.

“This weekend. Come see me off at the airport.”

“I won’t miss it.”

The weekend came. I drove to the airport and was led to the tarmac where Selena’s private jet was. When I got on the plane, I saw her going through a magazine. I sat by her side. She looked up, a smile on her face. “You made it,”

“I had to see you off. You look set.”

“Yes. I wanted to make sure I saw you before I left.” She saw my sad face and commented, “Karl?”

“No, not him.” I could not tell her just yet. She still wasn’t on board with Karl and me being together.

“Whatever it is, I hope you tell soon. I care for you.” She placed a hand on my knee. “And be careful around Karl, he’s my brother but I don’t want him to hurt you. Promise me.” She squeezed my knee.

“I promise to try.” That was the best I could do. She accepted that. The pilot informed her that it was time to leave. Saying my goodbye, I walked slowly to my car, in deep concentration. Whatever my relationship with Karl, she was right, I had to protect my heart. *But can I?*

Chapter 18



KARL

C hecking on the status of the designs, I was satisfied with the progress they had made. They were almost complete, and in a few days, we would be able to begin shipment to the various warehouses for public access as soon as fashion week concluded. I was still inspecting the finished collections when I beckoned Blake over to me.

“Sir?”

“How are the other preparations coming up?” I moved about, and he trailed behind.

“It’s all been handled. The film crew are done with recording the creative process of the project and have begun editing. Other than that, we are set. You can look forward to a flawless show.” His eyes flashed with pride.

He wilted under my gaze. “We can’t rest until that day comes. On your way out, tell the designers to ensure they keep in touch with their models. I’d hate for any issue to occur.” I waved him away. Truly, he wasn’t wrong. I had supervised the

process from start to finish, so I wasn't worried, but I had a perfectionist streak. I wouldn't tolerate any mistakes.

I went back to my office finally breathing easier, although I couldn't relax yet. I still had Marie on my mind. Whoever did that to us didn't deserve a modicum of respect. I tried to understand the person's motive. It wasn't targeted at me but her, so I ruled out a rival. But if those images were to leak out, it could devastate my company's new rollout.

I sighed. This was getting complicated, I had to solve it immediately before it caused more harm. It was just frustrating the interior cameras had caught nothing. Only a few cameras were in the building to keep the guests' identities private.

It could be anyone, a staff member or a guest who stayed back after the party. Howard was the most likely person to have a motive. This was all speculation, and I'd need more evidence. I pulled out my phone to call Norris.

I laid out my suspicion to him, then sent him the list of people who remained after the party. It was a small list, and I expected him to go through them easily. If any of them were involved, he'd fish them out, but my bet was on Howard.

I left the office sometime later in the evening. I thought I should head to Marie's before I went home. Smiling fondly at the few times I'd spent at her place; it seemed like our relationship was progressing well despite the threat posed by the anonymous person. I decided against it. The show was in two days' time; I'd see her then. I had a surprise for her. I wanted to officially define our relationship.

I drove home without incident. Walking past the door, I saw Rose with Jason, watching something on an iPad. I went to her and picked Jason up. “Hey, son. Happy to see me?”

“Yes! We can eat together tonight, right.... dad” I nodded, making him grin. I felt guilty. I had spent most of my time at the company or with Marie. I hadn’t given him much of my time. That had to change.

“Rose, kindly set the table. Come on son.” I went upstairs with Jason and had him sit on my bed while I went to change in my closet. When I got back to the room, he was already making snow angels on the white bed sheets. I sat on the bed. His leg hit my thigh and he stopped.

“Jason, would you like to have a mom?” I wasn’t sure he understood the gravity of the question, although he knew what *mom* meant. A year ago, he asked about her, non-stop. When I didn’t reply, he stopped. I noticed that he took Selena as the maternal figure he needed.

His eyes wavered, finally he held my gaze. “Like Aunt Lena?”

“Kind of, I want to bring home...someone you’d like. Daddy likes her, and I hope you will too.” If all went as I planned with Marie, I would bring her home to meet Jason. I felt they’d hit it off.

“Really? Yay. Yes, a new mommy.” I hugged him, keeping the more complicated thoughts to myself. It would be for the best if Jason accepted Marie. Being young should help, I guess. Leading him out of the room, we went to have dinner.

Later that night, I called Marie. I smiled when I heard her voice,

“Karl, you do your best to make me miss you. It’s working.”

I chuckled. “I’m flattered. The evergreen proverb says, absence makes the heart grow fonder. I want to be in your mind always like you’re in mine.” Cheesy, I know, but feelings did that.

“Then you have me where you want me, Karl. What plans do you have for me then?”

“Something awesome is in store for you after the show. Therefore, you must be in attendance.” I warned.

“I won’t miss it, but I can’t promise I won’t be in a playful mood. You excite me. Like right now, my clothes are slipping off. You’ve gotta do something, Karl.”

“I’d love to play with you right now, but I’d like us to reserve this for after the show. You won’t be disappointed. In two days, I’ll pick you up.”

“No. I also have a surprise for you. Don’t ask, a woman must keep her secrets. If you pick me up, it would no longer be a surprise.” I was amused and looked forward to this surprise of hers.

“Very well then. I’m looking forward to this. Goodnight, my love.” I heard her sigh her farewell. I went to sleep in a dreamy haze.



I stood at the entrance of the show, waiting for Marie to arrive. The sides of the red carpet were cordoned off and surrounded by journalists, news photographers and fans. I kept my distance, watching various guests walk down the carpet before they entered the venue. Some spoke to the journalists and fans. I checked the time, the show was about to start soon. She ought to be here by now.

At that moment, a sudden hush fell over everyone. A silver Aston Martin vintage parked in front of the carpet. The driver stepped out and opened the door. A pale heeled leg stepped on the ground, followed by the other. She gave her hand to the driver and stepped out fully.

Marie looked ethereal; her white gown showed much of her bare chest. She had adorned it with a simple diamond necklace, like a star resting on her bosom. Her hair fell beautifully down her back. She stepped on the red carpet, waving and smiling at the crowd.

She looked stunning...this was my woman and tonight I would make her all mine. Her walk was slow and regal, and the crowd adored her. She was a model herself. Her dress shimmered with silver highlights. It was a vintage dress from the company's previous rollout—one of the best. One...no two had been made.

As she reached the end of the carpet, I stepped out of the shadows. Walking over to her, I took her hand. I kissed it and linked our arms. Our words were drowned out by the voice of everyone cheering for us. Bright lights flashed around us. I led

her in. The sound of the crowd was muted when we entered the venue.

“You are so beautiful.” I spoke. I wanted to kiss her red lips. She saw my intentions.

“And has no one told you how dashing you look, Mister? Here.” She hugged me, giving me a peck. “Sorry, my makeup.”

“We have all night.” I winked and led her to our exclusive seats. Many were already seated around the raised platform in the middle of the hall. A large curtain hid the models. Very soon they’d start walking up and down the runway.

I introduced some of the more important guests to Marie before we took our seats close to the runway. Some cameras were busy snapping our picture. Others were focused on the runway. Several of them were Marie’s crew. They’d added this to the project.

“It’s about to start,” I announced, holding her soft hand on my thigh. The lights in the hall dimmed, obscuring the audience. Only the runway enjoyed full illumination. One by one, exquisitely dressed models walked out from behind the curtains. Although I had watched them practice, I was still impressed as they pranced down the runway.

Several rounds of applause went up at the sight of the superb designs. The climax of the show was close. The crux of the show was my looks. A male model walked out with a summery outfit—a mixture of 90’s American male fashion and a British college aesthetic. I nodded, watching other models

walk out in other notable designer looks. However, after the appetizers were done, the final models did not walk out.

Blake, trying to look composed, walked over and whispered in my ear, “Sir, something tragic has happened to the models—food poisoning. We just sent them to the hospital. I’m sorry for my negligence but the looks have been damaged. It looks like someone cut them with something sharp.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and schooled my expression. I couldn’t let them see me angry. The show had to keep going. “Go get the Enchanted designs. Make sure no harm comes to them or your job is on the line.”

He left hastily.

“What’s wrong?” Marie whispered.

Chapter 19



MARIE

“I have a favor to ask of you. I’m going to stand up soon, so please follow me. Act naturally. I can’t rattle the guests just yet.” I was unsure of what was happening, but he seemed serious. If there was any way I could help, I would.

I nodded. Murmurs were rising around us since no more models were coming out—especially the finale look.

He rose, looking unfazed. His confident look reassured me. I gave him my hand, and he pulled me to my feet. The guests quietened as they saw us walk toward the preparation room behind the curtain. We passed the curtain and entered a brightly lit dressing room with models in different stages of undress—and others applying or removing makeup. They stopped what they were doing and watched us walk past them into another room.

This room was private with large mirrors and lights to help with dressing.

“Why are we here?”

He sat on the seat pulling me on his lap. “Something happened to the models and the dress. Blake went to get other looks to replace them. It’s the last minute, and we can’t get new models. Fortunately, the dress will fit you. I want to ask if you’d like to walk down the runway with me?”

I touched his face, enjoying the tender look in his eyes. Regardless of what happened, this moment and the next on the runway would be worth it.

“I would love that, although I’m not much of a model.” We placed our heads together, breathing each other’s scent. A smile pulled on his lips.

“From what I saw, that’s a lie. You are better than many out there...” The door opened, and Blake pushed in a wardrobe.

“Sir, the clothes are inside. Would you like me to get the designers to help you put them on?”

Karl shook his head, “Go reassure the guests. I can take care of things here.” He left, and I faced Karl. We rose, went to the wardrobe, and opened it. A beautiful sea blue gown with emerald floral designs hung on a mannequin. An emerald crystal so dark as to be black was also on the mannequin. Beside the dress was a suit. It was green with a sea blue shirt. The jacket and trousers of the suit had blue fire designs. Both garments had so much detail, which added to their richness.

“This is the Enchanted. I want us to wear this down the runway. Would you be kind enough to join me, Marie?”

“Anytime.”

That brought a smile to his lips. Immediately, he helped me out of my dress. Carefully, I wore the special gown and all the accessories. The dress flattered my form; it was like I was born for the dress. I watched Karl strip naked. I admired his body as he put on the green suit. I helped where I could.

“We look immaculate,” he pronounced.

“Hair and makeup? More is still needed.”

He went to the door and called for two makeup artists. They went to work; we were ready a few minutes later. Looking at ourselves in the mirror, we looked not just royal but like a couple made for each other.

He gave me his hand, “Shall we?”

My hand in his was my answer. We left the room and went behind the curtains. I adjusted my state of mind. I was no model. Walking down the runway with Karl, in front of a sea of people. *Unnerving*. The curtains parted and Karl took the lead. Hand in hand, we walked on the runway.

It was surreal. When we appeared, the guests rose to their feet and gave thunderous applause. Karl gave me a faint nod. Under the light, we walked confidently with regal poses. We moved in sync as if we shared one mind. At the end of the runway, we turned and walked back to the curtains. We stopped; the guests grew hushed, obviously waiting for something. Karl smiled and put his arms on my waist. I held my breath.

“May I?”

I put my gloved hand on his chest, indicating my consent. He leaned in and we kissed. It was light and chaste but still electrifying. The lights from the cameras overwhelmed us. We retreated behind the curtains.

“Mission accomplished,” I declared. It felt great being able to do this with Karl—a memory unique to both of us.

“After this, I want to take you somewhere special. More memories are to be made tonight.” His lips brushed my cheeks, and there was a mischievous look in his eyes. “Give me a moment. I need to meet with the guests after this.”

“Go, I’ll be waiting for you.” He left through a side door.

Unknowingly, I had a smile on my lips. It shocked me how happy I felt around him. It came easily.

Heading back to the dressing room, the designers helped me out of the dress and carefully put it back. I wore my own dress, then waited for Karl. He came back a while later. Helping him out of the suit, he put on his previous one.

“Things are dying down. We can leave now.” He held my hand and led me through another exit out of the building. We walked some distance away. Most of the photographers at the entrance were focused on the leaving guests. We reached his car. He helped me in and took his seat. The car purred to life, and he drove us through the illuminated streets of New York.

He was concentrating on the road, so I turned to watch him drive. He noticed this and asked, “What?”

“I like to see you focused. You’re handsome when you are,” I said, placing my hand on his thigh. I felt his muscles tense. Winking, he pulled my hand to his lips. I enjoyed the touch of them on my skin.

The car reached a quiet street that led to a beach resort. I was anticipating a surprise. When we reached the beach, he came to help me out. I took in the view. It was dark, but I could hear the sound of the waves. The air was cool against my face. Ahead was a resort decorated with lights—usually it was filled at this time. He must have booked it exclusively for us. Karl took off his jacket and draped it over my shoulders.

“Follow me.”

I trusted him. He led me to the building. The staff met us at the entrance and led us to a balcony overlooking the ocean. Much work had gone into decorating the place. There were glowing lights on the water and more scattered along the sand, creating a picturesque scene. He sat on the sofa and in front of him was a table adorned with seafood and exotic fruit. Karl took his seat and beckoned me to join him.

I took off the jacket, giving it to him. I removed my heels and sat close to him, placing my feet on the couch. He wrapped his arm around me, nuzzling my neck.

“This is a nice surprise.” It wasn’t the surprise I expected, but I would enjoy this time with him.

He brought a slice of a fruit to my lips; I took one half while he took the other. We ate our pieces before bringing our lips together. We kissed, he licked my lips and bit lightly on the

lower one. My toes curled at the way his arm held me. He gripped my ass. We broke apart. My face was flushed, and I was breathing hard.

His finger traced the outline of my lip as he spoke. “I have tried to avoid you, and I’m tired of it. I now know what my feelings for you are. I would be a fool to deny it, Marie. Each day, I feel like I’m living for you. My life is more exciting when I’m around you. I often do things without thinking it through. No woman has such control over me, but you.”

I was enraptured, hanging onto his every word. I could hear my heart beating hard and fast.

“You are in my every waking thought, plaguing my nights and daytime actions. I don’t want to play games; I can’t hide the way I feel about you anymore. I’m in love with you, Marie. You don’t have to say anything back. I just want to ask you officially, would you be mine.”

I didn’t have to think too hard about it. I’d been waiting a long time to hear him say that. *Karl, I think I love you too.* I couldn’t say that just yet. *Was it right to say I love you this early in our relationship?* I wondered. I bathed in the endearing look in his eyes. The longer I took, the more his face fell. The hope in his eyes dimmed.

“Karl, I want to be your girlfriend, but your...I don’t know what to call her. Your ex or the mother of your son. I feel like I’m an afterthought in your life.”

The tender atmosphere suddenly shattered. I suddenly felt the chill in the air. I thought he’d rise and leave, but he sighed,

closing his eyes. *You've spoiled a good thing, Marie. Not again*, I cried internally.

Chapter 20



KARL

I guess it was time to tell the truth to Marie. She deserved it if she was going to be with me. I smiled to ease the worry creeping into her eyes. Rising from the seat, I stood close to the balcony railing. Breathing in deeply, I spoke. “Laura is my ex, and she is not the mother of my child. She’s a liar and a manipulator. I almost fell for the lie when she came to me, claiming to be his mom.”

Marie walked up beside me, staying close, due to the night chill. She was studying my face with a blank expression. “I love my son, Jason, and it has been one of my greatest regrets not to give him a mom. It must sound absurd to you, but when I was younger, I was a playboy. You might think I still am.”

She smiled at that.

“When my manager brought a baby to me, saying he had been abandoned, I looked at him and knew that he was my son. I did my best to find his mom to no avail: Nobody knew who left the baby. The video footage didn’t show a clear picture of the woman’s face.

The manager brought a note she had pulled from the baby's meager belongings. "*He was conceived here on July 15th 2018.*" Reading those words caused my suspicions to heighten. I decided to do a DNA test and the rest is history.

Many nights, I'd go out and get wasted. The revelation finally came back in the form of Jason. It was a cold reality check and I vowed I would be the best dad to my son. That was why I allowed Laura back into my life and into my son's life.

I knew she wasn't, but I hoped nonetheless, she'd be the mother Jason needed or at least function in that role. She's gone now. I sent her away before she could cause any more harm and after discovering how much of a fraud she is.

"Rest assured that I have nothing else going on with any other woman, other than you. You seem to have a thing against single fathers" I stated, chuckling.... attempting to lighten the tense air between us. She wasn't looking at me. I touched her shoulder, getting her attention. Her eyes were wet, and she had a faraway look in them.

"What's wrong?" I asked, shocked. She hugged me abruptly, crying. I held her, trying to comfort her.

When she got control of herself, she gave me a sad laugh. "Look at us, all in our feelings. I admire you, Karl, for taking the responsibility of being a father. I am ashamed of myself." She looked away and I didn't press on. She was thinking about something.

“A few years back, I had a reckless night out. I rarely ever did that, just to discover I was pregnant...my first time ever. I hid from everyone, my family included. It was a hard time in my life and an even harder time during labor. When I gave birth, I felt like I had no feeling left in me—I was hollow. It was a terrible feeling.

Feeding the child hurt: everything hurt. I feared that I was going to hurt him. In my sadness, I dropped the child off at the same place where I had lost my virginity. I still wonder who the man was. Right now, I’m dealing with this terrible guilt. I’ve hired a private investigator to try and find him. I had a beautiful baby boy; there is not a waking moment when I am not thinking of him. So, it’s not a stretch to say that you’re a better person than I am. I hope this doesn’t make you think less of me.”

I made her face me, wiping the tears off her cheeks. She looked frail. “I don’t think less of you, Marie. We’ve all made mistakes. No, listen to me, we have all had bad moments and done things...it doesn’t define us. It’s who we are and what we do about it that matters. I don’t care about your past. I am still making amends for mine. I accept you, Marie. Do you accept me?”

A resolute look entered her eyes. She stood straighter, smiling through her tears. “Yes. I accept you, Karl. I want to be your woman. Maybe we could make this work.”

“You don’t know how happy that makes me. I believe together we can make it work.” I was smiling so hard my

cheeks hurt.

“I didn’t know you were such a great motivational speaker. I almost feel invincible.”

“There’s more to learn about me and you. I think right now, I have your permission, huh?”

Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed me. I hugged her close, closing my eyes and feeling her lips as we deepened our kiss. The sound of the ocean waves and cool breeze filled the air. Marie could not keep standing like that. I led her back to the sofa. The food was now cold. Calling the servers, I had them serve us new dishes.

I took the opportunity to feed Marie, sharing this intimate moment slowly. She stuck close to me, her breasts and legs plastered all over me. It was hard to keep my focus since I was getting harder by the second. We acted nonchalantly in the ambiguous air between us.

We finished eating and the servers came to clear the table. It was late in the night, but I had boundless energy—feeling younger and lighter Marie was tracing shapes on my chest when she spoke.

“We didn’t ask Selena for her permission. Do you think she’d be against us being together? I mean, she warned me against being around you, but I didn’t listen.”

The way she said that it showed that she wasn’t distressed by Selena’s stance. “If you met the old me, I’d say take her advice. I was a heartbreaker. But not the new me. I understand

her concern; it's just that Selena is not convinced. Especially since you're her best friend, she doesn't want you getting hurt."

"Will you hurt me, Karl?"

"No..." I added, "I'll do my best not to hurt you. We should be honest if we do hurt each other. I believe this will strengthen our...*love*."

"That's all I need. And I'll do my best not to hurt you in turn."

"See, we're working out fine already. About Lena, she's not a hateful person, when she sees us so happy, she'll be happy for us."

"I know. I just hate confrontations and don't want to come between siblings...or for anything to affect my relationship with her."

Lightly flicking her nose, I kissed her forehead. "You worry too much. It won't come to that." Sighing, we sat comfortably together for a while. I checked the time, it was a few minutes past ten. "It's getting late. Let me get you home."

She agreed, so we left the resort a few minutes later. In the car, Marie played a few songs—singing softly as I drove to her home. In no time, I was in her neighborhood. Ahead, I saw the gate of her house. As I turned the car toward it, the headlights illuminated Laura with a baseball bat, standing at the entrance.

I stopped the car, keeping the lights on. Marie turned off the song. Laura's presence troubled me, considering that she had

intentionally come to Marie's place with a weapon—she meant to harm her.

“Why's she here?” I could hear the anger in her voice.

“It's quite obvious. I didn't know she'd resort to this.” She was about to open the door, but I held her back. “Don't do it. Let me talk to her.”

Marie shrugged. “If she doesn't leave, I'm calling the cops”

“That's fine by me.” I stepped out of the car. Laura looked shocked to see me.

She swung the bat at the car, anger distorting her features. “So, you are with her? You can't control yourself, can you? What does she have that I don't?”

Ignoring her outburst, “Laura, leave or you'll get hurt. What you're doing right now is a crime.” I kept my voice calm. She looked volatile. I wouldn't want to push her over the edge with my words.

“No. I came here to face her. Let her come out and face me.” She advanced on the car, moving toward Marie.

I dashed at her, hitting her wrist with a blow. The bat fell and she let out a whimper. I pushed her away, picking up the bat. “You don't get to come over here and threaten the woman I love. Get out! Don't make me repeat myself or else....”

Staggering to her feet, Laura glared at me with bloodshot eyes. “I won't rest until I bring you down, Karl. If I can't have you, then she can't. Watch your back!”

I narrowed my eyes, wondering if I should have her arrested. She wouldn't stay long in jail based on the charge of trespassing. She walked off into the darkness. I threw the bat away and went back to the car.

Marie was silent as I drove past the gate. When I parked, she let out a tired breath. "Could you please stay the night?"

"Afraid of her?"

"No, I just want you around, and I don't want this night to end..." She winked and stepped out of the car. Chuckling, I followed her.

Chapter 21



MARIE

I opened the door, smiling at him as he walked in. There was a curious look in his eyes that made my body light up with a roaring fire. As soon as I shut the door behind me, he trapped me with his body. My back was to the door. It was a bit dark in the parlor, but I could see the way his eyes took me in.

“Even in the dark, you are so beautiful,” he purred softly as he kissed my lips. I shivered, holding the lapels of his jacket.

“Your words drive me crazy. I’m developing a weakness for you, Karl.” I muttered, clinging to his body. His muscles rippled under his shirt. I touched his chest, then his abdomen, trailing along his waistline downwards and teasing him with the anticipation of something more.

“And that’s just what I want. Just me, all up in your mind.” His hands grabbed my ass and squeezed through my dress.

Despite myself, I moaned. My legs felt weak with the way his hands roamed and caressed my body.

“Oh, Karl...” I breathed, feeling his lips on my neck. I held his head close to my breasts. He could not stop just yet.

My gown was restricting my movements, but I did my best to feel his erection with my knees. He was hard, which brought a smile to my lips. We kissed slowly, leaving each other breathless. I wanted more of him...and to get out of my dress.

“Karl, upstairs. I need you.” He stopped kissing me, his hands resting on my waist.

He grinned, picked me up like a princess and walked up the stairs. I kept myself busy, undoing his buttons. We reached my door, and he pushed it open.

“Set me down.” I switched on the low light in my room. The red light added more tension to the charged air between us. I turned to see him sitting on my bed with his legs open in a manspread. He didn’t say anything, but the hungry look in his eyes pulled me to him.

I stood in front of him, slowly taking off my heels.

“Stop, keep them on,” he said.

I was about to take off the dress next when he stood up. I stopped, letting him take control. With his gentle hands, he undressed me. Goosebumps rose on my skin. Everywhere he touched my skin felt hot. As soon as he took away his hand, it turned cold.

He purred in contentment, kissing my breasts with my dress off.

“For God’s sake, Karl...” My words stopped with a startled yelp as he went down on his knees and kissed me below my navel. I stuttered, feeling my legs about to give out.

“Steady,” he said in a low, commanding voice. “Right leg on the bed.” I followed his instruction, placing my right leg on the bed. I was spread open in front of him. He licked his lips with a hungry fervor.

Ever so slowly, he started caressing my body and licking me at the same time. When his tongue circled around my nipple, I knew I was about to explode. When his fingers touched my clit, the juices from my honey oozed onto his fingers.

“Oh baby.... baby, I need to feel you in me now.”

“I’ve been dreaming of this all night. I’ll be damned if I’m gonna rush it.” I held my breath as he dropped to his knees, putting my leg over his shoulder and starting to eat me. My legs gave out on me and I fell to the bed. His tongue continued to slide up and down my opening.

Taking me like he’s a starving man and I’m his last meal, he replaced his tongue with his fingers, thrusting in and out as he sucked slowly on my bud. I cried out in pleasure. I pushed his head against me, holding him there. His tongue worked wonders.

I was breathing hard and shaking more. I bit my lip, chanting his name like a prayer as I came undone. Abruptly, he rose and pulled me hard against him. I melted into his arms and kiss, tasting myself on him. Wasting no time, he got out of his

clothes and was standing gloriously in front of me. His shaft looming big and angry, with pre-cum dripping.

I dropped to my knees, with my face close enough to breathe his scent, I took in as much of his shaft as I could. He watched me earnestly wet his length as I took him again and again. The sounds emanating from him spurring me on. My lady parts weeping with need for him.

He took me off my feet and lay me on the bed. I clutched the bed sheets, my chest heaving with excitement. I spread my legs and touched myself, watching him jerk himself. He joined me in bed. Leaning into me, he kissed me, keeping my mind occupied with the dance of our tongues. He coated his length with my wetness, then slowly pushed inside me. I gasped, breaking the kiss. He stopped, giving me time to adjust to his size.

“Goddamn!” I said. He laughed a deep chuckle that sent shivers up my body. He slowly began to thrust in and out, my body adjusting to his size without discomfort. I wrapped my legs around him and hugged him close; he kept me face to face with him.

I smiled through the pleasure, enjoying the look of enjoyment on his face as he kept up a steady rhythm thrusting in me. We said nothing, yet I could feel our eyes and bodies communicate on a level I couldn’t describe. We were now official, and my feelings for him were becoming more than just what my heart could handle.

“What is wrong?” he asked.

I put my hand through his hair and smiled. “You make me happy, and I love this moment between us. Right now.”

“Oh, Marie...”

I arched my body as his thrusts became faster. Our bodies making its own melody as an orgasm rippled through me threatening to tear me apart. My screams of pleasure filled the room.

Touching my breasts, he played with my nipples. My body was overstimulated. I was having an out of body experience. This was so good. I brought my hand down to my slit, feeling Karl’s length sliding in. I held his arousal and let out a high-pitched moan as I peaked. I felt some wetness slide down my leg. I gasped for air, my body alternating between cold and hot. Karl thrust again at that moment. My eyes widened as he held my chin and kissed me. He didn’t move, but I felt him tense as he emptied himself inside of me. It felt great having him there.

He gasped and lay back on the bed. I rolled onto him, hugging him. Lazily, he rubbed my back down to my ass as we cuddled.

“My man...” I called him, dreamily. I fell asleep on his chest, taking his words with me to sleep. “My stars.”

I opened my eyes with a start and took in the early morning light as it fell on Karl sleeping beside me. It felt surreal. I hugged him, kissing his cheek. He murmured something in his sleep, then tightened his arm around me. I was content to stay

like this. Out of the blue, my phone rang. I ignored it the first time. It rang again, over and over.

“I think you should get that,” Karl said with his eyes closed.

I sighed and rolled away. I took my phone off of the drawer and saw who was calling. It was Morrison with missed calls from unknown contacts. I answered the incoming call. “What is so damn important as to call this early, Morrison,” I asked, exasperated that my time with Karl was being disturbed.

“There’s no time to explain a lot, ma’am. Just know that some blurry risqué photos of you and Mr. Penfield have been leaked online from different social media handles and blogs. Some of the company’s lawyers and I are pressuring the blog owners with legal consequences to take them down. However, for the social media platforms, it is much harder. Are you there?”

I struggled to find my words. *How could things have gone so wrong in a few hours?*

“You...” I breathed in deeply. The bed’s weight shifted under me. Karl got up and looked at me with concern. I shook my head at him, but he must have seen the worry in my eyes. “Keep on handling the situation with the blogs. I’ll look into the other matter. And Morris, thanks. I’ll be staying away from the company for a while. You won’t comment on this issue to any media outlet until I say otherwise.” I ended the call, throwing my phone on the bed.

I wanted to scream and pull my hair out. I felt Karl’s hand on my back. He said nothing but his solid presence calmed my

manic heart.

“What’s wrong? You look devastated.” He held my chin up, holding my gaze.

“It’s the stalker, pervert, or whoever threatened me with those photos of us. They’ve released them online. Although they are blurry, I’m scared to even look at them. Why us? Why go to this extreme to ruin me?” I choked on my words as tears welled up in my eyes.

Karl pulled me to his chest, stroking my hair. “This might sound weird, but it will be alright. I’ll do my best to help you. Anyone attacking you is attacking me, and that’s something I won’t take lightly.”

“We need to get this guy. He can’t keep getting away with it. I suspect Howard or Laura. Either one of them. They will pay for this.” I yelled, hitting Karl on the chest. He just held me close, trying to soothe me.

Ever since I contacted the investigator to find my son, I feel the weight of my decision much more than before. I feel the walls I have built and the don’t care façade I have erected begin to crumble. On all account, I am a strong woman, but even strong women have their occasional weaknesses. The-not knowing who is behind this leaking of photos in such an intimate moment is highly disconcerting.

“If they are the one or it’s someone else, they’ll face the consequences. I promise you. Right now, just breathe with me. Can you do that for me?” My anger deflated, and I breathed easier. He grabbed my phone, putting it on silent.

After a while, I chuckled, finally noticing the smell of sex and sweat on us. I pulled Karl with me to the bathroom, and we washed. We were in no mood for anything extra. We got out and I dressed in some comfortable clothes before joining Karl on the sofa in my room.

It was by the window. He was dressed in his suit. Although he didn't have on his tie and his shirt buttons were not fully closed, he looked commanding. The look of concern and care on his face made me wince, remembering that I still had a lot to take care of. I felt ashamed, knowing my brothers would have seen that. At least they spared me the pain of calling and me trying to explain this to them. No doubt, that call would be coming in soon. Moreover, Selena would have questions, and I'd have to explain it to her. I felt overwhelmed.

Karl was saying something on the phone, and I wasn't listening. I felt like a ghost in the sun—lost and blind. Karl's tap on my shoulder broke my reverie.

“Hey, I just spoke with the heads of the various social media companies that have allowed the photos to circulate on their platforms. They'll be bringing it down immediately and suppressing any news. It also goes against their guidelines, so it's enforceable. This should mitigate the problem, though it won't change the public discourse for a while.” The pain in his voice almost broke me. Going out of his way to do this touched me.

“An idea just occurred to me.” I looked up at him, a smile slowly forming on his lips. “We are officially in a relationship.

Although what happened comes at the wrong time, overshadowing our success, we can still steer the online conversation. We should tell the world that we are together and express our annoyance at someone invading our privacy. What do you think?" I asked, hopeful that he'd agree.

"Just perfect. How do we go about this?" I laughed, happy at how we complemented each other. Maybe things aren't going to be so bad after all. I took out my phone and went live on my personal account. The show was quickly filled with thousands of viewers. I smiled, feeling assured despite all that was happening and the disgusting comments I had seen. I brought Karl into frame, and we officially announced to the world that we were together.

Immediately, the comments changed to more appreciative and congratulatory. After condemning the actions of the leaker, I ended the live podcast.

"That was...something," he sighed.

"Dealing with the media is a tricky business. At least, we are able to turn this into a favorable situation..."

He gave me an apologetic smile as he answered a call. His smile changed into a mask of shock, then anger.

"Get the damn lawyers immediately and get this situation under control!" He ended the call. He squeezed his phone so hard, I thought he would break it. He saw my perplexed look and huffed out a frustrated breath. "My designs have been used by rival companies for their clothing line. There was a

leak, and I am sure it was Laura. This time she isn't going scot-free."

I sat stunned, feeling as if the world was after both of us.

Chapter 22



KARL

I was doing my best to keep a lid on my anger. I said goodbye to Marie and drove swiftly to the company. When I arrived, I saw a horde of reporters waiting for me at the entrance. I pushed past them, ignoring their questions and attempts to grab me.

I headed straight to the elevator and rode to the top floor, then I made my way to the conference room. Unceremoniously, I entered, and the conversation died down. The head of the legal department, Walter, rose from his seat, while Blake stood to the side, clearly nervous. The table was packed with several papers; I recognized some as my original designs.

I stopped Walter from talking and moved past the other lawyers to my seat. Blake immediately handed me an iPad. I scrolled through the photos, looking at the knockoff copies of my designs on several models. Narrowing my eyes, I went over them again, careful not to miss anything. These were copied from my works—designs I hadn't released to the

public. I recently brought out these designs to have a select few designers work on them. They are under strict contracts and dare not sabotage me like this.

The pirate companies would have had these designs for a while now, which meant they had gotten them a few weeks ago. The real designs had been sitting in my study, until... Laura. Yes, she was the one who was sneaking around my study. But I'd need more than my suspicions to prove it in court. I needed evidence.

I looked at the lawyers and their assistants. They looked away, reading the files in their hands. The room was silent. Walter gave a polite cough. I nodded curtly and he spoke.

"Sir, to an untrained eye, these designs are quite similar. Therefore, a case can be made. Also, with the help of a fellow reputable designer, your testimony, and original designs, we can take this to court and secure a possible win."

"Possible?" I asked.

He sighed, looking embarrassed. "We have a lot to prove, and we also have to fight the legal teams of both companies involved, Dell'Arte United and Camp Wears International." My silence prompted him to continue. "The judge could halt these companies from producing and selling these designs for the duration of the case. However, we have to prove that you made the designs first and at the very least show that someone from their company had access to your sketchbook or heard you discuss the designs and the creative process." Walter looked defeated.

“We are going to do our best, but with matters of intellectual properties such as these, proving it to a jury is difficult. We need evidence, something concrete that can link someone with access to you or your sketchbook from these companies. Or else, the case might get thrown out. So...”

Everyone’s eyes were on me. It was like the room held its breath. I spoke, much calmer now. These guys were some of the bests in the country. With what I knew of Laura’s action, it could increase the likelihood of winning this case. “This revelation might help, though it’s still within the realm of possibility.” *How do I ascertain Laura gave these companies the design? I can only prove that she entered my study and rifled through my things*, I mused. Shaking my head, I continued.

“The rest of you get out. Walter and Blake, stay behind.” The others quickly walked out. The crowded room suddenly felt spacious. “Laura, a woman I was once involved with, might be behind this. She had access to the original designs in my study. After we fell out, she threatened to hit me where it hurts. I’ll have you get this to court as soon as possible. I’ll get you the necessary evidence. And Walter, don’t fail me.”

He nodded gravely.

I left the room. In my office, I saw Norris.

“Good day, sir. I was asked to wait for you since you were busy. I have something interesting here. I kept tabs on Laura as you ordered.” I nodded, going to my seat. “She suddenly received a whopping sum in her account and paid off her

debts. She now has enough to live a good life. I investigated the source of this wealth and discovered it was sent by the COOs of both Dell' Arte United and Camp Wears Intl. I believe this is important. Here.”

I chuckled, feeling quite lucky. “Good job, Norris. This comes at the right time. You’ll be handsomely rewarded.” He grinned, patted his jacket and inclined his head in a bow. As soon as he left, I called Walter to my office. With this evidence, it was now possible to get Laura charged and stop these companies from using my designs.



Within the week, I tried to spend time at home and give more attention to Marie. I was grateful that she understood what I was facing, though I wished I could have solved her problems sooner and, more importantly, introduce her to Jason. It was high time I did that.

“Sir, we’re here.” Blake left the driver’s seat and walked to the door on my side. He opened it, and I stepped out. The courthouse was busy. Adding to the fact that today was the day this case was being tried in court, the media was positively glowing with anticipation of the verdict. I scanned the faces of the crowd for Marie. She said she’d be here today. I didn’t see her.

“Let’s go,” I said to Blake. We walked up the stairs leading into the courthouse, doing our best to avoid the frenzied reporters. They needed a soundbite from me. It was laughable.

When I walked through the doors, Marie was there standing with her arms calmly folded across her chest. She released them and came over, her arms open wide. I embraced her, sharing a light kiss.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” I said, smiling.

“I like to keep you on your toes. Come on, the trial is starting soon.” I nodded, following her into the courtroom. She and Blake took their seat in the gallery, and I joined Walter in his seat as the plaintiff. On the other side were the lawyers for the defendants, Dell’ Arte and Camp Wears. I looked behind me when I heard the doors of the courtroom open. The COOs entered, taking their seats. Laura came in as well, avoiding my gaze and sitting far away from others. *Your luck has run out, Laura.*

The judge pronounced that the trial had started. The lawyers made their opening arguments. It came down to presenting the facts. As expected, the opposition claimed the designs were theirs and the brainchild of their designers. After their arguments were made, Walter called in an expert to comment. This went in my favor; he found the defendant’s designs to be poor copies.

I testified next, bringing the court’s attention to Laura. When she was called to the stand, she looked sick and ghostly. Walter grilled her; she couldn’t get her story straight, and her inadvertent blunders implicated the defendants. Walter turned in the evidence to the court. The judge’s face was unreadable. He called for a recess.

Ten minutes later, the court was back in session. The judge had reviewed the evidence and had the jury go over it. He gave Walter the green light to proceed to the closing argument. The jury found the defendant liable for intellectual theft. The judge in turn passed the judgment. He fined the companies heavily and ordered the money in Laura's account to be withdrawn. My company was to be compensated for the damage. The kicker was when the judge fined Laura half a million dollars or risk spending time in prison. With satisfaction, I watched her taken out of the courtroom in handcuffs.

It felt great to have Laura and these issues out of the way. I walked out of the courthouse with Marie. She handled the media with ease and followed me to the car.

"So, we have something to celebrate today, Karl," she said, rubbing my thigh absentmindedly.

"What's wrong? You know I'm here to help?"

"No, no. I can't get in the way of your victory. I can handle it," she insisted.

"Marie, there's no victory without you happy and by my side. Let me share your worries as you've shared mine."

Sighing, she dabbed her eyes, "The anonymous person sent me a letter today. It said *you'll be going down soon. Expect me soon*. I think they're gearing up for something worse. What if they reveal what I did, abandoning my child?" Her eyes were wide with fear. I touched her skin; it was hot.

“Look at me! They’re hiding because they’re cowards. Whatever they think they have on you has no power over you if you don’t let it. I am here for you—to support and protect you. Don’t ever forget that.” My heart was beating fast. I felt like I wasn’t enough. My words alone wouldn’t stop the attacks on her.

Marie looked a bit relieved.

“Follow me home and meet my son. He has heard so much about you and would love to meet you. I know he cannot replace your lost son, but I hope his presence may heal you and you’ll both like each other.”

“Really? I’m starting to feel less nervous. Thanks, Karl. I feel like I’m not saying this enough. I’d love to meet your son.” She wiped her eyes and laughed. “Let’s go.”

When we arrived at my place, I led her to the door. Oddly, I felt giddy. She was about to see a part of me few ever saw and got to know. I gazed at her long enough to see her cheeks redden. Chuckling to myself, I opened the door.

“Come in, dear.” I took her hand and led her in.

I heard Jason’s soft giggles before I saw him. I was about to call him when Marie’s phone rang. She looked shocked but calmed down after seeing the caller.

“I’m sorry. One moment.” I nodded, and she moved away to receive the call.

“Jason! Daddy’s home!” I called out. A moment later, he ran out of the kitchen with a smile. I went on my knees and

welcomed him into my arms. “Hey there. I brought home someone you’d be excited to see. Look...”

“Who?” he asked, mouth agape. Marie looked over then. She waved at us, but her face looked sad. “She’s beautiful, Dad. Really.” I smiled, looking at his cute face. It suddenly occurred to me how similar some of his facial features were to Marie’s. The shape of his eyes, the same hair color, and the little curve of his lip resembled Marie’s smile. *Strange.*

“I... I think you’re my son.” *What?* My head snapped up. Marie was clutching her phone to her chest and pointing a shaky hand at Jason. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes. “Oh my, I’m so sorry.” She turned, about to run.

“No. Marie!” I dashed after her before she reached the door, wrapping my arms around her in a tight hug. “Why are you running? What’s this you’re talking about?”

“Please, let me go. I feel so ashamed. He’s my son. I had a son with you. All this time, I never knew.” She broke down crying.

Chapter 23



MARIE

I couldn't stop myself. My tears kept falling and my chest felt too tight to breathe. "My son...my son... Ja..." I wanted to say his name, but I was ashamed. What right did I have to claim him? Karl held me tight; I could not leave his arms. I wanted to run, but wasn't that what I did five years ago? I ran and abandoned Jason.

"Please, stay. Whatever it is, we can work through it together. I promise." *What did I ever do to deserve you, Karl? Really, how did I forget ever being involved with you?*

Jason came to stand in front of us, his eyes looking back and forth between Karl and me. I held his gaze, seeing something of myself in him. *How did I miss this for so long?* I went to my knees, dragging Karl with me. He kept me steady. Trembling, I stretched out my hands to Jason, "Hello, I'm Marie, your mother." He looked confused and regarded Karl. My heart twisted in my chest. Karl still looked unsure, but he nodded. Slowly, Jason walked to me. I touched his face,

smiling through my tears. “May I hug you?” He nodded, a smile forming on his lips.

I hugged him, breathing easily. I broke out in a bout of laughter. My voice echoed in the house, the joy clear in my voice. “Thank you, Karl, you saved me.” I was happy, sad, and tired, but I felt better than I’d ever been.

Karl led us to the living room. To my surprise, Jason decided to sit beside me. He held my hands in his, admiring and comparing them to his. My heart warmed. I regretted missing time with him—and all we could have done together. I faced Karl who had a smile on his face even though he looked confused.

I said, “It’s a miracle you made possible. You’re aware that I gave up my child five years ago. Recently, I started looking for him. Nothing came up, and I was about to lose hope. Not until now. See this...” I passed him my phone.

“The detective was able to trace him from the club where I left him. You are the owner of the club but that didn’t link Jason to you. Your recent trip to the movies with Jason sparked his interest, and he discovered that Jason’s mom was unknown; moreover, after following up on some leads, a source told him that a baby was dropped off at the club four years ago and it turned out that you are the father. I didn’t believe it at first. However, seeing him has convinced me. He’s *our* son, Karl.”

He set down my phone after going through the file. “How?” he asked, incredulously.

“I think we had a run-in at the club. We were so wasted; it seems we both couldn’t remember much of that night. However, Jason came out of the encounter.” I touched Jason’s hair, at a loss for words.

Karl moved close to us, grinning. The mirth on his face made me smile harder. “This calls for a celebration. I’ve always wondered who his mother was. Even with my limitless resources, I could not find her. Which meant, I couldn’t find you. You found us, Marie, and for that, I’m grateful.”

I brought my face close to his and kissed his cheek. “You made this possible, Karl. Thank you for keeping him safe.” We said nothing more and just smiled at each other.

“Jason, this is your mother. She’s back. Come...” Jason jumped between us and giggled as he tried to pull Karl and me closer, with him in the middle. *This right here is enough celebration for me.* I wanted to tell Karl that I loved him. He made me happy and our *family* possible. Yes, I now had a family of my own, it seemed.



I told my brothers the great news about Jason. They wanted to meet him immediately. I promised I’d bring him over during the Christmas holiday. It is a time for family and love.

It wasn’t easy adjusting to my new life. Finding my place in Jason’s life proved hard, but I was going to be there for him no matter what. I wouldn’t let my fears destroy a good thing ever again. With that conviction, I turned on the bed to see Karl

already awake, staring at the ceiling. I felt a touch of pride and so much love, looking at this man beside me. I had officially moved in with him, wanting to be close to him and our son. I still feared that I had acted too soon.

“What’s on your mind, love?” Karl looked at me, shaking his head with a smile.

“Love? Do you love me?” My words stuck in my throat. I wasn’t afraid to say it, but I imagined a grand scene when I did. *But this is better: in bed with the man I love, away from the eyes of the world.*

I moved to him, kissing his bare chest and then his lips. “Yes, my love. I love you. More than I ever imagined I could love anyone. You’ve taken a hold of my heart, and I don’t want to ever let you go.”

The surprise on his face turned into an endearing smile. “I love you too, in a way that my body and mind can’t articulate. You’re my world, Marie.” The kiss that followed took my breath away.

My phone rang. “Sorry,” I muttered, ending the kiss. I answered the call immediately, seeing that it was Selena. I had sent her a message about Jason and me, but she had been too busy to return my calls.

“Should I call you sister-in-law now?” Because she certainly was. “You are family Marie. So, how are you?” She sounded excited. That eased the worry I felt, considering how she had felt about my relationship with Karl.

“I’m great and yes, you can call me sister-in-law. I miss having you around, you know.”

“Me too. Great news, though. I’m done with business in Dubai, and I’ll be heading home soon. It will be a family reunion!”

“That reminds me, we plan to meet with my family in California this Christmas. I’d love to have you come with us.” I gave Karl a wink. I hadn’t told him about this meeting. He just shrugged.

“That’s cool. I’d make it just in time...and you have some explaining to do, girl.”

“You’ll get everything you need to know. Bye for now.” I ended the call. “Selena,” I said to Karl.

“What’s this about meeting your family?”

“They want to see you and our son. I thought this coming holiday would be perfect. What do you think?”

“I agree, it would be great to meet with your family. I’ve heard a lot about your brothers. What is true?” I settled in beside him, telling him more about my brothers.

A few days later, after uploading the collaborative documentary with Vance Styles to the country’s top streaming service, I closed my laptop ready to leave the office, excited to get back home to Karl and Jason. My phone rang from a text.

It’s time for your reckoning. You’ve had enough time to rest. Time for you to play. To keep your family safe, you’ll do as I say. You come to the address I sent or else...poor Jason.

I sucked in a deep breath and kept my fear at bay. I was worried but not afraid. I had Karl. We could fight this. This meeting might be their big play. If only I could find a way to arrest them during the meeting. It would be dangerous, but I'd had enough of schemes. It was time to fight back.

I drove home to Karl. He arrived a few minutes after I got back. Immediately, I took him to his study and shut the door behind us. He stood in front of me with a worried look.

"I didn't want to say this within earshot. Someone just sent me a message. I think this is their endgame. Look." I gave him my phone to see the message.

"I want to go, but I can't do it alone. I need your help."

He shook his head. "Marie, this is too dangerous. We could send a stand-in to get this guy, not you."

I touched his chest. "I'm scared but I have to do this. A stand-in might escalate things. This is our chance to get this person. This could be a trap. Call the police; I'm sure they'd want to help with this."

He sighed. "You know you can be stubborn at times. Okay, I'll do this, though I would hate myself if anything happened to you."

"I'll be fine. I can protect myself, and with you around I'll be safe. You..." A message popped up on my phone. They sent the address warning me against bringing anyone. I looked at Karl's face. It was hard and cold.

“Let’s go get this nuisance.” He immediately went on a call, talking to the chief of police. With our plans set in place, we left the house in separate cars.

After just finding my son, the last thing I expected was to grapple with the fact somebody was threatening me. I don’t have enemies who would want to hurt me. One thing was certain, I had to handle this latest threat. *Nobody is taking me away from my son.* I have to make sure that no harm will come to him. We decided to leave him with his nanny and Rose while I put myself in harms way to deal with this threat against me.

A little while later, I was parked in front of a hotel in a deserted area of New York. It was dark with a few lights illuminating the building. I stayed in the car and called Karl with a small phone that I could hide. He was parked somewhere out of sight. “I’m here. I’m about to go in.” I breathed out, slowly.

“Be careful and keep the call going. If anything goes wrong, I’ll come in immediately. The cops are already parked around the perimeter of the building.”

“Okay.” I didn’t end the call; Karl must have been recording it. I hid the phone and left the car. I went straight to the room where they asked me to meet them. I turned the lock and the door creaked open. It was dark inside. I called out, but there was no response.

I looked behind me; it was a deserted place. No cars were parked, and few moved on the street. I took assurance with the

presence of Karl. I entered the room, and the door closed behind me. I tried the light switch, and a low light illuminated the area. There was no one there. The room was a cramped small space with a dirty look to it. I was disgusted. *Who the hell was this person?*

I heard a car drive by. I went to the window to check it out. It was a black escalade. The car parked. For a minute no one came out. Then the door opened, and someone stepped out. It was dark, but I could confirm that it was a guy. Was this *the person*? My heart raced with fear and hate. I must get him. He walked to the room quickly.

I moved away from the window, staying far from the door. I reassured myself with the switchblade hidden at my back. The door opened to present a man of medium height and dark hair. He wore black gloves with a mask on his face, hiding his identity. He calmly closed the door.

He faced me saying nothing. That irked me.

“That much of a coward, huh?” I teased, but I noticed the way he carried himself reminded me of someone.

“I’ve got you now. That’s all that matters.” I could instantly tell he was faking his voice. He sounded a whole lot like...

“Howard! You fucking imbecile. Is that you?” I let out a manic laugh. He flinched, obviously caught off-guard.

“I’m...I’m not him. Shut up!” he screamed, ripping his mask away from his face. It was Howard alright.

“Why all this, Howard? Releasing my photos, stalking and threatening me. Why? You could have any woman you want.” Since Karl was recording the conversation, I had to get Howard to confess to his crimes.

He grinned. “After disgracing me at that party, I had to get back at you. I discovered that you are no saint. Releasing your images to the world was the tip of the iceberg. I’ve got you here, so you better be cooperative. Get naked and lie on the bed. If Karl can have you, so can I.”

My skin crawled. *Never.* I resisted the urge to get out my switchblade.

“Over my dead body.” That was the distress signal. Karl and the cops should be moving in immediately.

Chapter 24



KARL

As soon as I heard the distress signal, I signaled to the lead detective, Benson. He gave the orders to his officers to move in. I dashed forward immediately, ignoring Benson's calls. I heard what Howard said, and he'd have to go through me before he laid a finger on Marie.

Still on the call, Marie was trying to stall him. I was proud, noting the lack of fear in her voice. I reached the room and kicked the door open. The door swung in, slamming into Howard. He yelled, falling to the ground. Immediately, I pounced on him, restraining him.

"Damn, you! Let me go, I have your life in my hands," he screamed. His attempts to shake me off didn't work.

"You messed with the wrong people, Howard, and this time you'll never know freedom, I promise you." The officers entered, relieving me of the burden. Marie rushed into my arms.

"I'm glad you're okay. That bastard deserves worse." I said.

She smiled and said, “We’ll make him pay. Please take me out of here. I’ve had enough of this.” Outside, the cops were pushing Howard into the patrol car. Benson came over.

“Mr. Penfield, we found some...explicit photos of you and your family.” His eyes darted to Marie. “This can be used as evidence in court.”

“Thank you for your help. I’ll support the NYPD in putting Howard behind bars.” Benson smiled at the promise and walked away. “Let’s go home.”

Howard’s arrest and subsequent trial drew national interest. He found it hard to weasel out of the case due to the damning evidence. He was sentenced to five years in prison, although I was sure he was going to appeal the ruling. However, with me involved, he’d be hard-pressed to find a favorable sentence elsewhere.

With things going great, it was no surprise Selena came back home early. She exited her car and stood with her hand on her hip, looking at Marie and me at the entrance. Her indifferent face cracked into a smirk. “If I didn’t know better, I would have said you guys were an old couple, Brother.”

I hugged her, smiling at her well-intentioned joke.

“My dear sister and best friend! Come here.” She hugged Marie excitedly. They whispered something to each other and then giggled.

“Don’t worry, we aren’t planning your downfall, brother. Let’s go inside. Where’s my favorite nephew?” She pushed

open the door, walking in. Marie took my hand, pulling me along.

Selena had fun with us, and I was happy with her acceptance of my relationship with Marie. Finally, we got a chance to be alone at the indoor bar. She took a sip of her wine before setting it down.

“I am happy with what I see. I was skeptical and doubted you, and for that I’m truly sorry. Marie looks happy, and both of you now have a family. However, it would make more sense if you...” she winked.

“What?”

She rolled her eyes. “Put a ring on it! What are you waiting for? Or you don’t love her enough for that?”

“Come on, Lena. I love her. We love each other and I have plans for her. I can’t tell you just yet; otherwise, you’ll ruin the surprise,” I scolded her.

She chuckled, putting a finger on her lips. “It’s going to be soon then. I can’t wait. Hey, ready to meet your soon-to-be in-laws? I hear they can be pretty intimidating.”

“I am. If I’m to have Marie with me as my wife, I’ll get to know her family. And what she says about them, they are pretty chill. They’ll love us. Or maybe you’re the one who’s being nervous,” I teased.

Selena laughed, “Maybe I am, but I believe they’ll love you. Who wouldn’t?”

I hope they will.



A week into the holiday, we left New York on a private jet. It was a five-hour journey, which promptly put us to sleep. When the plane landed, the Flight Attendant came to inform us that we had arrived. He left soon after.

I carried Jason, who was still drowsy, off the plane. Marie and Selena followed behind. An SUV was parked, waiting for us. The air hostess was loading our luggage into the trunk. The driver, Cole, was sent by Marie's brother, Lorenzo. We got into the car, with Selena sitting in the front.

The car drove away from the airport. Jason was now fully awake, and Marie was looking out the window.

"Anything wrong, dear?"

"Oh no, I was just imagining the meeting. You know, they are not aware that I was pregnant. They must be blaming themselves for this, and I feel guilty."

"Don't think like that. You're coming home with us, that's a cause for joy."

She smiled weakly, resting her head on my shoulder. Jason was content to watch the blurring of the street as we drove by.

When we arrived at Lorenzo's house, we stepped out of the car. The house lived up to expectations. Marie was looking more confident now. I saw her glancing at the opening door. A tall man walked out. He was handsome despite the shocks of gray in his hair. Behind him was a younger woman; she linked

her hands with his. As if on cue, two more men slightly younger than the first man stepped out.

Marie walked over to them. It seemed there was some tension between them, but the tall man, Lorenzo, by the look of it, hugged her. They all laughed, each of them hugging and kissing her cheeks. She waved us over. Selena, Jason and I finally reached them.

“This is my boyfriend and the father of my child, Karl Penfield. This is our son, Jason, and my best friend and Karl’s sister, Selena.” She then introduced her brothers. “Lorenzo and his wife, Crystal. This is Lancelot and Igor”

I shook hands with them; they welcomed me with smiles on their faces. “Please, come in. Your luggage will be taken care of. We’ve been expecting you. In fact, we have a feast set out for you on our table.” Lorenzo patted me on the back while showing us in.

True to his words, it was a feast. I noticed a young boy the same age as Jason sitting beside Crystal. Jason saw him and began waving from his seat to the boy.

“That’s Alfred, my brother’s son. We could let them play together,” Marie said beside me.

“That’s good. Jason doesn’t have playmates his age. He’d love it,” I agreed.

When we were done eating, Jason dashed off to play with Alfred. Marie took her leave from her brothers and showed

Selena to her room, which left me alone with her brothers in the living room. *Clever.*

Lancelot spoke first, “You’ve surprised us, Karl. It still makes us worry, seeing all the recent *scandals* and *controversies* my sister has been in—because of you, I must add. I wonder if she’ll be safe with you.” He shrugged carelessly, but his words hit home. None of the others interjected or added anything. They were waiting for my reply.

Lancelot was blaming me for what had happened, but he was not wrong. What I said now would determine our relationship going forward.

“I understand your worries. I have dealt with this same feeling, intimately. I love Marie and would hate for any harm to come to her. Unfortunately, unwanted circumstances arose, but I dealt with them swiftly. This is what I can promise for the future. I will protect her no matter what, although I can’t stop bad things from happening. Lorenzo himself has had to face such himself, I might add” I threw the ball to Lorenzo.

They kept silent, and out of the blue Lorenzo laughed. “Oh, you’re quite good. Yes, we can’t fault you for unforeseen circumstances. However, what about your stream of affairs? One thing I won’t stand is my sister being cheated on. If I ever hear of that, well, that’s the end for you.” His voice suddenly turned cold, making me more tense.

“I don’t just love her; she is my world. I would never hurt her.” I responded and Lorenzo nodded.

Smiling, he said, “She should be waiting for you. Go get some rest. Welcome to our family, Karl.” He walked away. Lance and Igor shook my hand before they left. I let out a relieved breath.

Upstairs, I saw Marie pacing back and forth, waiting for me.

“Hey.” She jumped and spun to face me. Immediately, she asked, “How was it? What did they say?”

“Calm down. It’s all fine. Although they were quite tough, we have their blessings.” I put my hand around her waist and kissed her. She smirked, walking to one of the doors.

Inside the room, Marie took off her clothes. “I need a bath, come join me.” She winked, entering the bathroom. I took off my clothes and obliged her. It wasn’t sex, we just enjoyed the intimacy of the moment. Later, we left the bathroom and changed into more comfortable clothes.

“Your brothers are pretty fierce. I can see that they love you very much,” I said as I brushed her hair in front of the mirror.

“They are, and I love them as well. They see me as fragile, sometimes forgetting that I am older and can protect myself. But it’s great to know you have people who love you at home ready to protect and take care of you. And you, my love, are one of them.”

“I won’t fail you, Marie. I knelt in front of her, kissing her thigh.



Christmas was going to be in three days. I checked the box I wrapped in my luggage. It was a gift, a promise, and a proposal. I planned to give it to her that day. I heard someone knocking and quickly kept the box hidden.

“Yes?” I answered, opening the door. Selena had glitter in her hair. I saw Jason and Alfred running away with ribbons in their hands.

“What are you doing inside? Come on out. We’re decorating the tree. It is better than staying here brooding. You can form more of a connection with her family.”

“I know. I was just carried away. Come in first. I have to ask you something.”

I closed the door behind her. “The thing is that I want to take it to the next level with Marie. I want to know if she has expressed any discontentment?”

“She has been pretty chill and very happy. Where’s this doubt coming from?”

I didn’t want to jinx myself by saying it, so I switched the topic. “Is there anything she likes or prefers that I might not know?”

“You wanted to get her a gift? You should have said that. Marie has almost anything a woman could ever need. Sure, a few expensive gifts wouldn’t impress her, but she loves to have something unexpected yet unique to the person giving it to her. So, if there’s something dear to you, she’ll love and cherish it.”

I smiled. “Thanks. I’ll join you soon.” She nodded, leaving.
*Yes, something dear to me. Marie, I’ll be giving you my heart
and home. I hope you accept it.*

Chapter 25



MARIE

The Christmas celebration was dying down. We had decided to stay home and have an intimate holiday. I genuinely enjoyed being in the company of my family with Karl and Jason around. I felt complete. Well...not as complete as I'd like. I wanted to marry Karl. I was sure in my heart, and maybe he was too. I looked at him from the corner of my eyes. He was sharing a drink with Lancelot, laughing at something. Maybe I was just being hasty, and things would fall into place. We loved each other. Little did I know that this day would bring the biggest surprise of all.

“Snap out of it. It’s about time. Come, there are lots of gifts here. I even left you something.” Selena grabbed my arm, leading me to the brightly decorated tree. The kids were running around it. Crystal’s twin girls sat comfortably on a couch, watching Jason and Alfred play. The gift boxes sat under the tree, and I was giddy imagining what Karl had gotten for me.

Soon after, Lorenzo danced over with Crystal while Lancelot arrived with Karl. Igor sat with the girls, smiling. “Come on y’all. What are you waiting for? Let’s open our gifts.” After Lorenzo said that the kids jumped up and snatched boxes from the kids’ section. Everyone was busy with a box in their hands.

I got several gifts from my siblings, and we shared laughs, comparing them. I didn’t get anything from Karl, which made me upset. I looked around to catch his eyes. He was smiling. *What for?* I felt a new surge of hope; maybe he got me something special.

Amid the merriment, he approached with his hand behind his back. The room suddenly grew quiet. He stopped in front of me to present a beautifully wrapped gift. His eyes sparkled with anticipation. “For you, my love.”

I rose to my feet, my hands trembling ever so slightly. My heart raced with curiosity and delight as I eagerly opened the package. Nestled inside the box was a velvet case, and as I opened it, my breath caught in my throat.

There, gleaming under the soft glow of the Christmas lights, was a breathtaking ring, shining with diamonds that seemed to dance with every flicker. I was wowed at that moment because this was in front of my family. He went down on one knee, drawing gasps from the children.

My voice, filled with nervous excitement, broke through my astonishment. “Karl, you... This.” I stopped, catching my breath. This was happening. He took my hand, taking the box from me and picking the ring up.

“Marie,” he began, his voice steady and assured. I held his gaze, seeing the love in his eyes. “I know we’ve had our ups and downs, and it sometimes felt like we would never make it work, but we did. I hope we can keep on proving our critics wrong and love each other, always. So, Marie-Ann, will you marry me?”

My heart soared with joy, and tears of happiness welled up in my eyes. I looked into Karl’s eyes, so full of love and vulnerability. Without a moment’s hesitation, I whispered, “Yes, Karl, a thousand times yes!”

The room erupted into cheers and applause as our loved ones celebrated our engagement. My brothers enveloped us in warm embraces, and Selena, my confidante and best friend, had the brightest smile on her face.

“This is what I’m talking about. You’re officially welcome to our family, Karl.” Igor cheered. Jason came over, hugging my legs, calling me *Mommy*. I felt so elated that I could barely form a coherent speech. I hugged Karl, kissing him boldly in front of everyone. This moment, under the Christmas tree, would forever be etched in my memory as the beginning of our journey toward a lifetime of love and togetherness.



A month later, after we returned to New York. It was the New Year, and to my surprise, Karl wanted us to get married immediately. How could I say no? I had agreed to this. My brothers were aware and promised to help in any way they could.

Karl wanted to bring my dream wedding to life. He focused on making the wedding gown and a bespoke suit. I couldn't wait to see what he came up with. In the meantime, Selena and I picked a venue. It was an elegant art gallery, with several Greek and Roman statues decorating the building. From there, we met with the wedding planner, Mallory Dubois. I wanted to be part of the wedding process, leaving nothing to chance. We worked on the theme of the wedding, the color palette, and the invites.

“Yes, and make sure the cake is to the taste I requested. Yes, thanks, Mallory.” I felt Karl's kiss on my neck. I shivered, ending the call hastily. He hugged me tight, caressing my curves.

“You've been working too hard. I barely see you around,” he said without any resentment in his voice.

“I'm sorry. Been trying to set everything up and help you in any way I can. How are the clothes coming?” I asked, grinding my ass on his crotch. He reacted to that, exhaling with a sigh.

“Oh, well, I can't wait to see you in the dress, walking to me. You'll be more than a queen.” I melted into him as he said the words. The way he honored my body and mind aroused me.

To hell with restraints. I turned, pushing him against the wall. We were close to the window in our room. I kissed him hungrily. He reacted just the same. Jerkily, we took off our clothes, inching closer and closer to the bed. I hit the edge of the bed and fell on it. Karl climbed on top of me, his arousal swaying close to me.

Flashing him with a grin, I grabbed his length stroking my hand up and down. Even after all this time, I still can't seem to get enough of him. He wasn't to be outdone. He kissed my breasts, fondling them while teasing the lips of my most intimate parts. I burned hot for him.

I moved over on the bed to give us more space. I wanted to be on top. We skipped the foreplay, too eager to feel him in my depth. I sat on him, slowly taking him in. I brought my lips to him, kissing him as I rode him at my own pace. I took pleasure from the enraptured look in his eyes as I threw my head back in ecstasy.

He held my waist, keeping me still as he thrust with a short and fast rhythm. My body jerking from relentless thrusts. He flipped me over, our sweaty bodies enhancing the moment and we come together. I held his head, keeping his eyes on me. I wanted him to take in the sight of me. Feeling his eyes on me brought me great pleasure. "Go on, make me scream."

He pushed his length in and out over and over again, his eyes never leaving me. His lips held my name. The burning look in his eyes was too much to bear. I screamed out his name as my body tensed and clenched his shaft tightly, holding him in place as I climaxed. He collapsed on me, breathing hard. I felt his hot release within.

I was still catching my breath, but I held him tighter and whispered in his ear, "My love, my husband."



It was the day of the wedding, and I was in the dressing room putting on the gown Karl made for me. It was regal and studded with tiny crystals and diamonds. I put on the dress and the accessories. I admired myself in the mirror. Selena made me twirl for her. She was in a blue silk gown with flowers in her hair.

“We better get going. They’re waiting for us and we’re late. With how beautiful you look; Karl might think I had stolen you away.” I chuckled, following her out.

The car parked in front of the gallery. Photographers and journalists were all about. Selena stepped out of the car first. From the window, I saw Karl walking down the stairs in his bespoke suit. He was my prince charming at that moment. He opened the door and helped me out. A cheer rose from the gathered crowd.

I held Karl’s hand, feeling nervous and giddy with excitement. “Let’s do this, shall we?” Karl asked, I nodded.

“I’d have it no other way.”

We went up the stairs, passed the foyer, and entered the grand hall. The luxury and elegance of the venue were brought to life by the decor, but it paled in comparison to the love and excitement radiating from our friends and family who had gathered to witness our union.

The guests rose to their feet, clapping as we walked to the center of the room on the purple carpet. Selena took her seat beside my siblings. I noticed my niece, Scarlett, who sat with

her mom, Crystal. They waved at me, beaming smiles on their faces. *Did they feel like me during their weddings?*

We reached the center of the room, where the raised platform was occupied by the officiant. Karl and I took our positions. My brothers looked proud, and I did as well. I had ended up with Karl. It felt just right, and my dreams were about to become a reality. Instrumental music started and the doors opened for Jason and Alfred, who were walking with velvet pillows toward us. Our wedding rings were on them.

The kids reached us in seconds. Alfred stood beside me while Jason was beside his father. The officiant began with the introduction. Afterward, we were to start the vows. I didn't panic. We both didn't have any vows written down. It was going to be directly from our hearts.

Karl took the ring from Jason's pillow and held my hand, "Marie, today is finally the day we make our dreams come true. I want you to know that I see you as my equal, my partner, and soulmate. In you I see my future and old age. Whether in sickness or health, or sadness or joy, I'll be with you. Even when all seems to have lost meaning, I'll be with you. Together, we can do all we ever wanted and more. I would be honored to be your husband, committed to only you forever. My wife." My smile was so broad that my cheeks hurt. I nodded and he slipped the ring on.

Smiling down at Alfred, I took the ring. I faced Karl. "Most times, words failed me, but your love hasn't. More than just love, you make me feel safe and strong. You respect me and

complete me. I believe that I went through all that has happened just to get to this moment, where we reap the reward of our efforts. You're a man I'd trade for no other. I am and will always be committed to you. To love you through all and stand for you in all. Together we'll complete our dreams, my love, my husband."

He accepted my ring. We kissed immediately. He spun me around to the cheers and applause of everyone. The sound of our loved ones celebrating our union was a symphony of joy, filling the air with pure elation.

"To the dance floor!" Selena yelled. Slow romantic music came on and I gave Karl my hand. The area was cleared for us. Others were already dancing with their partners. Karl and I danced happily from slow to upbeat groovy music.

Our grand wedding reception was a whirlwind of dancing, laughter, and heartfelt toasts. It felt like the day would never end. The night passed in a joyful blur. As Karl and I stole a moment alone on the balcony of the building, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by gratitude. Gratitude for the love that had brought us together, gratitude for the support of our friends and family, and gratitude for the beautiful journey that lay ahead.

"We did it. We're married. Officially, Mrs. Penfield." We held hands viewing the bright night lights of New York City.

He turned me to face him, and I gazed into my husband's eyes. "I meant everything I said back there. My life goal is to make you the happiest woman alive and to love you with my

whole being, my love. You deserve it...and it brings me so much joy to see you genuinely happy and smiling.”

“This is already enough for me, Karl,” I said.

“Let me do more...for you and for us.” Gazing into his sincere eyes undid me. *There was truly a love this strong, I thought. You’re lucky, Marie.*

Our grand wedding in New York was just the beginning, a beautiful prelude to the adventures that awaited us. And as we held each other, filled with hope and excitement, I knew deep in my soul that we were embarking on a journey that would be nothing short of extraordinary. *Not just of love, but with family.*

Epilogue

*T*wo years later

My happy ever after came after fighting so long to get it, and I found it with the man beside me. I rolled on my side, his arm going around me and tightening gently. He was pretending to be asleep, and he had a small smile on his face.

“Must be a good dream you’re having, my love.” I kissed his nose, and he chuckled. His hand on my waist caressed me then went under my lingerie. It sent a tingle of warmth up my spine.

“Waking up to you beside me is always a good dream. A perfect one in fact.” He opened his eyes, gazing at me with such love and tenderness, I felt like melting.

“Your flirting skills are improving, I see,” I teased, running my hand down his six pack to his rising bulge in his pajamas.

“Darling, you...” he gasped, his eyes widening as I got a good feel of him. “Someone woke up feeling naughty.

Marie...Marie, my star.” He purred in my ear, kissing my neck and running his hand over my bump to my breasts.

He brought me under him, towering over me. He was careful not to rest his weight on my baby bump. He smiled down at it, caressing the bump through the silk thin fabric of my garment.

I held his hand on the bump, feeling the tiny movements, the life in me was making.

“Will this not be a repeat of the past?” I touched my belly, remembering my first pregnancy and how depressed I had become afterward. I shuddered at the events happening again.

“Hush, that won’t happen. I’ll be here with you throughout everything. Don’t worry, you have me and Jason to help you.” He kissed my belly, assurance in his voice.

I pulled him to my side, hugging him. “You make me feel safe. I feel my worries leaving every second we touch.” I nuzzled my face into his chest, enjoying the warmth I got from him.

“I’ll be happy when you don’t have any doubts again. This child will be an addition to our joy. Jason gets to have a sibling and we get to raise another child together.” He brought my hand up, linking our fingers. “There won’t be a repeat of the past. Trust me.”

We stared into each other’s eyes, saying a thousand words without our lips moving. A tear threatened to roll down my cheek. He wiped it off, sucked his thumb and grimaced.

“Salty. Let’s try to make it sweet next time. Tears of joy they call it,” he mused, biting his lip as if in deep thought.

“I’ll try to make it sweeter next time.”

“No. I’d rather you didn’t cry. Though you look beautiful doing it.”

“Oh, my God, stop.” I buried my face in the pillow, feeling shy all of a sudden. He wrapped me in his embrace, sighing deeply in contentment.

Later, we got out of bed and left the room to check on Jason. He was already up, changing out of his pajamas. “Good morning, baby.” I said at the door. Karl was by my side, his hand on my back. Ever since my bump had started to grow, he always placed his hand there. *Support*, he called it.

“Mommy!” I never got tired of that name or the way he said it *full of joy and love*. He reached me, hugging my thighs and resting his head on my bump. “I can hear the baby.” He looked up with bright eyes. “Baby, be good. Don’t hurt Mommy.”

“Thank you, my love. Mommy is good. Come with me, your breakfast is ready.”

“Daddy will have to miss breakfast with you, son.” Karl grumbled beside me, ruffling Jason’s hair. I nudged Karl’s ribs, glaring at him.

“Sorry Dad, Mommy let’s go eat. The baby should be hungry.” He let him go and ran ahead.

“Ah, I can’t run after him. Carry me to the dining room, love.” I swooned into his arms. He strained, trying to lift me.

He panted, looking sad. “I can’t carry you. Seems I’m failing at my husbandly duties. Don’t leave me, Marie.” He blinked, smiling, trying his best to make some tears fall.

“I...” My words turned into a scream as pain ripped through me, making my legs weak. I almost went down but Karl held me up.

“Jason!” Karl yelled, calling a befuddled Jason back. “Go get my car keys.” Jason understood what was going on and ran to get the keys. “Baby, easy, one step at a time,” he said to me, breathing the way the doctor had taught me to do.

I nodded, finding it hard to breathe. We went ahead to the stairs slowly. It was a long journey down the stairs then to the car.

Jason gave the keys to Karl then he ran into the car. “Mommy, sorry. You’ll be fine soon.” He had tears in his eyes. I tried comforting him, but only a squeak came out of my mouth.

Karl, haste driving him, sped out of the house. I shut my eyes, breathing hard while waiting for us to get to the hospital. We reached it in due time, and I was taken quickly to the labor room. I begged them to let Karl stay with me. They allowed him in, and I took his hand as the hard labor started.

He uttered sweet soft words to me while urging the doctors to help me. I pushed and screamed and screamed. The pain I felt was only softened by his presence.

I cried, feeling both joy and pain as I delivered our baby. But as soon as the baby was out, I fainted.

She woke up, groaning with wonder and relief in her eyes. I rose from my seat, moving to her. I was so happy but also hurt seeing her so weak and pale.

“Baby, you’re fine. I’m here with you.”

She smiled, a light shining in my heart. “How’s she?” she asked about the baby.

“She’s fine and so beautiful. Sasha is a vision, my love.” I replied, kissing her hand. She turned to look at Sasha in her baby crib.

“Oh, my God, Karl. I love her.” She looked truly shocked then happy. “I want to hold and kiss her.”

I could understand her now. Her postpartum depression hadn’t returned. I had brought the child to her while Jason woke up where he was sleeping. He sat on her bed while I sat on the other side, handing her the baby.

“I love you all, so much.” She broke down crying despite the grin on her face.

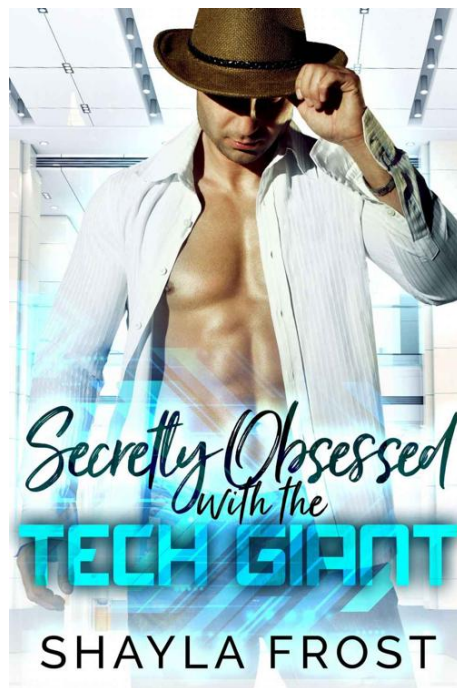
I brought her head to my chest to kiss her forehead. “I love you more...and you too Jason.”

“Yay, and I love my baby sister and you too Mom and Dad.” Jason held our hands tightly.

I was content having them with me. My happy ever after with her was now perfect. *I'd have it no other way.*

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About the Author

Shayla Frost resides in Yorktown Heights, New York with her two sons. She is an avid reader who especially enjoys a glass of wine while engrossed in the pages of a steamy romance novel. While growing up, she has always dreamt of being a writer, but life got in the way. Now after rediscovering her passion, she wants to take you on this exciting journey with her. She will tickle your romantic appetite with all the twists in her new page turner.

Her steamy heart-stopping romances guarantee a happily ever after ending. Portraying strong men and endearing women, her tales will leave you begging for more.

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