

BIO-TECH BILLIONAIRES
BOOK TWO

HE NEEDED A PERFECT YEAR.

SHE NEEDED A WAY OUT.

THE MARRIAGE

AVA
RANI

The Heir

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The Heir

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To anyone who has ever been silenced.

Your voice is powerful,

I say you put that power to good use.

Playlist

Royals - Lorde
Succession Main Title Theme - Nicholas Britell
Welcome to New York - Taylor Swift
West Coast - One Republic
All The Right Moves - One Republic
Beautiful People - Ed Sheeran, Khalid, NOTC
Gorgeous - Taylor Swift
Stop The Rain - Ed Sheeran
Delicate - Taylor Swift
Wildest Dreams - Taylor Swift
Lonely Together - Avicii, Rita Ora
Lobby - Anitta, Missy Elliot
Secrets - One Republic
Love to Lose - Sandro Cavazza, Georgia Ku
No Vacancy - One Republic
Desperado – Raghav, Teshar

Content Notes

This story contains topics that maybe sensitive for some readers. This includes parental death (off page).

For a full list of content triggers, please visit:
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CHAPTER 1

Selena



Rich people were weird.

Spending more money than most people made in a lifetime on a birthday party was mind boggling.

When I turned thirty in a couple of years, I would probably take a short trip somewhere.

Sloan Amari's thirtieth birthday party, however, was probably more opulent than the royal wedding.

It was a small affair, held at NoMad in Manhattan, just the birthday girl and a hundred of her closest friends. The five-star restaurant was converted to a stunning party space, complete with crystal stemware, tables adorned with lavish floral arrangements, and hanging lanterns that lit the entire space in a sumptuous glow.

The top-shelf bar washed down the menu prepared by not one but two Michelin-starred chefs. One chef was flown in from Valencia to make paella and tapas for the occasion. The other—a renowned pastry chef—was flown in from Mumbai. He was known for infusing botanicals into his hand-crafted chocolate pastries. His other confections, like jalebi, were award-winning.

I wish I had brought my camera. My actual camera, not the one on my phone, would be perfect for photographing all of *this*.

But that would break a cardinal rule of PR.

Never add to the pile of evidence.

When Sloan Amari invited me, she told me it was a “low-key” birthday. Nothing formal. The next day, two cocktail dresses arrived from Saks. I decided to wear the black knee-length Zuhair Murad dress. The slinky silhouette was crafted with romantic Leavers lace. A sweetheart neckline brushed delicately across my chest.

It cost more than my rent. For a year.

“Are they really *that* rich?” Isabelle wondered aloud as she scanned the room. She wore the yellow Nannette Lepore dress that didn’t fit quite right on me. It looked stunning against the dark sienna hue of her skin. She casually flipped her hair over her shoulder and tapped her foot with directionless impatience. Her dark black curls bounced as she looked in all directions. “I don’t see anyone famous.”

“Different kinds of rich, Isa.” I stood a few steps in front of the bar and took in the scene before me.

This was the kind of rich you didn’t see on TV or in the movies. They all went to private schools that cost more than my mom’s house for a year of attendance. The seasons were a verb. They all summered in the Hamptons and wintered in the Swiss Alps.

After years of working in personal brand management at the largest PR firm in the world, I understood *this* type of rich. By some twist of fate, I happened to be the aristocrat whisperer. I didn’t know how or when I got so good at it, but cleaning up high society messes was easy. Probably because it was easy to remove myself from them.

We were living on the same planet but in completely different worlds.

My next assignment, the Amari account, was a layup. That’s what my boss, Rita, kept telling me. I was half convinced she was punishing me for the Waldorf mess she had to clean up. After that debacle, I only took on clients of the

“celebrity rehab” variety. She kept trying to convince me, gently, to take on some of my old accounts.

“Seems the same,” Isa said after downing her drink and ordering another. “But more boring.”

“Why do I have a hard time believing that?”

The Amaris signing with my PR firm was a big deal.

Henry Amari, Sloan’s older brother, just became CEO of his family’s multibillion-dollar company—Amari Global. He was at the helm after his grandfather passed a few months ago. He would remain interim CEO until the board decided he was fit because the board wasn’t pleased with Henry’s personal life.

After doing some research, I could see why. The last few months were quiet, but before that, Henry Amari went through runway models and ballerinas pretty quickly.

He needed to be out of the papers for womanizing and in them for more noble causes. On its face, it was an easy image rehab, but nothing was ever simple with society people.

Rita, my boss and executive director of Pearson PR, was over the moon when Sloan Amari reached out to her. Our PR firm landed one of the richest families in the world, if we pulled this off.

The pay was outrageous. When I initially refused to take on another high society account, Rita promised me a promotion and a transfer.

The money was great, but the transfer to L.A. was what I wanted.

“Which one is the new boss?” Isa asked.

I scanned the room. I didn’t see anyone who looked like him, although all I had to go off were the pictures in the tabloids. “I don’t see him.”

My eyes landed on Sloan, the guest of honor. She didn’t seem real. The face of a movie star, the body of a model, and a

senior partner at some prestigious law firm. Not to mention, the bank account of an heiress was thrown on top of that.

“Which one’s the birthday gal’s boyfriend?” Isabelle kept looking around the room as if she’d know anyone, but surgeons didn’t generally run in the same circles as billionaires and socialites.

“Tall, dark hair, Patek Phillippe watch.” I nodded in the direction of Marcus Sutton, Sloan’s boyfriend and host of the event.

I didn’t know much about him. In my research, I learned that Marcus Sutton became a big deal in the biotech world about five years ago. He was the founder and CEO of Sutton Industries, the world’s most powerful biotech company. Before that, there was nothing about him I could find.

“Her friends are cute too,” Isa added.

“We aren’t here to socialize, I’m *working*,” I reminded her lightly. “Besides, I thought you were too busy to date?”

I was supposed to be here to observe, understand the environment and my soon-to-be project, Henry Amari. In addition to being Sloan’s older brother, he was also Marcus Sutton’s closest friend.

“Who said anything about dating?” Isabelle countered. She was in the middle of her orthopedic surgery residency. She hardly had any time to come out with me tonight but made the time when she found out where we’d be going.

“Behave,” I chided with jest. Isabelle flashed her serious “surgeon face,” nodded, and walked toward the bathroom.

I envied Isa in that respect; she never felt out of place. The impossible confidence of a surgeon. I thought maybe my experience in PR and degree at an Ivy League school would make this whole project seem less alien, but it didn’t.

The entire atmosphere made my stomach turn.

It used to be fun, blending in with the background and observing the parties. I used to enjoy it. Fixing a wildly out-of-

touch family's problems was like a puzzle. Some clients were ruder or more entitled than others, but it never bothered me. Not until the Waldorfs.

Now, all I wanted was my transfer.

"This party is insane. Who does this for a birthday?" I muttered to myself and began to turn when I crashed into what felt like a slab of concrete.

My vodka soda sloshed all over the place.

I took a step back when two hands landed on my shoulders to steady me. My eyes were immediately drawn to the giant stain my drink left all over his suit jacket.

"I'm so sorry," I sputtered in a panic as my eyes searched everywhere for a napkin.

I'd just ruined what was probably a six-thousand-dollar suit. He politely handed me a napkin, and I dried myself off. After a second, I looked back up to realize who I'd accidentally run into.

Henry Amari.

I recognized him instantly from the papers.

"An apology is wholly unnecessary; I was in your way." He excused my faux-pas so well-mannered, Prince Charming himself would have swooned. "And to answer your question, I'm pretty sure Xander planned the party. He and the rest of the motley crew."

I didn't know what that meant, but he went on when I didn't say anything. "Henry Amari."

He put his hand out, and I shook it. A slow static worked its way up my arm, long after he released me. The temperature-controlled room began to feel humid; the heavy air smothered my voice.

He was good-looking, I'd give him that. Better looking in person too. He was tall, with an athletic build. The muscles

beneath his perfectly tailored suit pushed against the expensive fabric. His jet-black hair was short and neatly coiffed.

Attractive and charming. I had no trouble believing he was a bit of a playboy. He looked like he'd walked off a *GQ* cover shoot.

“And you are?” his voice, deep and luxurious, asked after another silence.

Suddenly, my mind went blank. I couldn't think of a thing to say, which was odd. I was top of my class in high school. Voted most likely to succeed. I graduated Columbia University, an Ivy League school, summa cum laude. I worked in PR for years; I knew how to handle myself around the rich and powerful.

Yet, I was silent.

Speak.

“I was just leaving, actually,” I stammered. My eyes tracked around the room, looking for Isa.

His eyebrows raised, and a smirk crept across his cheek, up the steep cut of his jaw. He moved a step closer, looking amused.

“How do you know Sloan?”

“I don't, really,” I admitted.

His gaze followed mine, and after a few more silent seconds, he grinned when I didn't elaborate.

“Are you crashing my little sister's birthday?” he teased.

I stiffened. Even with the designer dress, I stuck out. I didn't belong. It shouldn't have bothered me, it never used to, but now it did.

“I was invited,” I assured him politely. Normally, I didn't talk to the guests, but something about him made me want to engage. In what? I wasn't sure. “By your sister.”

He chuckled. “I was only joking. You look like...”

“Like...” I repeated absentmindedly, distracted, wondering where Isa went off to.

“Like you’re bored.” He took another step closer.

“This isn’t exactly my idea of fun,” I explained. I tried to find Isa’s yellow dress in a sea of socialites, but his gaze finally caught mine.

“What is?” He motioned to the bartender for another drink to replace the one he was now wearing. “Besides assaulting perfect strangers with cocktails?”

My spine tingled with an awareness of his proximity, but just as it did, I saw Isabelle walking toward the head table.

The trance he seemed to have me under was broken.

“I have to go.” I shook my head free of the fog that clouded it. “Nice to meet you.”

My heart raced. I wasn’t sure why, but it was probably too soon to be jumping into this type of work again.

“You too?” An unsure tone peppered his words as I walked away.

I tried to get Isa discreetly, but right as I got to the table, my eyes met Sloan’s. She recognized me and waved from the other side. We’d met on a video call a few weeks ago when she and Rita explained the situation surrounding Henry’s press attention.

“Selena?” Sloan stood and walked over to me, leaving a group of people looking over at me, wondering who I was. “I’m sorry this is the venue we have to meet for the first time.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m so grateful you were able to help us out for the year,” she said courteously.

Up close, she was even more unreal. Long black hair, stunning brown eyes. Her skin was tanner than her brother’s and practically glowed in her rose-gold dress. She was tall too. Did the whole family look like models?

My confidence finally came back to me. I was back in my element.

“I may not be the best fit,” I began, knowing Rita would kill me if I lost this account. “But I’m sure someone at Pearson PR will be perfect.”

“I’m sure Rita will fill you in on everything to get you acclimated to the task at hand.” She ignored my polite declination. I had to remind myself I wasn’t talking to a regular heiress, I was talking to one of the best lawyers in the city, and most of my maneuvers wouldn’t fly with her.

I nodded and focused on what awaited me if I just kept my head clear this year.

I’d be out of New York City for good.

CHAPTER 2

Henry



Despite it being the middle of summer, I felt frozen in place. Whoever she was, she was striking. Like lightning, she charged the air around me.

“He shoots, and he misses,” Xander drawled, chasing away the lingering effects of whoever that was as he walked over to the bar. “Ouch.”

“I wasn’t hitting on her,” I grumbled. I *was* hitting on her, not that she seemed at all interested.

“If you say so.” Xander chuckled. “Doesn’t she know how big your trust fund is?”

“She spilled her drink on me. And, for the record, I don’t need my trust fund to close the deal.”

Even though that was all anyone was ever interested in once they learned of it.

Whoever she was, she looked a little bored. Stunning—the black dress against the sandy brass color of her skin, her long brown hair sweeping along her back, distracted amber eyes that refused to look at me—but bored.

Which was surprising, since most people who weren’t close to my little sister foamed at the mouth to be around her. Hell, my best friend wasn’t immune.

Marcus, Sloan’s boyfriend, had been my closest friend since we met in our freshman year of college. That was seventeen years ago, and we’d remained close since. He was

gone for almost the entirety of the last two and a half years, running around the globe as he built his company. Marcus and Sloan happened to be in London together earlier this past year, and their relationship seemed to pop out of thin air. Now that he was back, he spent most of his free time with her.

“I’m sure it doesn’t hurt.” Xander snorted a laugh, swiped his dirty blonde hair back, and turned to the bar for another drink.

While Xander had been Sloan’s best friend for the last decade and a half, he and I developed a rapport over the years. Marcus being away meant I was down a friend. And Xander was a good one to have. We’d been through a lot together, the four of us. When Marcus and Xander’s parents passed eleven years ago, we went from being close to being something of our own little family.

Xander and Sloan had a bizarrely close relationship, making the development that Sloan was dating his older brother all the more surprising. To me, at least. I was the last to know. Nobody felt it necessary to tell me, and I only found out because I walked in on them.

“Hardly matters. My only focus for the next year is the company,” I said as I got my drink from the bar. “If Marcus can focus his entire life on work, so can I.”

I sat at the helm of Amari Global, the pharmaceutical company my grandfather started from nothing decades ago. Today, it was the world’s largest and most powerful, and my grandfather’s recent death meant I was now CEO.

It was unexpected, and I didn’t feel ready. It didn’t help that the board, when voting me in as interim CEO, stipulated a morality clause.

“A lot of good that did him.” Xander laughed. Marcus spent the last two and half years essentially a ghost to all of us. He left to build his company, with almost no contact. Sloan was the one to pull him back. “If my older brother let himself live a little, he’d have been sleeping with Sloan *way* sooner.”

I grimaced. “That’s my little sister, man. And *your* best friend.”

“All I am saying is it doesn’t have to be one or the other. You don’t need to be a shut-in to prove you’re a good CEO.”

We walked back to our table, where Sloan smiled and nodded to Xander. She motioned to the other side of the room where their close friends had congregated.

“I’ll be fine without the advice. Thanks.”

Xander shrugged, downed his drink, and followed Sloan. I walked over to the now vacated seat beside Marcus. I didn’t really want to talk to him, but I had no one else to talk to here. And most of my *other* methods to keep my mind busy were under scrutiny.

He slapped a supportive hand on my shoulder.

“How have the first few weeks been?” he asked.

Fucking terrible.

CEO was my destiny from the day I was born. I’d been preparing years, but the reality of it was much more difficult than I ever realized. Everyone wanted a piece of me, and I had to be the expert on everything.

I always had the assurance that my grandfather would be there to help guide me when I eventually took over, but now that he was gone, I didn’t have anyone.

My father was zero help. He asked specifically to be passed over because the job wasn’t for him.

The next best thing was Marcus. He was my best friend and probably nothing could change that, but things with him were tense.

He went from being a constant force in my life to utterly abandoning us for years. He apologized time and time again for leaving, but I wasn’t ready to hear it.

Besides, I liked to hold a grudge. I was great at it.

“Focus on the things you don’t trust anyone else with,” Marcus began, reading my silence.

That sounded exactly like the advice my grandfather would’ve given me. Although he hardly trusted anyone. Trusting someone gave them leverage, and my grandfather never gave a piece of his power to anyone.

Marcus went on when I was silent. He knew I wouldn’t want the advice but probably needed it. “Everything else you need to delegate until you get a better handle on things.”

“Thanks,” I huffed.

I felt like I was drowning some days. I needed help, and for a long time, Marcus was the guy I leaned on for that help.

Until he left.

Another tense silence passed.

“How did you do it?” I asked.

Marcus’s company, Sutton Industries, defied every expectation set for it. Its meteoric rise was documented in financial journals and taught in business schools across the country. A part of the lure was that Marcus and Xander grew up like regular kids, outside of the privilege Sloan and I were born into. His success was unprecedented. In the last few years, he oversaw his company’s rapid expansion. He was focused completely on his work, and it paid off.

“I had help,” he reminded me. My grandfather was his mentor too. He sighed and looked back at Sloan. “And I ignored everything that mattered.”

“You regret it?”

“Things turned out fine, so no.” He laughed again, leaned into the chair, and looked at me. Marcus’s lack of contact over the last couple of years was partially out of his inability to deal with things he couldn’t control. Namely, the fact that he’d secretly fallen in love with Sloan. Luckily for him, my sister didn’t hold a grudge. “If I had lost Sloan, you’d probably get a different answer.”

It was weird, to say the least, to see Marcus in love.

We spent the better part of ten years being the same type of guy. Money and power were a hell of a lot of fun when there wasn't a board watching your every move. We went through women with reckless abandon. I didn't love the idea of *that* dating my little sister. But if there was one person I trusted more than anyone else, it was him.

“So...” I began. I needed a change of subject. I didn't want to think about the colossal task ahead of me. For a night, I wanted to think of literally anything else. “Who knew Sloan's thirtieth birthday would be the year's biggest social event?”

I looked around the dimly lit room. The party took over the entire restaurant and the rooftop bar outside. Perfect for the summer weather.

Sloan may not have held a grudge with Marcus for leaving, but he had clearly thrown this affair as one of the many attempts to make it up to her.

“I missed the last two. I may have overcorrected.”

“Delegating any details to Xander was your first mistake.”



I groaned at Sloan's table during brunch the next morning. “You can't be serious.”

Ever since Sloan and Marcus returned from London, where they clandestinely started their relationship, our group of friends began having a weekly brunch at their place in Tribeca.

It was Sloan's doing. The idea of Marcus hosting a brunch was laughable.

“Henry, relax.” Sloan took a sip of her mimosa and sighed. She sat between Marcus and Xander at the breakfast table. “She's from the best PR firm in the world. Not to mention, I

have it on good authority that she helped keep a couple of Augustus Club families out of the papers.”

“Who?”

She gave me a look. “You know I don’t know that.”

“Why would you hire me an employee without telling me?” I asked, trying to sound a little less ungrateful.

She, Marcus, and Xander helped ensure a relatively smooth transition to CEO when my grandfather passed a few months ago. But this was typical Sloan. She thought she knew better, so she acted without any regard to how I might feel about it.

We spent years going back and forth, trading jobs in order to prove who was best fit to run the company. Even though I knew it wasn’t another hit, her secretly hiring me a PR consultant felt like one.

It didn’t help that she was probably encouraged by Marcus, the only other person in the world who did the same annoying shit.

I looked at him.

“Did you know about this?”

“No,” he stated skeptically, and his eyebrows raised at Sloan. “I didn’t.”

“Plausible deniability. I didn’t want you to have to lie to Henry.” Sloan placed her hand on Marcus’s. He smiled, picked it up, and kissed it.

They were nauseating.

Sloan turned back to me. “Her name is Selena, and she wouldn’t be *your* employee. She’ll retain her normal reporting structure at Pearson PR, and she’s hired and paid for by the family trust.”

Of course.

When our grandfather passed, I got control of the company while Sloan got control of the family trust. We had our separate inheritances, but the family trust was massive. Hundreds of billions in assets.

Almost like it was my grandfather's final way to make sure we competed for the rest of our lives.

He was an... interesting man.

She sighed after a prolonged silence. "Look, I hired the PR firm back when things were a little"—she paused—"tenuous." Sloan meant before the board meeting that resulted in the morality clause. I was the first person to admit I handled the great expectations poorly, but I had no intention of doing anything remotely inappropriate. "Now, it makes sense to have some PR, for the family anyway."

If I wasn't so annoyed with Sloan, I'd have been able to admit to myself that it was a good idea. It was the fact that Sloan went ahead and did it without even asking. A lifetime of living with Miss Perfect made me resent her at times. Usually, when she did something like this.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Xander added.

I dropped it for now. There wasn't any point in ruining brunch over it. Besides, it was nice having the four of us back together again.

After a turbulent year, it was welcomed stability.

Sloan and Xander went out after brunch, a cannister of oats in hand. They had a Sunday tradition of feeding the ducks in Central Park.

I shifted in my seat, awkwardly. Sloan and Xander's departure left us in a drawn-out silence.

I glanced around the breakfast nook that we sat in; it bled seamlessly into the clean and airy kitchen. A few serving trays were left out on the expansive marble island. Sunlight poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows, bouncing off the deep walnut of the breakfast table.

“You didn’t put her up to this?” I asked.

“I’m keeping out of it.” Marcus raised his hands in defense. “You and your sister can figure this out.”

I buried my face in my hands and groaned.

“How was tennis?” he ventured cautiously.

I groaned again. While Sloan largely avoided my parents, I was a sadist and had a weekly tennis match with my father. We played that morning before I left for brunch.

My parents didn’t really have any parenting instincts when I was growing up. All of those seemed to materialize long after Sloan and I were grown. When the Sutton brothers lost their parents eleven years ago, my parents suddenly became involved. It was too late for either me or Sloan to really want them in our lives by that point.

“I won,” I told him, looking up. He winced. He knew my father and I had a rough relationship.

It got quiet, and I stared down at the table.

My father loved to remind me of how important my role was in protecting the family legacy, the one he couldn’t be bothered with. My residence on the front page of every tabloid didn’t help matters.

“I think he dislikes me more now,” Marcus added. It was his attempt at levity. Our conversations were mostly forced since he got back.

I chuckled. “You’re dating his daughter.”

My parents had known Xander and Marcus since I was in college, and while my father adored Xander, he and Marcus weren’t close. It didn’t help that Marcus and I lived the same less-than-noble lifestyle for years, and now he was dating Sloan.

He shrugged and stood, motioning me to follow. “At least your mom seems to be on board with the relationship.”

I got up and followed him down the hallway.

My mother was excited at the prospect of a wedding, even though they'd only just started their relationship. She also had a proclivity for trying to set me up. Luckily, Sloan's unexpected relationship with Marcus provided me with some cover.

"You're her best chance at a grandchild," I said offhandedly.

Marcus turned and walked into his office. In front of a towering window were two upholstered leather chairs with a marbled table in between. A chess set was always set up, ready to play. I took a seat opposite a mahogany desk. Before he left, we spent weekends boxing, playing tennis, or chess when the weather was bad.

I made the opening move. Chess was something I was great at. We went back and forth with wins, but it came easy to me. I grew up playing with my grandfather.

"You going to tell me about Verge?" I huffed as he sat to join me. I looked up to see that I had managed to surprise him. "Give me some credit."

Verge Corporation was a cutting-edge biotech company based in Zurich, run by CEO Hugo Aubert. My CFO mentioned it a few months ago when there were rumors it may have an IPO in the States. It caught my attention, and after looking into it, my PI found that the early trial data for a gene therapy they'd pioneered had impressive results.

It was a game changer.

My board of directors could threaten me with a morality clause all they wanted; I wouldn't breach it. But delivering Verge would make me a hero.

I'd be respected. Like my grandfather was.

"I wasn't going to talk about Verge." He moved a pawn. "But feel free to share any legwork you've done. I'd be happy to poach them from you."

“Just like the old days,” I reminded him, moving my knight.

After business school, Marcus and I worked at Amari Global together. Competing against each other had become a cornerstone of our friendship. He left to run a start-up, sold it, and used the payout to fund Sutton Industries.

“Same rules as always?” he asked, moving a bishop.

I nodded and moved a pawn, developing more space to breach the middle of the board, where early control was vital. “Of course.”

Our rules when in competition for the same acquisition were simple because there was only one. No sabotage. Other than that, everything was fair game. Usually, whenever one of us was knocked out of the running, we’d help the other.

“Are you going to try to turn Sloan against me?” I asked.

Sloan worked in Mergers and Acquisitions at her firm. She oversaw the biggest and most lucrative deals in the world. If she wanted to, she could find out the inside track.

“That would be highly unethical,” he chuckled. “I already told Sloan we’d probably be competing for it. She wants no part in it.”

“May the best plan win.”

“I’m not going to go easy on you,” Marcus warned.

In many ways, Marcus was the protégé my grandfather always said he never got in me. I needed a win to prove to my board that seat was earned as much as it was given.

“Good, it’ll be even nicer when I win,” I shot back.

I needed this win, at any cost.

CHAPTER 3

Selena



Rita DiPhillipe was avoiding me. She'd been my boss at Pearson PR for years, so I knew her routine by heart. She took her coffee black in the afternoon and always got it herself because her assistant would be busy prepping her afternoon meetings. Rita worked in the stunning corner office overlooking the city, the one I had my eye on for years, and needed to pass my office to get to the kitchen.

She didn't pass my office once. She was avoiding me.

Probably because, despite her steely nature with almost everyone else, she had a soft spot for me. That and she probably didn't want to have to say no to my many requests to hand the Amari account over to one of the other associates. I emailed her and texted her a few different options for who could take on the account over the last couple of days.

"What would you say if I helped one of the junior associates with the Amari account?" I finally caved and decided to ambush her on her way back from a meeting. Her dark blue eyes tried to avoid mine as she made her way to her office. Technically, day-to-day PR was a little beneath me at this point in my career. But the Amari account was huge. I knew she would only trust me with it. "They do the day-to-day; I handle the strategy."

"I thought we already discussed this. You're perfect for the job." She sighed.

"It's too soon."

“Is your title still ‘Director of Personal Affairs and Media Management?’” she asked, keeping her eyes fixed forward as we moved quickly down the hallway to her office.

“Yes.”

“Great. Then *you’ll* do it.”

“It’s too soon,” I repeated, more insistently. Her assistant politely opened the door to her office for us and we stepped inside. “I can handle all the work from here, just send someone else in to—”

“It’s been a year since the Waldorf debacle.” Her voice softened. Rita was stern but fair, and she’d always looked out for me. “And months since the Miles Asher situation. This might be the reset you need to go back to what you’re good at.”

“Yeah...” I knew Rita allowed me to stay off my old accounts for much longer than she wanted to out of deference to how I might feel about jumping back in.

I owed her for that and all the other ways she’d protected me, particularly when I went way out-of-bounds with the Waldorfs.

Instead of helping the Waldorf family, I may have *accidentally-on-purpose* exposed some of their heinous crimes. When their family’s financial problems started becoming society news, I was hired to help manage the situation. After spending months fixing it, I blew it all up.

Luckily, the only one at work who knew about my minor lapse in judgment was Rita. I should have been fired, but she protected me. She was the one who brokered peace. I signed a non-disclosure agreement in exchange for the family agreeing to abstain from pursuing legal action against me.

In an ironic twist, it turned out Julian Waldorf was Sloan Amari’s ex. Another conflict of interest I didn’t want to have to manage.

A tense silence constrained the room.

“I’m not going to force you. It’s a contract for a year. You’ll work from Amari Global for that time, keep the press attention positive, and then you’ll be back at Pearson. Pearson L.A. With a promotion.” Rita rounded her desk and picked up her glasses.

The Pearson offices in L.A. served celebrity clients. Not the ultra-wealthy. Not society people. Celebrity clients were difficult to manage but easy to understand.

That’s what I needed.

“And, as your friend, you need to take this. The money alone is enough reason to do it,” Rita continued. She sat down and smiled.

“What the catch?” I asked. “There always is one with society types.”

Being around society types that night at Sloan Amari’s birthday brought back all the nervous energy I had after the Waldorf mess. I just wanted to move on.

“The job is simple. There was a morality clause in his contract when he became CEO. It outlines behaviors he can’t exhibit. Keep that type of thing quiet. That’s all.” She gathered a few files and handed them to her assistant, who stood stalwartly next to her desk. “Look, this is too important of an account to hand off to someone else. In addition to the transfer back to L.A., the bonus they’ll pay you is more than your annual salary. Anyone else would *kill* for this account.”

She was right. Anyone else at Pearson would see getting assigned this account as a gift. And it was. Rita was doing it to help me as much as she was doing it to secure the company’s biggest client. Giving it to me meant she’d have no trouble approving my transfer once the work was done. And that was all I wanted.

“Yeah...” I trailed off. Saying no would have been stupid.

My mom lived in L.A. I missed her, but I hadn’t really considered moving back until this last year.

She didn't have great associations with New York City either. She lived here when she was in college but moved back to California before I was born to be closer to my grandparents. After they passed, it was the two of us.

"One year," I agreed.

"Exactly." She smiled warmly and handed me the contract. I signed it and handed it back. "Now get back to work."

With that, she dismissed me.

CHAPTER 4

Selena



It was close to 8 a.m. on Monday morning when a raindrop plopped dead center on my forehead and slowly trailed its way down my face. I looked up between the towering skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan. The bright morning was giving way to a dark shade of gray as the clouds loomed overhead, blocking out the sun's warm glow.

“Great,” I said to myself, and looked down at my blue wrap dress. The silky fabric rustled in the wind.

The usual noises of the city faded to a dull murmur, replaced by the low rumble of thunder in the distance. I never checked the weather, and I lost my umbrella on the subway weeks ago.

The scent of petrichor warned me of the impending downpour. Another drop came a second later. I had one block to go before I got to the Amari Global building lobby.

My feet impatiently tapped at the corner, waiting for the light to turn so I could cross the street and make a run for it. The raindrops picked up in cadence and fell in louder thumps along my head and shoulders.

Shit. I was going to look like a mess on my first day. My dress became dotted with raindrops as they fell with more consistency, and then, suddenly, they stopped.

A large presence loomed next to me, and I was under an umbrella. My eyes snapped to my side to see Henry Amari's

tall frame standing beside me, so close I could feel the heat radiating off him.

Dark brown eyes. Athletic body. Perfectly coiffed black hair, frayed slightly in the damp air.

He didn't say anything. He looked down at me, gave me a courteous smile, and then looked forward.

The light changed, and we crossed the street wordlessly. He began to hand me the umbrella before realizing we were walking toward the same entrance.

"Which building?" His deep voice carried over the sound of the raindrops hitting the umbrella. A warm shiver rolled up my spine, in warning or delight, I wasn't sure.

"Same one." My eyes lingered on his when he looked down at me.

He nodded and looked back up. That was when I realized he didn't remember me.

Why would he?

The look on his face was polite indifference. He had no memory of me from a week ago, even though I spilled a drink on him.

I guessed I shouldn't have been surprised. If the tabloid stories were even close to true, he'd probably found someone later on who made a more *memorable* impression.

I realized my hand was wrapped around his when we entered the lobby.

"Thank you." I turned and released a held breath. His right side was a little damp, but I was perfectly dry. Miss Manners would've been proud.

"It would have been impolite to let you suffer that deluge when I had an umbrella," he replied with all the cultivated graces of a proper gentleman. His attention immediately went to the phone he pulled out of his pocket. "Have a nice day."

He handed the umbrella to me and walked in a different direction than the main elevators.

“This is yours,” I called after him, as if one of the richest men in the world would even register the loss.

“Keep it,” he answered without turning around, disappearing in the other direction.



I met Sloan Amari at the top floor.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again.” Sloan shook my hand. She was just as cordial and friendly as she was the other two times we met.

She introduced me to Bridget, Henry’s assistant, and then went to Henry’s office door and smiled.

“Ready?” she asked me but didn’t wait for an answer and opened the door.

Henry’s office was spacious and well-appointed, with a sweeping view of the city through the floor-to-ceiling windows. He sat at a grand desk in front of them, intensely focused on his screen.

He leaned his elbow on his desk, passing a pen between his fingers. My eyes were drawn to his bicep as it flexed against the still-damp fabric of his navy Brioni suit.

Focus, I snapped at myself. One year. Get the job done and go home.

At the sound of the door, he looked up and smiled. It wasn’t a smile I was expecting. It was warm, humble. Cute.

It was gone in a flash, and the pen in his hand dropped to the desk.

Sloan looked at me. “Selena Montez, Henry Amari, CEO of Amari Global.”

He stood and outstretched his hand. Something flashed through his eyes, but he blinked whatever it was away.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Henry said. His deep voice sent embers down my spine this time.

“Henry, Selena Montez is the one of Pearson PR’s best,” Sloan explained.

My voice became tangled in the messy warmth that flooded my body. “Nice to meet you.”

The sound of Sloan clapping her hands together with a contented sigh broke me out of the trance this man kept putting me under. I could see her checking this box off her list of things to do in her head.

“Henry.” She turned to leave but stopped and looked back to her brother. “I asked Bridget to get Selena an office space on this floor.”

“How kind of you.” At first, his voice sounded grateful, but there was a sharp undercurrent.

“Need help with anything?” she asked diplomatically.

“Why? Are you going to gather intel?” He asked with a pinched look on his face.

“I’m still an Amari.”

There was an uncomfortable tension in the air from their sparring. I could hear the gossip columnist in me overflowing with questions. Was it because her boyfriend was his competition? But Marcus Sutton was Henry Amari’s best friend, so what was that about?

Sloan smiled at us and made her way out of the office with a polite goodbye.

“Don’t let the angelic face fool you,” Henry advised me as he walked behind his desk and motioned for me to take a seat. “She’s a viper.”

“She’s also your sister.” My eyes widened as I sat down. It slipped out, and I couldn’t figure out why.

I was supposed to lay low, not make waves.

“And no one will ever let me forget it.” He said quietly to himself.

I sucked in a large swath of air and tried to figure out why I was nervous.

A long, awkward silence filled the room. “Thank you for the umbrella.”

His face was blank, and he didn’t say anything. Another uncomfortable silence passed.

Did he forget me from the lobby too?

Maybe he didn’t need PR, maybe he needed a neurologist.

“Do you have some time now to go over the basics?” I asked, attempting to reset and earn the exorbitant amount of money I was being paid.

“Not much,” he offered politely. “But what’s the plan?”

“Well, first, I need to know everything I’m up against.” I flipped open my day planner to a page where I’d been making notes. “The good, the bad, the very bad.”

A sly grin crept up his face for a split-second before he immediately restrained it. “The very bad?”

The seriousness in the room seemed to lift.

I cleared my throat. “That’s what the papers will be most interested in. And based on what’s in the morality clause, probably what’s going to get you into trouble.”

He tensed. “The papers make it sound worse than it is.”

The papers made it look *bad*. Up until early this year, the stories were of a handsome billionaire who spent his nights at social clubs and exclusive bars. All the while clearly inebriated and on the arm of a different, beautiful woman.

“Good. Then the plan is simple from there,” I explained. I didn’t need to know what the truth was, and it was better that I didn’t. I needed to manage perception, and that was all.

After I signed the contract in Rita's office, I planned for the next year. Henry had been staying out of the press by keeping to himself, or so seemed, the last few months. If we could steer the fascination in him to something more appropriate, I was sure it would both make him less interesting to the press and keep him in good standing with his board of directors.

"Since there's already a charitable foundation set up in your family's name, I'll start there. We get you out in front of cameras for select events where the foundation makes a donation, I'll find ones that align with the company's core values, and we go from there."

"Okay," he agreed, and his gaze lingered on me again. It felt *heavy*. "That sounds fine."

"Great. I'll try to pick events and charities important to your board as well," I went on. "And we should be in the clear as long as you don't..."

I looked down at my planner, trying to find a delicate way to say stop screwing every runway model and ballerina in Manhattan.

"As long as you..." I tried again and failed.

I was a Rhodes scholar. I won the Los Angeles County spelling bee for my age group three years in a row. Yet, for some reason, whatever nervous tension hung over me made me forget my impressive vocabulary.

His eyes flickered down to his hands.

"Find more dignified hobbies?" Visible tension lined his shoulders, and his jaw flexed.

"Exactly." I exhaled a sigh of relief. If he was serious about his image, that would make my job easy. I wouldn't need to chase down every tabloid and pay them off for incriminating photos.

"Don't worry, it's an important year, and I have no intention of making your life difficult." His voice became

more serious.

The mood in the room shifted again, and he didn't look back at me. Instead, his eyes moved to his computer screen, and his attention was fully lost.

It was clear that whatever basic details I needed, I would probably have to get from his assistant.

“Great.” I closed the planner. “First things first, I'll get an idea of anything lurking with some of my contacts in the major tabloids. Otherwise, keep a low profile and we shouldn't have any problems.”

He nodded, and I made my way to the door. “Bridget can get you acclimated.”



As it happened, Bridget, Henry's assistant, had been his assistant since he started at the company after business school. She was older, mid-fifties by my best guess, with short, pin-straight blond hair. She reminded me of Rita in a few ways. There was a protectiveness about her, the same way Rita was with me.

“He was late today, but normally he gets in around seven in the morning and usually stays till about eight or nine at night these days,” Bridget explained.

We finished a quick tour of the executive floor and the office I would use for the year. It was Henry's old office before he became CEO. The floor mostly consisted of my office, Henry's, a couple of other executives'.

“Wow.”

“Great expectations.” Bridget sighed and left me to start getting myself up to speed. She also gave me some insights into what I was up against in terms of his past. It wasn't far off from what I expected: fancy parties and lots of women.

After an hour or so of acclimating to the new office, I knocked on his door during a sliver of free time between his meetings.

“Come in.”

“Mr. Amari...” I began as I hovered a few steps into his office, trying to decide whether or not to take a seat, suddenly unsure of every move I made.

“Henry,” he corrected without looking up from his screen.

“I wanted to get an idea of which meetings I can sit in on. Nothing major, anything with strategic goals that are already publicly available. Things to help tie your image to the company’s good standing.”

If I was going to spin the truth into a carefully crafted fib on occasion, I would need lots of good facts to wrap it up in. If those facts could be useful in promoting the company, then win-win.

He stopped reading.

“What?” Irritation pierced his tone.

I ignored it. Almost every client I ever worked with was resistant to help at first. Rich people didn’t like being told what to do, and they definitely didn’t like someone following them around doing it.

“I should probably come along to a few key meetings to get an idea of—”

“Why?” He got up and made his way to the door, stopping a few steps in front of me, his brows furrowed.

“Well, whenever I inevitably need to pivot a story or a press release, knowing what’s happening at the company can be a way to do that,” I reasoned. “Amari Global is well-respected, it’ll be good to build that assoc—”

“You’re not the company’s PR.”

“I understand that—”

“Amari Global and I are two separate things,” he snapped at me.

An annoyed spark flared in my gut. If this man didn’t stop interrupting me, I’d find a new use for his umbrella.

“I understand that.” I huffed a quiet breath through gritted teeth. “But now that you’re CEO, *you’re* the public face of the company. I need to know what’s going on here in order to cover when we have a negative story out there.”

“I already told you.” The annoyance in his tone became more pronounced. “I have no plans to make your job difficult. I won’t be giving the tabloids any fodder.”

“Okay,” I retorted politely. The tabloids didn’t exactly have a high moral code. They’d publish what they wanted without evidence. It was a fact of life he had to know by now. A fact we needed to prepare for. “But I’m sure you know as well as I do that they don’t need anything new. They have more than enough on you already.”

He flinched. Maybe it was the reminder of his misdeeds that ticked him off, but his heavy stare warned me that people didn’t talk to him that *honestly*.

Years of working in PR and I never had a problem ignoring the sometimes-petulant attitude clients gave me, especially the ones who weren’t pleased to have me around. I could understand the opposition to having me at important meetings.

But there was too much riding on this year, for both of us, for it to go wrong. That knowledge made my patience thin.

“Look, I’ll level with you.” I sighed, hoping it would slow my racing heart. “I know you don’t want me here. But you need a perfect year before the board vote next June, and I need a way out. We can accomplish both of those tasks if you just let me do my job, and I’ll do everything I can to stay out of your way.”

There was an almost imperceptible lightening in his features. The seconds passed, and it felt like an eternity.

“Okay.” His tone was steady, calm, but an amused smile clawed its way out. He breezed past me through the door. “Let’s go.”

I stood frozen and blinked in confusion.

“Keep up, Miss Montez,” he called down the hall.



Henry was like two different people, each struggling for control. The focused and buttoned-up CEO warred against a charming gentleman who seemed promptly silenced whenever he managed to sneak through.

It made me wonder what he was like outside these walls.

Why do you care?

After a long day of meetings, it was getting late. I would normally be home by now, but I found myself engrossed in making an accurate timeline of his last few years.

There was a lot I still needed to know, but Bridget was long gone. I threw a few things into my purse and got ready to head out when I noticed Henry’s office light was still on. It was nearly nine.

“Mr. Amari?” I stood in the threshold of the large double doors. He didn’t look up from what he was reading and instead motioned me into the large office to sit.

“Henry,” he said more firmly this time.

“I don’t think that would be appropriate.” I sat down in the seat in front of his desk.

“Neither are the countless stories Bridget will probably tell you in the next few months.”

“You could make it easy and tell them to me now,” I pointed out.

Henry's chest rose and fell deeply. His tie was loose, and his sleeves were rolled up his toned, deep sand-colored forearms. His suit jacket lay along the back of his chair. When he inhaled, I could see the muscles of his chiseled chest press against the perfectly ironed button-up.

It suddenly felt too warm.

"Honestly, anything worth telling you is already blown out of proportion in the papers," he confessed.

"The price of power?"

"Something like that." A ghost of a smile breezed across his tired face.

I nodded.

"I'm going to head out. See you tomorrow." I stood and began toward the door.

"Miss Montez," he called when I was a few steps into the hallway. I turned, and his eyes moved from me to his phone. "My driver is downstairs. His name is Winston, he'll drive you back home."

"Oh no, I'm fine, I—"

"It's late, and knowing Sloan, it's probably in your contract."

"I'm fine, thank you." I didn't wait for a response and went to the elevator.

Usually, on the nights events ran late, the PR firm would provide a car to take me home. It wasn't surprising that it was in my contract. But something about him offering it to me didn't sit well. I wanted to keep my distance from him, from his world. All of it.

When I stepped out of the elevator, I saw a middle-aged man waiting for me in a driver's uniform. He was on the phone and motioned for me.

"Of course, Henry." He hung up and looked at me.

“Miss Montez?” He approached me and cheerfully laughed when he registered my surprise. His staff called him Henry? “I’ve been told you are not to go home unaccompanied.”

I didn’t like it. But the idea of a long subway ride was enough to accept it.

CHAPTER 5

Henry



I spent the last couple of weeks trying to get in the good graces of Verge's largest stakeholder: Charles Hayworth.

He also happened to be a board member and a close personal friend of Verge's CEO, Hugo Aubert.

Hugo was difficult to pin down, and I was beginning to believe he'd be near impossible to convince to sell. I'd need another avenue to acquire the technology, so I thought I'd try convincing him from the inside.

If there was one thing I knew well, it was the importance of a loyal board of directors. And my private investigator was following his entire board like a shadow.

"I'll have the jet bring you to the city for a proper introduction," I said politely into my office phone, despite the general distaste for the person with whom I was speaking.

"I look forward to it." Charles Hayworth's cold British formality was felt even an ocean away. It rivaled that of my mother's. "I'm curious to see the famed Augustus Club, I've never had the privilege to see it for myself."

My family had membership at virtually every exclusive social and athletic club in the city. The Augustus Club was the pinnacle, with no other social club like in the States, and only a few in the world. The Amaris gained access when my grandfather stopped asking and simply bought up all the land around it, costing him billions, and casually mentioned to the

board of their admission committee that he could make their club either a haven or hell.

They made the obvious choice.

“I’m sure it won’t disappoint.” I swiveled in my desk chair, already bored. I watched the shadows from the sunlight cast through the window appear and vanish on the floor as clouds passed outside.

I didn’t know the man, and I didn’t want to. I’d met a version of him my entire life. Polite, dignified old money who scoffed at families like mine, ones that lacked what they thought were appropriate blood lines. But they found a way to tolerate us when they needed little things, like billions in capital.

But, I had to play nice. I needed Charles. He had Aubert’s ear and could be useful. I didn’t just need a win. I needed this one.

Acquiring Verge was something I was sure my grandfather would have had no trouble doing. He was great at finding weakness and exploiting it to make a deal work. But Verge was outside of our normal portfolio, and the acquisition would be a notable expansion, one he probably wouldn’t have agreed with.

I didn’t want to be my grandfather. I wanted to be different, better.

I continued with some socially mandated polite conversation before a far more appealing person caught my attention. I ended the call when the familiar sound of Selena’s heels neared.

“Henry?” Her silky voice wrapped around me.

The way she said my name. *Fuck.*

I cleared my throat. “Come in, Miss Mon—”

“Selena,” she reminded me for the hundredth time.

“Selena.” I nodded.

I liked the way her name rolled out of my mouth. I hadn't stopped thinking about her since I hit on her at Sloan's birthday. Luckily, after ignoring it during that initial meeting on her first day here at Amari Global, she seemed to be okay with pretending it never happened. She hadn't mentioned it, and I certainly wasn't going to.

It was clear, based on her candor, that she didn't think too highly of me. I couldn't blame her, given all the information she'd sifted through in preparing for this job. But the last thing I needed was her thinking that on top of the scandals I'd already stared down, I'd engage in a workplace romance.

Although, romance was the last thing I wanted to do to that sass mouth.

"Here are all the board members you're going to be seeing over the next few weeks at various events." She sat down and put a few papers in front of me.

She was impressive. Quick-witted. Intelligent. In a week, she managed to get up to speed on the company and, more importantly, the board.

I thought I'd hate having her around. Nobody liked a reminder of their past indiscretions, and Selena was a constant one. She wouldn't have been here if my more debauched days weren't well documented in every tabloid.

But I didn't mind having her as my shadow to meetings and outings. She was a cute one to have.

"Great." I looked over the list.

Selena wasn't afraid to be honest with me either. A lifetime in proper society with people who had their own motives to stay in my good graces meant almost nobody told me how they really felt. Everything was coated in a sugary formality.

Not Selena. She was a little biting. And, fuck, I wanted to bite back.

“Since summer is winding down now, there will be a lot of parties in the Hamptons.” She didn’t look at me. Her attention was focused on the list she had placed on my desk. “You only need to go to one or two. I checked with Bridget, and the ones circled fit your schedule to be there a couple of sporadic weekends if it suits you.”

“That sounds fine. The Annual Amari Summer Close party is the last summer weekend, and you’re welcome to come.”

She tilted her head as she took a seat. Her lips pursed. “Okay. I’ll make a list of the board members you should speak to, along with some topics. Bridget gave me the board vote from the July meeting.”

I winced at the memory. I was unanimously voted in favor of remaining CEO, but only because Sloan, Marcus, and Xander helped secure it. If they hadn’t, the board’s choice to replace me was Sloan. My ascension to CEO had been a contentious topic between my sister and myself for years. A part of me felt guilty for taking it from her, and another part felt like I needed to prove I was still the right choice.

“Feel free to bring a date,” I added for no apparent reason.

She scribbled a few things down with neat little check boxes next to them. Some of the ink from her pen scrapped across the page when her hand swept by. She was left-handed.

The door opened, and my mood suddenly dampened. The sound drew Selena’s attention to the visitor.

“Don’t tell me you forgot about our Friday tradition.” Xander walked into my office uninvited.

Most Fridays, we would leave work at a decent hour and get a drink. It helped fill the void left in both of our lives when Marcus was gone. A lot had changed in the past year, but this little tradition was a nice constant. It was previously something I did with Marcus.

“Just finishing up.” I closed the clinical trial data I had been paging through over the last several weeks. I looked at Selena to introduce her, but Xander, of course, beat me to it.

“Xander Sutton.” He shook Selena’s hand. Then, he raked his hand through his dirty blond hair and tilted his head slightly. I knew Selena would smile. I’d seen that move a thousand times.

She smiled. I could fucking kill him. “Selena Montez, nice to meet you.”

“Selena, can we fix him?” Xander pouted, and then nodded his head in my direction. “Or is it more humane to pull the plug?”

She laughed. This time I could feel the veins in my forehead throb.

“There’s hope.” She turned to me. “I’ll have Bridget make arrangements for the Hamptons.”

Xander watched Selena as she left the office and closed the door behind her. If he weren’t Marcus’s younger brother, I’d kick his ass.

“Hamptons?” Xander raised an eyebrow and turned to me slowly after the door shut behind Selena.

“Yes, I have to attend a few end-of-season events. Selena’s going to attend the Annual Amari Summer Close party,” I told him nonchalantly. He wasn’t buying it. “What?”

“What?” Xander mocked and began to laugh in a low chuckle. He took a seat. “She already turned you down once. You think the beach will help your chances?”

I cursed the fact that Xander had a perfect memory.

“I never hit on her, and it’s strictly business,” I retorted, even though I did, in fact, hit on her. “Half the executive team will be there. *You’re* going to be there.”

“I manage everyone’s money, I kind of have to be there,” he countered, and continued chuckling to himself.

Xander was a managing director at a capital investment firm. He was also one of the youngest in the world in that position. Xander’s mind worked like a machine. You wouldn’t

know he was a prodigy based off his flippant behavior at times.

“You wanna fuck the PR consultant, don’t you?” he went on. His body shook with another laugh. “The one who’s here *specifically* because you can’t seem to stop fucking people you’re not supposed to.”

“I won’t.” There was no point in denying I wanted to, but I wouldn’t.

“It’s like Shakespearean, right?” His laughing continued. “Or Machiavellian? Where’s Sloan when you need her?”

“Don’t tell Sloan,” I warned. The last thing I needed was a lecture from my little sister.

“I’m not going to tell Sloan.” His laughing began to die down. I had a hard time believing that. Xander and I were friends, but he and Sloan were like one mind. They didn’t have secrets.

“Tell Sloan what?” Marcus’s voice drew us to where he stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, eyebrow raised. He looked at Xander.

“Nothing,” Xander and I said at the same time. We exchanged looks, and he chuckled again. Marcus looked down the hall from his spot in the doorway. His eyes narrowed for a moment, and he dropped it.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked Xander.

“We’re grabbing drinks. Want to come along?” I answered as I grabbed a few things from my desk and turned off the computer screen.

“Friday drinks with Xander?” Marcus looked offended.

He had every right; the tradition was originally ours. It was nice to know he got to feel a little of the bitterness I had to feel the last few months. It was bad enough to be abandoned by my best friend, a guy who was practically my brother. But then to be lied to felt like a slap in the face.

He lied to me about my board, about his involvement with Sloan, and what stung worse was nobody lied to Xander. I was the expendable one, or it felt like I was.

“Jealous?” Xander grinned. “Consider it payback for stealing my best friend.”

Marcus rolled his eyes, and we left. Right on the heels of Selena leaving at the same time.

CHAPTER 6

Selena



I was never one for retail therapy, but I needed something to wear for the Amari Summer Close party.

The two closest people to me in New York, Lauren and Isa, came with me to find a dress. It was a perfect summer Sunday for it.

After a couple of busy weeks at my new position, we three were finally able to hang out.

“How’s the hot boss?” Isa took a sip of her coffee as we climbed the steps from the subway.

Isa and I went to college at Columbia together, and after graduation, I went to work for Rita, while she’d gone to medical school.

“You didn’t tell me he was hot.” Lauren smacked my shoulder.

While Isabelle and I met at Columbia, I’d known Lauren most of my life. She and I grew up in L.A. together, and she moved out to New York last year to pursue a culinary career. She hadn’t had much luck yet. When she learned this job could potentially mean a transfer back to L.A., she practically started packing.

She never wanted to be out here but came when all the Waldorf drama went down. Now, I thought she felt like she needed to be here for me.

“Ooh!” Isa squealed to Lauren. “Him and literally all of his friends. I don’t know how you’re gonna get any work done.”

“I think I’ve reached my max with getting personally involved with clients,” I reminded them as we made our way down the block.

My career was essentially spotless when it came to professionalism. The two blips happened to occur one after the other. First, it was the Waldorfs. Then, Miles Asher was an actor/former client whom I got swept up with.

“You were vulnerable,” Isa cooed. I met Miles after the Waldorf drama, and he felt like a soft place to land. He was for a time, but when the shimmer faded, there wasn’t much left. “You’re in a good headspace now.”

After the breakup, Miles tried reaching out, but I ignored it. It felt disingenuous to entertain the idea of dating him. He was a decent guy, but I didn’t feel much for him. We were together when I needed an escape, and he was the perfect one.

“Is the hot boss why you’ve been working late?” Lauren teased.

She had been crashing at my place while she got on her feet. Admittedly, it took her longer than she had promised, but it was nice. She was an aspiring chef and always made amazing dinners. Besides, if we were moving back to L.A., it didn’t make sense that she get her own place now.

“What?” I stammered. “No, of course not.”

I did have a habit of staying late. When the evening hours rolled around, I could get answers to questions without feeling like I was pulling him away from something important.

That was the only reason I did it.

Not because he would often loosen his tie and rake his hand through his thick black hair during those hours. He looked different then, less put together, unrestrained.

“I think I annoy him,” I added.

Henry was always tense when I was around him. I tried to keep my interruptions short and scheduled, but that didn't seem to help. He was only ever relaxed at the end of the day.

“Well yeah,” Isa announced loudly. “You’re the mean lady making him keep his dick in his pants.”

The joke felt like sandpaper. “I guess. He seems pretty boring these days, to be honest.”

“That’s great!” Lauren cheered as we turned into one of the more expensive boutiques in SoHo. “Easy job, tons of money, and you and I can hang out more!”

“Boring?” Isabelle questioned as the doors closed behind us. She looked a little worried. “Then, why all the fuss?”

“His past is enough to screw him over,” I told her. “The tabloids only have to republish the stories they have to make him look bad in front of the board. Perception is reality.”

As we walked through the store, I felt my phone go off in my pocket.

“*Hola, Mami,*” I said as I picked up the call. My fingers drifted along the fabric of a light pink linen dress.

“*Mija.*” Her voice was warm. I could hear the sounds of the hospital in the background. “You haven’t called in a couple days; what’s going on with you?”

I tried to call her every few days. She had a vibrant social life, so it wasn’t like she was lonely. But lately, I liked hearing her voice. It felt safe.

I told my mom about the last few weeks. “I have some work in the Hamptons soon.”

“Oh.” Her voice dropped. “Don’t spend too long there.”

My mom thought my job in PR was beneath me. She wanted me to be a doctor, like Isa. She’d been studying to take her own medical school entrance exams when she had me. It became a dream she deferred, and she eventually went to nursing school when I was a kid.

“How are things at home?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“Good.” Her voice picked up. “Lauren tells me you two may be moving back.”

I sighed. Lauren had a way of keeping me honest. I knew she probably told my mom out of excitement.

“After this job is done.”

She didn’t say anything, but I knew she was smiling. “Just in time because there’s this boy I think you’d love. He’s a resident now, but next summer he’ll be an attending. He can show you around L.A. and all the new places.”

“We’ve talked about this, *Mami*.”

I heard a huff. “Fine, but you’ll see what I mean when you get here.”

I didn’t bother to argue or ask how my mom planned to keep a man “on hold” for year.

We finished talking, and I was just about to head to the dressing room when I heard a voice behind me that made my blood run cold.

I turned, and my stomach dropped. It was her.

Pearl necklace, blush Chanel jacket, blue blood.

Amelia Waldorf. The matriarch of the Waldorf family. Allister Waldorf’s wife, Julian’s mother. The wicked witch of the Upper East Side.

She gasped audibly. When I leaked her family’s many secrets to the press, she was the most vicious when she sought out recourse. Probably because she felt the most humiliated.

“What are you doing here?” Her tight voice was shaken at first, but she recovered quickly. Her demeanor shifted to a smug superiority. Amelia took a few steps closer and looked around the mostly empty store.

“Same thing you are,” I snapped.

My fingers curled around the linen fabric of the dress tightly in an attempt to steady my shaking hands.

I reminded myself that I could ruin her just as easily as she could me. Mutually assured destruction never seemed as tempting as when I heard her voice.

“Well.” She looked away and gently pushed her neatly coiffed blond hair behind her shoulder. Her eyes flicked around the high ceiling of the designer store we stood in. It was her silent way of telling me it was a place I didn’t belong in. “I thought our agreement might make you reconsider your lifestyle as a desperate interloper. I see I was wrong.”

I wanted to say something, *anything* to defend myself, but I lost every word I could think of. I never felt more small or powerless than when Amelia Waldorf looked at me like *that*. Like she controlled me.

The mention of the contract made my stomach churn.

I signed it in a moment of desperation, hoping that it would be the solution to all the problems I created for myself. If I hadn’t, Amelia Waldorf promised to have me blackballed from any job I’d ever find. They were in their legal right to sue for the NDA I breached by leaking privileged information. I’d lose everything I worked so hard for.

“Come on, Selena.” Lauren’s voice cut through the fog, and I felt her pull my arm away. But not before I caught a satisfied smile on Amelia’s face.

I agreed to keep quiet about *everything*, and they agreed not to pursue charges for the NDA breach. The contract was a constant reminder of the fact that I was just a dirty little secret.

We left without getting a dress. Isa and Lauren pulled me outside, and we walked aimlessly through the streets. They talked about everything and anything to get my mind off of what just happened.

I reveled in the warm outdoor sun. I wished I had my camera with me today. The sunny streets always picked up

beautifully through the lens. The bright rays warmed the cool steel skyscrapers and harmonized the clamorous bustle.

“Are you okay being around all those people for the next year?” Lauren said after a long silence. She tucked her golden blond hair behind her ear. Her normally carefree expression was marbled with concern.

If this job didn’t come with the promise of going home, she would have dragged me out of the building before I could’ve ever agreed. Lauren, Isa, Rita, and the lawyers were the only ones who knew about why I went absolutely batshit on the Waldorfs.

I nodded. “In a year, we’ll be back in L.A.”

She smiled.

There were moments when I thought back to a time before I ever met them. I loved the city, and I never wanted to leave it. Isa and I planned out our lives with the assumption I’d be here for good. Sometimes, I questioned if moving back was the right thing to do.

One run-in with Amelia Waldorf confirmed that I had to get out of here. Nobody in my life ever made me feel small or weak. Not until them.

I had to get home.

CHAPTER 7

Henry



I opened Selena's car door and offered my hand as she got out. She took it momentarily and smiled.

"Thanks." She pulled it back once she was out and immediately began typing on her phone.

"How long is this thing?" I groaned; my hand flexed as a static ran through it.

Winston, my driver, shut the door behind me. I began to read an email that came in from my PI. He'd been following Charles Hayworth and Verge's board, digging up everything he could find on him.

The security lined the town car as we arrived at my first public appearance set up by my new, frustratingly attractive PR consultant.

"Two hours," she answered. She stopped on the sidewalk, turned to me, and politely tapped my hand. "You'll have to talk to people, you *cannot* sit on your phone working the whole time."

"Understood."

I found myself constantly confused as to why I wanted to be around her. But while I figured out why she had this weird effect on me, I tried to keep the conversation and general chatter to a minimum.

Today's charity luncheon was thrown by some socialite to honor a world-renowned cancer researcher. The Amari family

trust provided an endowment for her to continue her research for years to come.

“You could maybe smile more,” she suggested next to me. I flicked a glance down at her. Selena walked alongside me and looked straight ahead at the Ritz’s ballroom as we walked into the lobby. “It’ll make you seem more approachable.”

I would smile if I wasn’t already frustrated with the fact that I was missing two hours of work on a Monday for a society brunch. Proving I was worthy of the position I was in meant that I needed to be *at work* or at least working. Not mingling.

“By all means, announce every qualm you have with me to all of Manhattan Society.” Did she want to make sure everyone else found me as distasteful as she happened to? Because I was pretty sure she was hired to do the opposite.

“Relax. It’s hardly a whisper chamber in here.” She rolled her eyes.

She had momentary flashes when she’d let a sarcastic or biting comment through, and they were thrilling. No one talked to me with a brutal candor the way she did. It was addicting, and I loved to spar.

“I think I smile just the right amount,” I noted. She looked up at me with a spark in her eye. She immediately looked away and scanned the room. “Besides, maybe I don’t want to be approachable.”

“Scared you’ll make a friend?” she teased. Two snarky comments in a row, lucky me.

I tried not to flinch at the bullseye she haphazardly hit. My problem in life was never having too many friends. It was always having real ones. Those were hard to come by.

“I have enough friends, but your concern is noted,” I retorted politely as we stood at a high-top in the large entryway a few minutes longer. The event started soon, and according to Selena, one of my board members was also chair of the charity.

“Where is the polite-society Henry Amari?” She turned to me, and an almost playful defiance flickered across her face. “Because I’m going to need him to be present today. You must know him.”

“He’s busy,” I grumbled.

“You can’t be grumpy and charming at the same time.” She took a glass of water from a waiter. “You have to pick one. And charming would be helpful today.”

“Oh?”

I found short answers always seemed to sneak under her skin the way everything she did snuck under mine.

My eyes caught hers again, the stunning amber stayed locked on me.

“Mm-hmm.” The confidence in her tone began to fade.

She needed to be careful with that magnetic field she seemed to have.

It was strong.

Dangerous.

“Henry, *darling*.” The sound of my mother’s voice was a bucket of ice on whatever heat was running through me after sparring with Selena.

My shoulders hitched up, and my entire body tensed.

“Why is she here?” I growled lowly to Selena through gritted teeth. I avoided my parents for the same reason most Manhattanites avoided slow walkers. They were infuriating.

“I’m not the company’s PR, I’m yours,” Selena reminded me in a whisper as she tilted her head, her eyes baiting me for a reaction.

“I’m yours.”

That was going to replay in my head far longer than it should.

“The press will love a few pictures of you with your mom,” she continued, more seriously this time. “It’ll make you look wholesome.”

Before I could say anything, a few shutter clicks from behind reminded me where I was. I forced my shoulders to relax and shook my head slightly as my mother joined us at the high-top.

My mother politely said hello and beamed at the idea that I invited her somewhere, clearly having no idea that Selena was the engineer to what she didn’t realize was an act of war.

“Remember to talk to Vanessa Grant.” Selena’s soft voice lingered as she breezed passed me and motioned to one of the Amari Global board members, who was also in attendance. “And smile.”

Selena began to walk away from the table.

“You’re leaving?” I found myself feeling another bothersome pull as she made her way out.

She didn’t hear me. I watched a few more seconds as she left.

CHAPTER 8

Selena



Working with the Amari charitable foundation was my favorite part of this job.

Today, we were at a pediatric outpatient infusion center in Queens. Thanks to the large endowment from the foundation, it would soon provide access to care for children in the area close to home. The kids would be in their own community and not miles away in Manhattan. It was familiar, and they wouldn't have to feel like they were in a different world while being poked and prodded.

It was Henry's idea.

After a few final photos, I walked out to the private SUV waiting for us and was surprised to find Henry wasn't already out there. I sat in there, answering some emails, until realized it had been almost fifteen minutes.

We'd finished early, and I expected he'd be eager to get back to the office as he had been with the other photo ops.

"I'm going to see what's keeping him," I said to Drake, my driver for all work-related activities, and hopped out of the car.

I passed through the double doors and peered into the large waiting room where the press had gathered and photos were taken with the hospital administrators. The room was filled with people, but Henry wasn't one of them.

I kept walking down the hallway and peered into the children's waiting room. There he was, sitting on the colorful carpet floor with his attention drawn to a Nintendo Switch in

his hands. A child, no more than ten years old, stood behind him and instructed him from over his shoulder.

“This seems like a terrible idea,” Henry protested blandly to the child. His voice lacked any seriousness. He was keenly focused on the screen.

“Just do it!” the child commanded from behind him.

A few more clicks of the buttons at the direction of the little boy and Henry seemingly did something right.

“Okay, now use the sword!” the boy cheered loudly.

The entire scene in front of me was adorable. Henry sat there, in his perfectly tailored custom suit, in a colorful waiting room that looked like it was plucked out of a Dr. Seuss book, obediently taking orders. There weren't any cameras around. In fact, he probably came in here to avoid them.

“Okay. Okay,” Henry agreed calmly.

“See, I told you,” the child gleefully reprimanded. The screen went blank after Henry completed the level. “How come they're taking your picture if you can't even play *Zelda*?”

Henry looked up at him and smiled warmly. He shrugged. “Nepotism, mostly.”

I smothered a laugh.

The confusion registered on the child's face, and Henry chuckled. I fought the overwhelming urge to sit beside him. Instead, I motioned a photographer to get the most adorable candid I could ever have arranged.

They snapped a few clicks before Henry's head shot up at the sound.

His features remained soft and warm when he handed the toy gently to the child. That changed instantly when he stood and walked over to me and the photographer.

“Don't use those,” he sneered. The force of his command made me step back.

He went from delightful to deadly in a second.

“Why not? They’re adorable,” I defended. That was the image he needed to personify. I struggled to catch up to the personality flip. “This is exactly the type—”

“He’s a kid. He didn’t even know the camera was there,” he snapped.

“All the parents consented—” I stopped myself when I realized *I* sounded like the asshole.

His pinched expression remained until he turned back to say goodbye to the children. Then, he walked wordlessly to the car.

We spent the first ten minutes of the ride in awkward silence. He was irritated in a way I hadn’t seen from him before. He didn’t say a word but answered emails and read through the numerous ones that came through.

“I’m sorry. It looked like a good photo op. I didn’t think about how the children might feel,” I explained. How did I become the villain here?

“It’s fine.” He didn’t look up from his phone.

“You have a soft spot for kids,” I teased, trying to cut the heavy tension that suffocated the car. I pretended the discovery and the adorable scene I witnessed didn’t do all kinds of things to my insides.

“I guess.” His eyes darted across the floor after a drawn-out silence. “They’re simple. No hidden agendas.” He shifted uncomfortably in his seat for a moment before he pressed the button to turn off his phone’s screen and exhaled loudly. “Meet their basic needs and all they want after that is to have some company and agency in their life.”

His words hung in the air. Then it struck me. He’d had cameras taking pictures of him since he was a kid. Nobody asked if he wanted his immature years documented, but they were. He was born to one of the wealthiest families in the world; people knew more about him than they should.

He wanted to protect that child the way he hadn't been.

I didn't ask any more questions. I couldn't understand him sometimes. You'd think he'd want people to see the parts of him that made him relatable and kind.

But for some reason, Henry hid them.



After the morning photo op in Queens, I avoided Henry. I finalized the plans for the Hamptons in a couple weeks with Bridget and started to plan for the inevitable negative story. With the papers being relatively quiet the last few months, I was getting a little nervous.

Quiet was never good.

Early in the year, Henry was in the middle of a shit storm.

For months, the press followed him while he attended multiple raucous parties every night. Each party with a different woman. The international press had a ball with his vacation antics. A revolving door of different women on his yacht, his home in Monaco, the family's private island.

But from the months leading up to his ascension to CEO and all the months following, the press was quiet. Probably because he refused to go out anywhere he might be photographed. At the very least, if there was something going on I wasn't aware of, he was being discreet. Which was all I could really ask. He was making my life easy by keeping a low profile, but that wasn't a strategy he could hold forever.

Maybe the press had simply lost interest in Henry, but it was unlikely. People in Henry's position were prone to having their private lives leaked.

When I thought about where any new leaks might come from, I realized I hadn't learned about any friends outside of

the Suttons. It was probably something I needed to get a handle on sooner rather than later.

I opened the bottom desk drawer, searched for a notebook, and saw a piece of paper sitting at the bottom. It was a photo. I picked it up and smiled. It must have been years ago. He looked younger. They all did.

It was a photo of him, his sister, and his friends at what must have been a graduation. Sloan was in a cap and gown.

He looked different, like the version of himself I saw brief flashes of occasionally.

It was mildly adorable.

I tucked it back in the top drawer and got up to see if Henry had some time to go over any friends he had at the company.

“Oh, Selena.” He looked up and back down at his work after I knocked on the doorframe “What can I do for you?”

He seemed bothered. Maybe he was still annoyed from earlier, but suddenly I wanted to get out of there. “Do you have any friends at the company? Just looking to plug any potential sources of leaks.”

He opened his mouth to say something but stopped. His eyes flickered to me, then immediately back to what he was reading.

“My friends don’t work for me,” he stated sternly, not looking up.

My entire body flinched as the words bristled against me.

A yes or no would have sufficed.

“Of course,” I snapped, knowing I should have just left it alone. But I couldn’t soothe the burn in the pit of my stomach. “How silly of me.”

It felt targeted. He was raised in high society. If he *wanted* to be polite, he would’ve been.

I didn't need a reminder that he and I were from different worlds.

He looked up. "Anything else?"

An irritated tremble traveled through my body.

"Nope." I turned on my heels and began toward the door.

He snapped at me earlier for the picture. Sure, I was the one in the wrong there, but still. Maybe he didn't need PR, maybe he needed a new personality.

I hated myself for thinking we were... whatever I was thinking.

Fuck that guy.

CHAPTER 9

Selena



Henry and I walked back from a meeting with the marketing group in silence. The little conversation we had before he was a total ass a few days ago had whittled down to only work-related items.

We walked into his office, and I put a press packet on his desk.

“Can you get me a meeting with a children’s health initiative in the city?” he asked as I started to walk out.

I ignored the pang that resonated in my chest and began typing an email to a contact at the children’s hospital.

“Sure,” I replied without looking up, my attention focused squarely on the email.

“Can you get me something for lunch?” he asked curtly.

My flinch had to be visible. I didn’t look up. I kept typing.

I wasn’t his assistant, not that there’s anything wrong with that, but what did he see when he saw us? *His staff*. A team of faceless people who took care of his tasks, too far beneath him to ever remember who does what.

Amelia Waldorf. Henry Amari. They all saw me the same way.

My tongue tucked in the side of my mouth for a second. I could just pass that along to his actual assistant. In any other circumstance, I would have, but he seemed to be lodged right under the part of my skin that had any self-restraint.

My mouth moved before I could stop it.

“*Yo no soy tu madre. Niño malcriado.*”¹ I muttered the words under my breath and began to turn on my heels.

I regretted it immediately. I should have ignored it. I always used to. But after everything that happened with the Waldorfs, the part of me that constantly knuckled under was feeling burnt out.

“*Mi madre no habla español. No los confundo a ustedes dos.*”² I glanced back, hearing his retort, and his irritation was well-contained in a polite smile.

His eyes moved to the door to Bridget who stood in the doorway.

He'd been talking to her.

She looked at him, then me, and smiled. “Sure. Anything else?” she asked.

Henry shook his head, and Bridget walked back to her desk.

“Next time you want to snap at me, try German. I was never any good at it.”

I should have apologized; I was in the wrong. He was my boss and anyone else would have fired me on the spot.

I opened my mouth to say something but didn't. I held the folder in my hand a little tighter and made my way to the door silently.

From the corner of my eye, I could see his attention move to me for a moment, then fall back to the stack of papers in front of him.

“Shut the door on your way out,” he barked, his voice releasing the indignation he'd bound after my comment.

On the other side of the door, Bridget sat at her desk with her arms crossed. I silently started toward my office.

“Miss Montez?” She stopped me. Her black-rimmed glasses made her piercing expression even more terrifying. “Regardless of your feelings, this is a place of business. You will not be disrespectful. It’s beneath you.”

I nodded. “I’ll apologize.”

“And such a pity. Of all the powerful people you’ve likely worked with, he’s one of the good ones.” She gathered a few papers.

My heart sank.

Sometimes I could see that clearly. That he wasn’t some acrimonious blue blood.

Other times, he was exactly the man I thought he’d be.

Whichever version of Henry was the real one didn’t matter. I was only here to manage perception, not reality.



When I got back to my apartment, I found Lauren standing next to a stunning flower arrangement of vibrant ranunculi in every color on my counter. The vase they sat in looked like crystal.

“These came for you an hour ago,” she said with so much restrained excitement I thought she might burst. “There’s a card.”

“Who knows my address?” I asked as I inspected the fragrant flowers. I moved so often around the city that it was hard for me to keep track of my own location.

“Maybe they’re apology flowers.” Lauren guessed. I’d told her about my friction with Henry over the past week.

“Doubt it.”

I pulled the note out from between the stems, and disappointment replaced the quick rush of excitement.

Thinking of you.

- Miles

“Did you tell him you moved?” Lauren asked as she read the card from behind me.

“No.” Rent in New York City was insane, so moving around was pretty common. I moved into my current apartment in Brooklyn earlier in the summer. I had only been in it a few months.

A prickle of concern was quickly washed away by the knowledge that the gesture wasn’t all that surprising. Miles was always a little eccentric. He sent me a gift basket after we slept together the first time.

A handsome movie-star, but eccentric.

He texted me periodically, bizarre or nostalgic messages, then he’d go radio silent for weeks. I ignored it, assuming he’d get bored and move on eventually. He never stayed too long on any interest. I knew I was probably the same, and I really couldn’t make myself care.

“He probably called and asked someone at your office,” Lauren reasoned.

“Yeah.” I put the arrangement on the windowsill, deciding to ignore the sentiment but keep the flowers.

1 I am not your mother, spoiled brat.

2 My mother doesn’t speak Spanish, I wouldn’t confuse you two.

CHAPTER 10

Henry



It was early afternoon when I got back to Amari Global. I spent the morning at the Augustus Club in informal talks with Charles Hayworth. He said he'd never been to the Augustus, so it seemed to be the perfect venue to make someone like him feel important and powerful enough to move in my favor.

To my delight, what my PI dug up on his financial situation provided me with some leverage. His family's money was running dry. This sale would put him back in the black. If I hadn't sought out the meeting, I'd be suspicious of how perfect it was.

I stepped off the private elevator and found myself lingering in the hallway, hoping to catch a glimpse of Selena despite trying to distance myself.

She barely spoke to me after that crack about my friends not working for me. I wasn't normally an asshole, at least not on purpose, but I needed to remind myself that she was off limits.

She was too easy to talk to, and I found myself wanting to talk to her more and more.

When I didn't see her, I walked into my office where Preston Scott was waiting for me. He was CFO of Amari Global and a former classmate of mine.

"Moving into gene therapy will be pricy," Preston warned when he heard me enter. He didn't look up. Instead, he paged

through the proposed acquisition documents. The purchase would leverage some of our international holdings; not a terrible loss, but not one I wanted to take. “But the upside is unreal.”

“I’m aware,” I told him. It could also change the world. In addition to being a novel therapy, with the financial backing Amari global had, we could turn it into something that would change millions of lives. Most breakthroughs died in development because they lacked resources, we could provide those resources.

“We move forward regardless.” I added.

He nodded and left, while I focused on getting the acquisition. I was never concerned about financing it.

It wasn’t until my attention was drawn to the sound of laughter that I realized he hadn’t gone far.

Every muscle in my body froze when I realized whose laugh it was.

Selena’s.

What she said on her first day here played on loop in my head.

“You need a perfect year... and I need a way out.”

I didn’t know what exactly she meant by that, but she clearly didn’t want to stick around.

Stunning. Intelligent. Temporary. It would have been the perfect setup if she wasn’t my employee. And harbor a general disgust toward me.

Another one of her soft, airy laughs floated into my office.

My door was only open a crack, and I couldn’t see anything. A burn spread across my chest and propelled me from my seat. Suddenly, I needed to ask Bridget something.

“Henry?” I faintly heard Bridget’s voice when I got to her desk, my attention on them.

Preston was talking to Selena outside of the executive kitchen. She had a coffee in her hand. Her finger twisted a lock of hair as she spoke to him.

What could she possibly find interesting about him?

All he ever talked about was sailing.

He leaned in and braced his arm against the wall. He wasn't close enough to be inappropriate but close enough that their voices were quiet. Except when he said something that made her laugh.

The flicker of annoyance burst into flames.

He was flirting with her.

The pen I was passing between the fingers of my left hand stopped, and I gripped it tightly. I didn't want some silly fairytale with her, but that didn't fucking mean I needed to see someone else try.

I could barely hear them, but I did catch when Preston began asking her if she was free tonight.

The pen snapped.

I could deal with the fact that I couldn't stop thinking about her and she hated me later. Right now, Preston Scott needed to get lost. Or transferred to the Dubai office. Or killed. In that moment, I didn't care, he just needed to get away from her.

"Scott," I barked, the poorly concealed rage erupting from me. His eyes snapped up to meet mine, and he stood up straighter. Selena jerked back at the boom in my voice. "Do I need to remind you how important this acquisition is?"

Selena, eyes wide with surprise, promptly retreated.

"If you'll excuse me," she squeaked as she passed me.

A breezy wisp of roses and lavender followed her. She smelled like a decadent summer in the South of France.

Preston stood there, mouth agape, speechless. When he didn't move, I barked again. "Did I fucking stutter?"

The confusion never dissipated from his expression, but he followed orders. A couple of silent moments passed before Bridget cleared her throat. She sat down at her desk, folded her hands neatly together, and looked up at me. "What was that?"

I glanced down the hallway to see Selena's door was shut. "What?"

"Henry." Her warning was low, motherly.

Bridget had been my assistant since I started, fresh out of business school. She was well-tenured at the time, and my grandfather wanted me to have someone around who knew the ins and outs of the company. Marcus and I started here at the same time, so she was the one who kept us out of trouble. And covered for us on occasion. Since then, she'd become one of the people I trusted most.

She always had my best interest at heart.

"What was that?" she repeated.

"Nothing," I told her, and myself. I had no idea where that came from.

Forgetting women was usually very easy for me. Selena was different. I was stuck on her, and I couldn't figure out why.

"It didn't look like nothing, and it certainly didn't sound like nothing." Her tone remained diplomatic. "You're playing with fire."

"Won't happen again," I assured her curtly.

She shook her head and slid her palm down the side of her face. "That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what?"

"Just be careful. Cognizant. Fire can be a good thing when used correctly."

I didn't know what the hell that meant, and I didn't have time to care. "Understood."

Bridget huffed an exasperated breath, and I walked back into my office.

CHAPTER 11

Selena



Henry Amari's Billionaire Playboy Past

The quiet was over. Henry had popped back up in the tabloids.

The Daily Review was the one to publish. It wasn't bad, just a compilation of his misdeeds from the past. Nothing new.

The article, detailing each day between January and April of that year, went through all the different women he was spotted with in hotels, private clubs, at parties. There was even a mocking little tally at the bottom of the calendar day for the number of women he'd been seen with.

It didn't matter that it was now late summer and he hadn't done anything remotely salacious since those photos. Perception was reality.

"The good news is they have no ammunition," I said as I dropped the paper on his desk when he let me in. "The bad news is they seem to be interested in you again."

His eyes scanned the article, particularly the graphic of the calendar, and outwardly flinched.

It had been a little weird around the office since he was a complete ass, then I was one, and then he was one again. At least that last one was directed at Preston.

It felt like maybe we were even.

Lauren and I had sat up all night bitching about him, even though she'd never met him. It was the type of unquestioning loyalty I needed at that moment.

"I guess I should be happy?" He motioned for me to sit. "Nothing new."

"It shows that they're desperate for *something*," I assured him. "Most of the other social sections have pivoted their interest to your family life. Nobody is even reading this article. The pictures from the benefit of you with your mom are a hit. We can capitalize on that, maybe a few outings with your parents."

He tensed. Based on his reaction to seeing his mom at the benefit a few weeks ago, I was sure he wouldn't like the idea. After the infusion center visit in Queens, I was beginning to realize how rocky that relationship may actually be.

"Or... maybe I can find a way to steer their interest in you to your sister and Marcus Sutton," I suggested. "They're a PR dream. Gorgeous, in love, and virtually free of scandal."

"No, I don't want the press bothering my little sister." His reply, stern and commanding, was so quick it sounded like a reflex.

"Okay," I said quietly.

"I'll make sure to get a few photos with my parents at the Amari Summer Close party. You think that'll be enough?"

"Yeah. Absolutely."

A silence hung in the room.

"How many more events do I have this week?" he asked.

"None," I answered, and watched as the tightness in his shoulders faded.

"Thanks for setting everything up these past few weeks."

My heart softened at the genuineness in his voice.

I was doing fine until his voice lost its formal coating. When he sounded like this and when he looked at me without his normal restrained indifference, it was hard to stop my mind from wandering.

“Just doing my job, boss,” I reminded myself aloud.

He looked like he was about to say something when there was a knock at the door. Bridget stood in the doorway with a plastic bag containing a few foam containers stacked on top of each other.

“Henry? Sorry for interrupting. A very persistent blond woman came by and insisted I give this to Selena.”

Bridget handed me the bag.

Lauren was *here*. She used to come by my Pearson office all the time, but this place felt like a different world, and I wanted to keep them separate.

“Oh,” I stammered, suddenly nervous. I immediately turned to Henry. “My friend is a chef. She’s interviewing at that fancy Thai place down the street. Sometimes she drops off food. It won’t happen again.”

“You’re allowed to eat,” Henry stated as he looked to Bridget. “Am I that bad?”

She laughed and exited the office.

“I don’t make a habit of—”

“Eating lunch?” he mused.

“Visitors at work.”

He looked back at the screen and typed something. When he finished, he folded his hands in front of the keyboard. “Will you share?”

“What?” I tried to pull together whatever nervous energy just ran rampant through me.

“Your friend is a chef?”

“Yes.”

His eyes watched me like he was playing a game, one he wanted to win.

“And she’s known to drop off food?” he interrogated further.

My mind was blank. “Yes.”

“Logic would dictate that the bag you’re holding is full of food?”

“Yes?” His unrelenting focus bore down on me, forcing every coherent thought from my mind.

“So... will you share?” he repeated with a diplomatic grace. “Don’t make me ask again. It’s bad for my ego.”

“Oh.” I snapped myself out of the fog.

He was being charming, and it needed to stop. I didn’t know how to function when he did that, but maybe sharing my lunch could be some kind of truce. We could stop whatever animosity had taken over the last couple of weeks.

“Sure,” I agreed. Lauren always packed way too much food anyway.

He stood and walked around his desk.

“Excellent.” He leaned over me to take the bag. His breath along my neck mixed with the smell of his cologne and sent goose bumps running down my body.

I sucked in a swath of air and shook off whatever *that* was.

“Careful, it’s spicy,” I warned.

Lauren’s interview was this week, and she’d been brushing up. She made an array of dishes last night, and judging from the number of boxes Henry was laying out on the conference table at the other side of his office, she’d been cooking all morning.

“I’ll be fine, spicy food is in my blood.”

I got up and took a seat across from him.

“Do you make a habit of stealing your employees’ lunch?” I wondered aloud.

He took a beat before answering. “It’s not stealing. When I do it, we call it an acquisition.”

I funneled the fluttering energy from my stomach into fidgeting with my pen. “But it’s not yours to acquire.”

His eyes flicked back up to me and watched me like a lion watching its prey. “Everything is mine to acquire.”

My stomach dropped like I’d just attempted a bungee jump. He looked over some of the containers and opened one.

“Those are Thai chilis,” I warned before he threw one into his mouth.

He finished chewing and showed no signs of duress from the heat. “I know what they are.”

“Sorry, I thought maybe I was dealing with the British half.” I joked, realizing only after I said it that it was probably something a little past the line of professionalism. The same line I kept seeing but skating past.

He grinned a self-satisfied grin. “Looking up my genealogy?”

Henry’s Amari side of the family was originally from India. His grandfather immigrated to the States, while his mother’s side was British nobility. But there was hardly anything I could find on that.

“It’s my job to know,” I reminded him, then pulled my attention to the container in front of me. Anything to look away from him when he was like *this*.

Charming, kind, *normal*.

At some point, we got into a pissing contest over who could eat more spicy food.

His suit jacket lay on the chair next to him, and he’d loosened his tie to meet my challenge of eating the extra peppers Lauren packed.

The lunch was long gone, and the late afternoon sun soaked the room in a warm glow. We'd been at the conference table talking for hours.

His cuffs were undone, sleeves rolled up, and he leaned his elbows on the table. The sly smile I'd seen at the bar reemerged. "Your turn, Miss Montez."

He was winning.

"Dammit," I cursed. My entire face was on fire, and not just because of the three Thai chilis I ate after being baited. "I was betting on the British half again."

That was the moment I heard it for the first time.

A real laugh.

Not one glazed in some icy detachment. Not his work voice. One that was real.

It was deep and decadent. It rolled over me slowly, leaving tingles in its wake.

"I should get back to work," I said with a hard swallow, knowing I needed to snap out of it.

He glanced out the window, then looked at his watch.

"Right." His brows furrowed and he looked at his phone. He raked a hand through his hair and stood. "Sorry I kept you in here so long. Feel free to pick it up tomorrow, I'm sure you probably have plans."

I did. A night of popcorn and wine on the couch with Lauren.

He's telling you to go.

But his gaze lingered on me, telling me to stay.

"No, actually, it's fine," I began, my eyes drifting to the last few unopened containers of Thai chilis on the table. "Besides, I think I deserve a rematch."

"Oh?" His eyebrows raised, and a smile climbed up his cheek. He rounded the table and took his seat again, this time

next to me. “You’re on.”

“I’m not going to let you win this time.” I swiveled in the chair to face him.

He chuckled, and another round of delightful chills sailed up my spine.

“How about we raise the stakes?” he suggested.

“Loser buys lunch?” I contended. Although, it didn’t seem fair. He was one of the richest men in the world.

He nodded and took the container filled with peppers from my hand.

“No water or drinks of any kind,” I said, reminding him of the rules we’d set earlier.

“First one to tap out loses.” He grinned and threw a chili in his mouth, his eyes never leaving mine.

I did the same.

I watched, nearly mesmerized, as each chili had its effect on him. His throat flexed as he turned the tie even looser with his finger.

It was about ten minutes before what I expected to happen, happened.

“You win.” Henry put his hands up and winced. Taking a second to down a bottle of water, he looked at me, confused. “How are you completely unfazed?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” I announced confidently, despite the excited trembles that spread to every muscle in my body.

I tilted my container for him to see. He had the Thai chilis, I had the sweet peppers. They were cut up, so they looked somewhat similar.

“Mine aren’t spicy.”

His brows lifted. A boyish excitement passed through his features, like he’d just discovered something. He leaned

forward, his hands braced on my arm rests, and his eyes searched mine, intrigued.

“You’re a cheater.”

My skin was suddenly flushed, even though I wasn’t the one eating the chilis. “I think you mean winner.”

“This doesn’t count,” he reprimanded playfully. “You cheated.”

I felt myself lean forward, and my heart beat erratically in my chest. “When I do it, we call it creative problem-solving.”

“Is that so?” The playfulness faded, and the look in his eye concentrated into something different.

His breath swept across my face as he moved in closer.

Electricity sparked around us. His hands gripped my armrests and pulled my chair forward. As his lips brushed over mine, his scent filled my lungs. Awash with masculine layers of cedar, musk, and spice.

A loud scuttle against the wooden conference table broke the spell.

With a sharp inhale, my head turned to the sound. The charged air dissipated

A text from Lauren lit up my screen. I shook my head clear of the clouds. “I...”

LAUREN

When are you coming home?

The text chased away the fantasy I was allowing myself to fall into.

“I should go,” I said firmly as I pushed myself back.

“I should...” Henry began shaking off the lingering effects of the trance we were both in. He stood and dragged a hand through his hair.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said quickly, and stood to gather my things, not daring to look back up at him.

“Have a nice night.” Henry’s voice stiffened, retreating to the serious tone of a well-mannered, high-society CEO.

He walked to his desk, and I made my way out of his office.

ME

I’ll be back soon

CHAPTER 12

Henry



The heavy echo of the speed bag slamming against its scaffolding in rapid succession filled the boxing gym. It was five thirty in the morning, so I was alone.

The Augustus was well-suited for any athletic endeavor. In addition to all the social spaces, the athletic wing was where I spent most of my free time the last few months.

Particularly the boxing gym, a habit ever since college.

Originally, I loved rugby, until I was injured. After that, I took up a more society-approved hobby—tennis. I lost interest pretty quickly but found boxing to be the perfect replacement.

I continued at my unrelenting pace, trying and failing to think of anything other than the sentence I couldn't help but replay in my mind, the endless loop of Selena's melodic voice pulling when she said:

"You need a perfect year... and I need a way out."

I was always taught to question everything and everyone that came into my life. That lesson seemed to be particularly bothersome now that I was constantly asking myself why she needed to leave.

Why do you care?

Because I couldn't stop thinking about her. I'd wanted to kiss her yesterday, and it wasn't the first time I felt that way. I knew I needed to push her away, but all I could do was think of the ways I could keep her close.

I was shaken back to reality when my fist missed the speed bag and instead hit the walnut backing with a loud, painful thud.

I hissed and pulled my fist back.

I needed to focus.

She worked for me, and the line was unmistakably clear. There was too much riding on this year.

“Henry,” a voice called from behind me.

I turned to see Marcus grab a pair of gloves and make his way to the ring. He nodded his head to join me.

Marcus probably spotted me while running the expansive track. Before he left, we used to come here in the mornings to run sprints or spar. Marcus was the only sparring partner I had who could keep up and didn't go easy on me because of who I was.

“Come on,” he ordered lightly as he wrapped his hands and went to his corner of the ring.

“Fine.” I huffed and walked over to meet him, grabbing my gloves on the way.

While I was still fully committed to holding on to my grudge against him for leaving, I needed to get out of my head. Hitting Marcus felt like a good way to do that.

“I'm a little out of practice,” Marcus explained. We both knew the real reason. He was trying, again, to get our friendship back to what it was before he left.

“That's because you prefer running from your problems.”

He didn't say anything; baiting Marcus into an argument was a fool's errand. We took our corners, and Marcus waited with psychopathic forbearance for me to go on offense.

He rarely, if ever, made the opening move.

He was patient.

I wasn't.

But I used it to my advantage. My opening jabs didn't land. Quick footwork ran in the Sutton family. The cross after made contact. He stumbled back.

"You never check your blind spots," I chastised, squaring up. His gray eyes narrowed on me.

He shifted to offense at a blistering pace, missing only one shot before he landed a hard punch in my abdomen.

I paused a moment, shuffled, and shook it off.

"Square up, Amari," he barked, and then shuffled back.

I evaded his next jab by a hair.

"Did I strike a nerve?" I goaded on.

"How's work?" he countered. That was his way of striking one of mine.

But not for the reason he thought.

She filled my mind again.

Selena Montez seemed to be an anomaly. Brutally honest, in a career that hinged on deception. Complete access to a gilded world but desired nothing more than an exit.

Behind an often guarded exterior, she was sweet. She didn't let me see it much though.

But she had last night.

After a full week where we barely spoke, it was nice to hear the hypnotic tune of her voice.

The swift crack through my lower ribs brought my mind back to ring. I stumbled back and fell against the ropes.

I was distracted. Again. And this time, it meant all the wind got knocked out of my lungs.

I winced in pain.

"Something wrong?" Marcus pulled his glove off and reached out to help me up. "It's never been that easy to land a punch."

“I’m fine,” I coughed, waving off his hand. I glanced up at the clock. “I should get to work.”

If Marcus was crestfallen, which I suspected he was, he didn’t show it. He never did. I got up slowly and made my way out of the ring.

“Henry,” Marcus called with an exasperated sigh.

Guilt clawed its way around my chest. He was trying to help. Be there. Make amends.

So, I turned around and said, “Why don’t you and Sloan come by Amari Manor before the Summer Close party?”

Xander wasn’t getting to my Hamptons home until just before the party. But Sloan and Marcus were going to be in town early for something, so it would be just the three of us.

When we were around Xander, things were relatively the same as they’d always been. But when it was the three of us, it was *different*. Xander seemed to melt into the new dynamic with ease, which was surprising since he was never good with change.

I could at least *try* to let go of some of my resentment.

“We can have lunch,” I went on.

Marcus nodded with a short smile on his face. “We’ll be there.”

As I made my way to the garage, Selena’s voice in my head followed. Nothing I did could silence it.

The most frustrating part about all of this was I was beginning to enjoy her company. There were times it felt like we were...

I flinched at how pathetic the thought was. We were nothing.

After every article she’d rifled through, I could only imagine what she thought of me. It couldn’t possibly be good.

She wanted an out, and I supposed I was the avenue for it. It made sense.

“... and I need an out.”

She was here to do a job, and that it was it. Frankly, if she wanted anything more, I'd be suspicious.

CHAPTER 13

Selena



I brought my camera along to the Hamptons to get some pictures.

After I'd settled my things in the hotel room, I put on a pair of denim shorts and a plain gray tank top and headed to the beach. The stretch of white sand behind the hotel was packed for Labor Day Weekend, but I walked along the shore for a while and found a relatively secluded area.

I strolled along the surf, occasionally stopping to take some pictures.

After I almost kissed Henry in his office, I desperately needed a reset. I was having a hard time reconciling the Henry from the papers with the one I saw every day. The more I tried to, the more I was drawn in. The more questions I had. The more I realized the answers to those questions would probably pull me in deeper.

I pushed my hair back from my face and looked down at my camera at the shots of the water. I could lose myself in the tide's sanguine push and pull. The tumbling waves crashing over one another. Each rinsing the shore with seafoam.

I looked back up and realized how far I'd gone. I'd been so lost in what I was doing, I ended up all the way in East Hampton.

"Selena?" His voice sent a delightful shudder down my body. I turned to see Henry, and a shot of heat followed, finding residence in my cheeks and *deep* in my belly.

He was walking over to me, shirtless. Water dripped from his hair as he ran a hand through it. My mind would have registered that he was coming back from a swim if it wasn't too busy thinking about other things.

I heaved an exhale.

"Why are you...?" My voice became tight and agitated. My gaze was unable to stop itself from tracking a droplet of water as it trickled slowly down his neck to the marble slab of his abs and the beginning of that V cut that led to what I now knew was an impressive endowment. Even completely unaroused and in the cool beach air in a pair of swim shorts. "Wet?"

Look up. I caught myself before he could notice I was gawking.

"Water tends to do that." He chuckled lightly.

"You don't have a pool?" I spat, annoyed for no apparent reason. He shouldn't be allowed to just walk around the beach looking like *that*.

"I prefer the ocean." His eyes followed mine. "You moonlight as paparazzi?"

He pointed to my camera and ignored the stroke I was in the middle of having.

"That would be a twist." I swallowed painfully against a dry throat. My feet shifted uncomfortably in the sand. "No, it's a hobby. Usually pictures of the city or landscapes. Sometimes people."

My eyes roved his naked torso, again, as if a magnetic field were pulling them. After weeks of wondering what was under that button-up, I knew. And I would never get a restful night's sleep again.

Look up!

"Anyone interesting?" he asked, and the corners of his mouth tried their best to suppress a smile.

He gave me the kindness of turning his attention to the horizon at the setting sun. If my cheeks could get any warmer with embarrassment, they would, now that he knew that I liked what was in front of me.

“I let the paparazzi photograph the interesting people.”

He nodded. “Where are you staying?”

“The Reform Club in Amagansett,” I answered, and turned back for a moment in the direction of the hotel.

His brows lifted, and he looked past me. “That’s almost ten miles away. You walked?”

“Oh. I guess I got caught up.”

“Come on”—he tipped his head in the direction of the houses right off the beach—“I’ll drive you back.”

He turned and began walking. I tried to follow, but my legs wouldn’t move. Instead, I watched the divots form and disappear in his back as the muscles shifted beneath.

“Not a negotiation, Miss Montez.” His voice shook my thoughts. He walked up the beach toward one of the massive homes that lined the shore. I trailed a few steps behind him until I finally caught up and realized where we were going.

A house in Lily Pond. I don’t know why I didn’t put that together. It was the most exclusive part of the Hamptons to live in, and most of the homes topped a hundred million to buy. His real estate holdings weren’t of any consequence to me or my work. But it served as a reminder of the massive rift between our two worlds.

We walked up the porch that overlooked the beach in relative silence until we came up to his house. It was palatial. Classical architecture with massive French doors and mahogany windows, it could easily house fifty.

And it was his summer house.

“Oh. Just a little seaside cottage,” I said nonchalantly as we walked past the terrace and I saw the pool and guest house.

He laughed, and it felt like a blanket in the evening air.

“Amari Manor... it’ll do.” He shrugged, and his voice overflowed with a playfulness I’d never heard from him before.

I wondered how rich you had to be before one of your many global homes got the moniker of “manor.”

He opened the French doors that lead into the expansive Great room. The same quiet voice in my head told me to run. It was silenced when he looked back at me.

“I’ll just take a quick shower, and I can drive you back,” he said as he disappeared down a hallway.

I nodded and found myself engrossed in the stunning artwork that adorned the walls. The high ceilings and windows offered panoramic views of the ocean, and the bursts of pink and purple from the sunset soaked the room in color. I could get lost here.

Not too long after, I heard his steps and flicked a glance over my shoulder. He was in a T-shirt and joggers. Casual. His hair was damp.

“It’s quiet,” I noted.

“I didn’t want to call the entire staff in for a night. They’ll be here in the morning for the party.” Henry looked around. “I’m not always a spoiled brat.”

“Someone is *not* letting that go.” I laughed lightly.

A silence wrapped around us, and the soft sounds of our breaths echoed in the massive space.

He glanced over to me and grinned. “So, any good shots of the water?”

“Huh?”

“The beach?” His chin notched forward to my camera again.

I shrugged. “Well, they’re not like the beaches back home.”

“And that is?” He turned and walked down the hallway, his hand motioning me to follow.

“L.A.,” I answered, following behind him. We stopped in the massive chef’s kitchen, and something smelled amazing. Henry opened the fridge and handed me a bottle of water. He tucked his tongue in his cheek, the corners of his mouth tipped up.

Flutters. Everywhere.

“What?” I asked when he remained silent.

“Nothing.”

“No, what?”

“Nothing, you just seem very New York.” He paused. “I mean...”

“Oh, please elaborate.” I crossed my arms.

“It’s ...” His smile faltered. He laughed again, rubbing the back of his neck. Was he nervous? “You know what, forget it.”

“Well, get your story straight by July. I’m moving back, and I *will* take offense then,” I teased.

He paused again, and his eyes fell around the floor. A silence wisped around the pristine kitchen, and the scent of spices caught my attention again. The large gas range had a couple of pots on it. He could cook?

Get out, now.

“Hungry?” Henry saw me staring at the food. He grabbed a plate from the cabinet next to the range.

I did walk nearly ten miles. “You cook?”

“A little, and not well. Consider that your fair warning,” he answered, handing me a plate and uncovering one of the pots. “My grandmother taught me and my sister. I can make a few things.”

“Mmmm.” I inhaled the scent of allspice and chili that filled the air. It was potatoes and lentils, something an old roommate of mine in college used to make. “Was she concerned that ‘handsome billionaire’ wasn’t enough to get a date?”

His head turned slightly toward me with one eyebrow lifted. “You think I’m handsome, Miss Montez?”

The way he called me that. I heaved another breath.

“That’s what you chose to hear?”

“I think it was her way to make sure we didn’t forget her and where she came from.” He had a faraway look. “In the midst of all of this.”

He looked sweet when he talked about her.

“My abuela was like that too,” I said. The mention of his grandmother brought up vivid memories of my abuela making food for me as a kid. She passed when I was still in grade school, shrinking my already small family. “I think she was scared I would forget.”

“Same.” Henry looked straight ahead at the countertop. “She raised me and Sloan, until boarding school, that is.”

A pang resonated in my chest. I couldn’t imagine being torn from my whole life so young. Boarding school was expected for a lot of kids in society, but he went to Swiss boarding school, which probably meant he didn’t visit home often.

“That must’ve been hard,” I found myself saying before running it through my head first.

A family like his had considerable power. Swiss boarding school catered to those kids, ones that would benefit from having connections to world leaders. Seemed like a lot to subject a child to. All alone. A ten-hour flight and an ocean away. Judging by the tension that lined his jaw, he wasn’t a fan of it.

“She and Sloan would visit all the time,” he said in a detached tone. “They’d bring parathas. They were my favorite growing up.”

I smiled. We settled along the kitchen island, sitting beside each other, eating and talking about our grandmothers.

He looked different. He *was* different. Not just the casual T-shirt draped over the body that was sure to make a reappearance in my dreams tonight. He seemed relaxed. This Henry was sweet and endearing.

Regular.

Despite the hundred-million-dollar beach house I sat in, when we talked about our families, I felt like I could relate to him.

He wasn’t nearly as closed off as he liked to pretend he was. It almost seemed like he was waiting to talk to someone. It made me wonder how many people in his life *actually* listened to him. Not catered to him because of his name, but listened.

It made me feel lucky. My family was tiny and came from humble beginnings, but I was always heard.

“What about your grandfather?” I asked, taking another bite from my bowl.

His body tightened as if bracing for impact.

“Sorry I...” I trailed off and focused instead on the food in front of me. The heat from the chili, the warm tingle from the garam masala. It wasn’t fair play that he could cook too. “Never mind.”

Rishi Amari was a legend. Everyone knew something about him, how he left India during the partition with next to nothing. Built one of the most powerful companies in the world with very little.

To the public, he was an inspirational story of overcoming overwhelming odds. Based on Henry’s reaction, the legend was probably romanticized a bit.

“Not much to tell,” he said dryly, averting his gaze.

I awkwardly scraped the bottom of the bowl with my spoon.

He looked around the kitchen like he was trying to find a way to keep himself busy. He got up, grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge, and poured a couple of glasses. I didn't say anything, unsure of what to add, and he finally spoke again.

“He built it, I'm the legacy,” he answered as he handed me a glass.

The word “legacy” was so densely packed it nearly burst. I wanted to know more, but those three syllables did more to silence Henry than any news story I'd ever presented to him.

A tense quiet strangled the room, and I took a few large sips of wine. My attention went squarely to the bottle in front of me. It was amazing. I wasn't usually a fan of Riesling. I tried to remember the name and vintage for later.

“It's from Alsace,” Henry said when he noticed my attention on the label. He got up to clear our plates.

“Oh. They teach you about wine in etiquette too?” I stood and leaned against the countertop. I took another sip of the sumptuous Riesling.

“Believe it or not...” He leaned next to me, taking a drink as well. “I learned it in boarding school.”

“They gave kids wine?” I playfully smacked his shoulder. “L.A. public schools have a lot of catching up to do.”

His chest shook with a chuckle, and his entire face lightened. “No. They taught us about it.”

“Do all these interesting facts score you points with the models?” I turned to face him.

He paused. Indecision passed over his face before he answered. “They're playing a different game. Those points don't work there.”

He didn't make any sense. When I started, I expected him to be a pain in the ass. Someone who would need me to clean up leaked pictures of him doing debaucherous things.

Nope. He kept to himself and didn't do anything that would get him any attention, just like he'd promised.

"Why not date? *Actually* date," I asked out loud instead of in my head.

His morality clause with the board was more about night after night of different models and wild parties. An actual relationship with someone was completely fine. He had to be a little lonely, right? His years-long string of one-night stands were a cry for help more than anything else.

"Why watch a movie when you already know how it ends?"

"Could still be interesting," I suggested. "Maybe expand your viewing library past runway models and ballerinas."

"Ouch." He grimaced and looked down. Then, he looked back at me. "Was that judgement?"

"No."

Maybe a little. The pictures I sorted through in preparing for this job began to bother me more and more these days. The closer I got to Henry, the more they bristled an annoyance through me.

"All right, well, this means I get to pass judgment on the people you date." His smile radiated an arrogance that made my entire body fizz.

"That hardly seems fair." I felt the need to fidget, so I refilled my glass and his, knowing I probably shouldn't have.

"Why?" He drew a little closer. "Someone needs to ensure those clowns conduct themselves appropriately."

I swallowed a gulp of wine, hoping to sedate the butterflies in my stomach. "And how's that?"

"Like gentlemen." He turned to face me completely.

“Maybe I don’t want a gentleman.” Maybe I did. Maybe I *really* wanted one in particular.

“No?” he challenged quietly, stepping closer. He gripped either side of the counter, enclosing me between his arms.

I shook my head. The wine didn’t work to sedate *anything*.

My heart raced. My body warmed.

“Why’s that?” he whispered. The look in his eye, the one from his office. It was back.

His hand moved from the marble countertop to my hip. His thumb lightly dragged up and down along the exposed skin between my tank top and my shorts.

A light shudder ran up my body.

My stomach dipped and bowed with each languid stroke.

“It’s...” My mind became foggy when his thumb stopped just above the waistband of my shorts. After a momentary pause, it dipped below, only to retreat a second later.

I gasped quietly.

“Proper is off-putting?” His murmur brushed along my cheek.

My nipples hardened against the thin fabric of my bra.

“I...” I wanted him to keep going. For his hand to soothe the dull ache that had begun to spread between my thighs.

“A man who opens the door for you.” He leaned in, his lips just barely grazing mine. “Treats you like a lady in public.”

I shook my head again, slower this time. Hesitant.

“Does unspeakable things to you in private.” His warm breath fanned along my neck when he whispered it in my ear.

Shivers swept across my skin.

“That’s not what...” I had no idea where I was going with that. My entire mind was fixed on the heat radiating off his

body.

He let out a deep exhale along the hollow of my neck.

The airy kitchen became stifling, filled with a humid tension.

Heavy. Warm. Suffocating.

“It’s getting late,” I whispered so quietly I hardly heard it.

I put my hand on his chest, originally to push him back, but it rested there, unsure, feeling it rise and fall.

“You’re welcome to stay.” His lips brushed against a spot just below my ear.

The entire world blurred.

“I…” I couldn’t think straight, not when the pulse between my legs became an inescapable throb.

He pulled away, and his heavily lidded eyes searched mine again. “What are you doing to me, Selena?”

Before I could answer, his mouth covered mine. I hesitated for a moment. His tongue skimmed my lower lip, then he impatiently bit it gently. He used my gasp as entry.

My senses became overwhelmed with his taste, his scent, the way his tongue felt as it glided against mine, begging to spar.

I gave in.

He gripped the back of my neck and released a tortured groan. His body molded against mine. It was just as deliciously rigid as I thought it would be.

A voice in my head warned me to stop, but his grunt against my lips silenced it.

My fingers tangled in his hair, keeping him close, enjoying the addicting taste of saltwater mixed with scandal.

Without breaking the kiss, Henry hooked his arms around my thighs and lifted me onto the countertop, so swiftly I was sure I was weightless.

Rough, controlled, reckless all at the same time.

My legs swung around his hips and pulled him in closer. His thick arousal grinded against my core, sending firecrackers up my spine.

None of this is real. The voice was louder this time.

My brain finally caught up with my body, and I pushed him back. Henry looked dazed and annoyed. My eyes fell to the floor and stayed there. If I looked at him, I would give in.

I released a shuddered breath. My hand trembled against his chest as I push him away, farther this time, despite every cell in my body begging for more.

“Goodnight.” I hopped off the counter and went down the first hallway I found. I didn’t know where I was going, but I had to get out of there.

I found a guestroom and locked the door. Henry hadn’t actually given me one to stay in or asked me to stay, but I knew one thing. I could not go back out there.

If I did, I knew I’d be waking up next to him.

Attraction was one thing, but feelings were unacceptable. I couldn’t get close to someone like him.

Not again.

I knew what I’d be. Yet another mistake in Henry Amari’s past.

I should have called a car and gotten the hell out of there. My body wanted things my mind was in no condition to sign off on. Hazy from a few glasses of wine and an overwhelming ache to feel him against me, I tried to steady my unruly pulse.

I tucked myself into the bed and prepared myself for another night with him in my head. Until the desire to have him anywhere else went away, I’d have to fake it.

There was a world that separated us. I had to stop ignoring that fact and focus on the job ahead. It was my way out.

CHAPTER 14

Henry



Shit.

I kissed Selena. If she hadn't stopped me, I'd have fucked her right there on the kitchen counter.

Shit.

Sunlight flooded the dining room as I sat and turned the coffee mug in front of me. She'd been avoiding me all morning. I could occasionally hear movement, but I didn't go looking for her. The Hamptons house was enormous, and anyone could easily hide.

The memory of her soft moans kept me up all night. That and the realization that if this got out, my life as CEO just got a lot more complicated.

I buried my face in my hands. "Shit."

"It won't get out." Selena's voice had a mysterious power over me. Despite the mess I found myself in, the soothing sound cooled my nerves. I looked up to where she stood in front of the large dining table with a coffee cup in her hand. The sunrays bounced off the elegant curve of her cheekbones. Her hair was slightly tousled. She was stunning. She had on the clothes she wore yesterday.

"I'm sorry. If you want to resign—" I paused. A sharp pain sliced across my chest at the thought of not seeing her again.

"It won't get out," she repeated, and then sat at the dining table a few seats away from me. The detachment in her voice

bothered me. She practically drooled when she saw me on the beach. I felt her react to me when I kissed her. I heard her moan. I wasn't the only one who enjoyed it. "We were the only ones here, and it was obviously a mistake."

She was right. I knew that. But why did it feel like the actual mistake was stopping?

"Yeah." I looked down at my cup. She knew every detail of my past, and for some reason, I didn't want her to think last night was *anything* like the litany of stories she'd read about me. That kiss was different. "Selena, I don't do—"

"It doesn't matter, and it didn't happen."

"Right."

We drank our coffees in silence, then I drove Selena back to her hotel to get ready. She'd be coming back here later since the Annual Summer Close party was always held at Amari Manor.

Knowing she'd be back seemed to soothe the twinge in my chest.

I had to be careful; the attraction was a rip current. I'd be pulled under before I knew what was happening, aimlessly swimming against an overwhelming tide, delaying the inevitable conclusion. That I'd get pulled too deep.



"Henry?" Sloan's voice echoed through the entrance of the house.

I walked down the steps to see Sloan and Marcus walking into the marble foyer, his arm draped over her shoulder. After I dropped Selena off, I went for a swim to clear my head. By the time I got back, the house staff and party organizers had arrived and began setting up for the party later in the afternoon.

“What are you doing here?” I asked as I descended the staircase.

“We were invited,” Marcus reminded me.

Right.

I was distracted, yet again, by everything happening and not happening with Selena.

“Are you staying at Xander’s?” I asked, nodding in the direction of the south terrace where the staff were probably setting up lunch. I’d inherited the Hamptons house, and Sloan usually stayed with Xander, in Southampton, whenever she came out here.

“Actually.” They exchanged glances, and Sloan beamed. “We just bought the house next door, that’s why we came in early. We closed this morning.”

Of fucking course they did. Sloan had loved the house next door since she was a kid. There was never any reason for the family to buy it, though, since we had a massive home five hundred feet away.

“You two are nauseating,” I grumbled.

She grinned. “One day when there are kids running around, it’ll be nice to come out here for the summer.”

“And they’d be next door to their *cousins*,” Marcus added facetiously.

Kids were fine, I guess. I had no plans to ever have any.

I ran that back. They’d moved in together, bought a beach house, and now they were talking about— “Wait. Are you?” I looked at Sloan.

“No!” Sloan, for the first time in this entire overly affectionate conversation, became red. “I’m just saying. There’s no harm in looking forward to the future, Hen.”

It was nice to see my sister happy, but my future was CEO, and that was all I was prepared to think about. I had no interest

in the trophy family—which was the closest I'd get to something real.

Sloan and Marcus's fairytale ending wasn't one that awaited me. My parents sent me to boarding school as an eight-year-old rather than raise me. My grandfather saw me as a legacy, never a person. Every woman I'd ever met was only interested in one thing when they learned who I was.

With very few exceptions, when given the choice between Henry or the heir, everyone chose the heir.

I accepted a long time ago that I would spend my life surrounded by people but completely alone. It was probably better that way.



Selena and I spent a wordless twenty minutes next to each other at a high-top on the terrace overlooking the beach at the party. The Summer Close party always took place on the south terrace of Amari Manor, next to the pool. Lanterns and hanging lights were hung from the house and all the way to the beach for when the sun set.

I'd just spent a tortuous hour with Morgan Parker, a board member who voted in favor of the morality clause, regurgitating all the facts about birds Selena wrote down for me. She did some legwork to find out he was an avid bird-watcher, and I pretended to care when he told me about all the places he went bird-watching.

My eyes kept wandering to Selena and whoever she was talking to throughout the afternoon, lingering on the way the ocean breeze swept across the blue linen dress she wore, outlining the tempting curve of her hips.

She'd kept a low profile, mostly working discreetly on her phone.

Another minute passed, and the awkwardness mounted.

“Look.” She turned squarely to me and looked around to make sure nobody was near. “Clearly, *that* can’t happen again. But we work together, and you’re... okay.”

“Okay?” Now wasn’t the time to tease, but *okay*? I could take her back to the house and call her bluff.

Her lethal glare shut me up.

“If we weren’t working together and you weren’t—” She motioned her arms in front of her in no real pattern. She was so fucking cute.

Pay attention.

She went on. “Maybe, we could be friends. We *can* be friends. Work friends.”

I nodded.

Another awkward silence filled the space between us. The sound of the party mixed with the sounds of the crashing waves.

“Not that you *have* work friends,” Selena teased. A smile crept along her supple lips.

“Someone’s not letting *that* go.” I nudged her shoulder gently with mine. She looked up at me, and the colors of the sunset glimmered in her irises. I could drown in them. My voice dropped lower. “I’m sorry.”

The intrigued gleam in her eye vanished, replaced with the look I saw last night. Right before I kissed her.

A familiar desire wisped between us.

She cleared her throat and took a step back. “We can’t be all weird in front of half of your board. Then it’ll really look like we’re—”

I stood up straighter. “Right.”

“So let’s just forget all about it. I was taking pictures on the beach, you said hello, that’s it.”

I nodded.

“Talking about migration patterns with a weird birder was not how I planned to spend this evening,” I told her.

I had to keep her talking. I missed the sound. Hearing her voice so serious made me want to hear the soft sweetness of her giggle.

“He loves golf,” she noted casually, and looked down at the beach. Almost like she wanted to hide the full-blown smile from me. She turned back to me, mischief painted on her flawless face. “But there’s no way you know *anything* about that. I figured birds were the safest option.”

The tightness that had strangled my chest all day finally loosened. She trapped me in a mind-numbing discussion about birds as part of our bizarre sparring match?

I liked this side of her. She kept me on my toes.

“I hope you know this means war,” I warned.

“I’m not scared of you.” She lifted her chin and granted me a defiant grin. “Don’t push me, or I’ll convince him the next company retreat should be a birding trip.”

“If you think I wouldn’t drag you along, you’re out of your mind.”

She shook her head. “Lucifer.”

“Better the devil you know.”

Starting tomorrow, I would get my head back to where it needed to be. Verge was my priority. That and keeping Selena at an appropriate distance.

CHAPTER 15

Selena



Henry picked me up at the hotel the next morning. No point in either of us going back to the city alone. At least that's what I told myself. Hours in a car with him was a practical decision.

There was no way we could have sex in the middle of traffic.

It was the second time I rode in his Aston Martin. The rich interior smelled of expensive leather and his cologne. I settled in for what I thought might be a long ride since it was the last weekend of summer, but after about ten minutes, we were nowhere near the Long Island Expressway.

We were at a private airport hangar.

“Where are we going?”

The car slowed to a stop. His biceps flexed against the hem of his T-shirt sleeve when he downshifted and parked.

“Home,” he said, grabbing his phone and the laptop behind his seat. My hand moved to the door when his sharp tone stopped me. “Stop.”

The gruff command sent a tingle through my body.

“What?” I lifted my hand off the car door handle.

He got out and rounded the front of the Aston Martin to the passenger side. His lips formed a straight, frustrated line as he opened the door for me.

“Seriously?” I asked. He hadn’t said more than five words to me all day, but the gentleman setting was still switched on like it was hardwired. I got out of the car, and my hand remained on the door to close it, but his tight grip on it stopped me.

I registered his courteous, forced smile and lifted my hand.

“What can I say? The nannies raised me right,” he explained, shutting the door behind me.

“What did the nannies say about all the one-night stands?” I countered, trying to remind myself of all the reasons the attraction needed to stop. His reaction was hidden behind his aviators, but his muscles tightened, and I immediately regretted it. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he grumbled.

I looked around. What the hell was going on? Why were we here?

Turning to walk to the jet, he pulled out his phone, began typing, and called out to me. “If we drive, it’ll take hours.”

“We’re flying?” I stammered.

“The helicopter is too loud to work on.”

“Of course,” I said sarcastically to myself. “Because a helicopter would be impractical. The obvious choice was a jet.”

Rich people are insane.

Whatever I felt last night, today was the opposite. Last night was fun. We enjoyed each other’s company. I liked spending time with him, and I thought maybe we’d fall into something closer to friendship now that we’d put the kiss behind us.

“Keep up,” he barked.

Guess not.

I struggled to match his breakneck pace. He was at least six-three, and his strides were long as it was. I was only five-seven. Add in the fact that he was practically running from me, I was out of breath when we got to the stairs.

“What about the car?” I asked between breaths. Wrong day to wear heels.

“It’ll be driven back.”

I followed him onboard and took the plush seat across from him. He immediately opened his laptop and began working.

“Have you ever flown on a regular plane?” I wondered. The family had three jets, that much I knew. But it dawned on me that he grew up one of the richest kids in the world, and had probably never been inside an actual airport.

“As opposed to the magical one we’re on?” he asked dryly as he glanced up.

I gave him an unamused look that didn’t seem to faze him. “I meant a commercial flight.”

His upper lip curled ever so slightly. “I’ve never had the... pleasure.”

With that, I decided to stop asking questions that would only get wildly out-of-touch answers.

We were in the air for a few minutes when the hostess practically sat on Henry’s lap and asked if he needed anything.

Okay, she stroked his shoulder. But it was highly inappropriate for the workplace.

“I’m fine.” Henry didn’t look up at her, but he did shrug his shoulder out from under her hand.

“If that changes, I’m here for *anything* you may need.” Her voice lowered. “*Anything...*”

“It’s a thirty-minute flight, he’ll be fine,” I interrupted, surprising all three of us. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

My entire face heated, and my heartbeat drummed loudly in my ears. Henry's tongue rolled from one cheek to the other, then he looked up at me with a short smirk.

"Selena, *darling*, do you need anything?" His tone was as sweet and manufactured as a Diet Coke. I could have burst out laughing if I wasn't enjoying the little skit.

"No, *dearest*." I regained some composure and scrunched my nose to play along. "I'm okay."

Henry turned to look at the hostess. "She's okay too. Thank you for asking,"

She got the message. He didn't say anything, and his attention returned to his laptop. I wanted to let my mind go wild thinking about all the reasons he did that, but I sat quietly and looked at the photos I took over the past two days.

In my periphery, I saw him look at me and open his mouth. But he would close it and go back to his work each time. The charming gentleman warred with the serious CEO, and the serious version of Henry always won.

"Does that happen a lot?" I asked.

The corner of his mouth twitched. He didn't look up.

"Yeah," he said curtly. "Who wouldn't want the chance to hitch their wagon to all of this?"

He motioned around the jet.

An ache filled my chest. There was a sadness that hung over him. It crept out at the worst times, particularly when I was trying not to find him endearing.

"Lots of people," I assured him. "Plenty of people see this and run in the opposite direction."

I meant it to be encouraging, to remind him that there were probably lots of people in his life who didn't care about all the adornments that came along with Henry Amari. Unfortunately, it sounded harsh but served as a reminder that I was one of those people. A reminder I needed.

“Understood,” he said after a long silence.

The low hum of his personal phone tapping against the woodgrain pulled us from the tense conversation. Henry looked at it and sighed. Instead of putting his laptop away and picking up the call, he put it on speaker and continued to work.

“Sloan,” he answered. “You’re on speaker.”

“Henry,” she mimicked. It felt odd to be listening in on his call. “How was the rest of the party? Sorry we had to leave early.”

“Great, did you know that blue jays don’t migrate to the south in the winter? Because I do.” He sounded annoyed, but his smile to me said otherwise.

“I’m not going to pretend to understand what any of that meant. Are you coming to brunch?”

“We land in twenty minutes.”

“We?” Sloan asked.

“Selena’s flying in with me,” he noted with a casualness that made my stomach hurt. Not nervous or guilty. He said it like nothing happened.

“Selena, please join us.” Sloan’s voice was inviting as always. I had trouble imagining the viper Henry described. “You can meet the whole motley crew.”

“We’ll be there,” Henry answered, and the phone clicked. After a prolonged silence, he looked up from his laptop at me. “Don’t feel like you have to. Sloan can be a little forceful with invitations. It’s way outside of your job description.”

So was sleeping with my boss, but I’d considered that more times than I should’ve. He didn’t want me there. Obviously. He had real friends and a real life. One I did not fit into.

I did want to get an idea of his social life though. His social circle was the interest of the press to begin with. After a

few moments, I realized I was having a conversation in my head, with myself.

Say something casual. Cool and casual.

“Indeed?” I asked. Apparently, my stroke from the beach had returned. Maybe I needed the neurologist.

Nailed it. You didn't even answer the question.

He chuckled to himself. “Certainly,” he mocked.

“Surely.”

“Truly.”

I tried to keep a straight face and overcome the shock of the Jekyll/Hyde switch he just did. His lightness made my head spin and go completely blank as I searched for synonyms.

He held his stare, baiting me to think of something. I couldn't.

“Okay.” I gave up. “Fine, you win.”

“Thank god, they might rescind our Ivy League diplomas if we keep going.”

My incoherent sputtering seemed to dissipate the tense air between us.

“You didn't tell me you had pocket aces with the board.” I perked up. That was an interesting thing I learned from last night. Sloan was a hit with almost *every* board member.

“What?” he asked in confusion.

“Sloan. She's a hit.”

He tensed. “Yeah.”

Great. A landmine. He'd been prickly all morning, with just a few glimmers of charming man from the party. It was probably best not to push. “You're a little mean to your sister.”

Or, push.

I was expecting to get a cold reminder that it was none of my business. Instead, he closed his laptop and blew out a heavy sigh. “Sloan and I were equally matched when it came to who was prepared to be CEO. The only difference is her accomplishments were celebrated because she wasn’t the heir.”

“And yours?”

“Largely ignored. Wish I could say the same about the missteps,” he noted plainly. “It’s probably better that way. Can you imagine the hell my little sister would have been put through if she was the Amari the press followed?”

He was right. Sloan Amari, while hardly ever in the press, didn’t seem like she abided by the rules of polite society. I was sure there were stories she could tell, stories that would stay a secret because her brother was the one who inherited the company. Her brother took the scrutiny.

While he was still society’s most eligible bachelor having his “fun” before settling down, Sloan, doing the same things, would’ve been seen as something very different.

It dawned on me. “That’s why you wanted me to keep the press from your sister.”

“Yeah.” He chuckled, but the austerity in his voice remained. “Everyone still respects me. They would have destroyed Sloan for even toeing outside the line.”

I was silent.

The weight he carried made me wonder how he could ever have those moments of levity. It was evident some days, the crushing pressure to be everything everyone wanted him to be. To live up to a set of nearly unattainable expectations.

He took another deep breath. “I love my little sister. It’s not her fault we were pitted against each other. Sometimes it’s muscle memory to get annoyed with her for no reason.”

I blinked away the surprise.

The realization that he just unloaded decades of sibling drama became apparent. “Sorry,” he said curtly.

It only made me like him more.



Sloan and Marcus’s townhouse in Tribeca was enormous. The stone façade was simple and unassuming, while the interior was anything but that. The foyer was giant and airy, with a grand staircase that overlooked the entire first floor. We walked into the open-floor living area where everyone seemed to drift between the couch and the kitchen island. The large windows filled the rooms with a warmth that felt nostalgic.

I’d always wished for the scene in front of me. Not the ninety-million-dollar townhouse, but a home full of people. A tradition with family, or in this case, friends who felt like family.

“Everyone being summoned here on a weekend to hang out seems fun,” I said wistfully to Henry.

Growing up, it was just me and my mom after my grandparents died. I would have loved *this*. The money and power never interested me, but *this* made me envy him.

“Or like the beginning of every murder mystery,” he remarked matter-of-factly, looking down at me with a crooked smile.

My heart skipped. “I’m more of a *Night at the Museum* girl. It was my favorite movie growing up. But I love a whodunit.”

“It was the CEO, in the study, with a letter opener,” he whispered playfully before Sloan walked over to greet us.

CHAPTER 16

Henry



Why the fuck did I bring Selena here?

Watching Marcus police everyone who dared speak to Sloan was always funny. Finding myself becoming that guy—not so funny.

“Is this what you envisioned when you asked Sloan to move in?” I questioned Marcus, trying my best to distract myself from monitoring Selena’s movements.

“It’s louder than expected.” Marcus rubbed his eyes and handed me a drink. “But these get-togethers make Sloan happy.”

He noticed when my eyes stopped at Tristan. Selena melted into the group easily and had been busy in conversation with CeCe when Tristan Alders decided to interrupt and become overly familiar with her.

The possessiveness that kicked up in me wasn’t new. In fact, I knew the feeling well, but never when it came to a woman. I had no reason to be possessive. They usually threw themselves at me.

From the day I was born, I was expected to eventually take over one of the most powerful companies in the world. Being the Amari heir meant a lot of things. One was that I wouldn’t share anything—money, power, market ventures, and now her. The company was mine, the power it wielded was mine, and even though I couldn’t do anything about it, Selena was *mine*.

The fact that I couldn't have her, she didn't seem to want me, and that it was probably a terrible idea didn't hold any of the power it should have.

"He's harmless," Marcus assured me, suppressing a grin poorly.

Tristan Alders was a friend of Sloan and Xander's. He and the rest of the group became a large part of my life by association. Proximity to Sloan and Xander inevitably meant proximity to Marcus and me.

Tristan was a lot like Xander in that he loved to instigate and push personal boundaries. He'd done it for years with Sloan and our friend CeCe. It wasn't anything meaningful, and he would usually back off if they were dating someone. But he didn't have any reason to back off Selena. She was single, or at least I thought she was.

"I don't know what you're talking about." My fingers gripped tighter around the glass when Tristan threw his arm over Selena's shoulders.

"Sure." He watched my reaction. "I am curious, though, if you were staying at Amari Manor alone, why were there two coffee cups out on the table when we got there?"

Dammit. It didn't matter that Marcus knew anything because nothing was going to happen. "Nothing happened."

He nodded. "Just be careful. And take from this what you will. That awful gnawing in the pit of your stomach, it won't go away. It'll just get worse."

How could it possibly get worse than what it was now? My mind replayed that kiss every few seconds, and now I had to watch and pretend it was nothing. All while every muscle in my body wanted to take her home and show her exactly how that kiss should have ended.

"You're going to advise me on how to conduct an appropriate relationship?" I was annoyed, and it flew out in the form of unresolved issues with my best friend. Excellent.

Seemed like I was determined to push away the few people I actually had in my life. “Really? *You?*”

He didn’t say anything. Marcus hardly ever reacted. Even when I managed to land a shot.

The pang of guilt that resonated through my chest was muffled when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at it. It was my PI. Hopefully this meant he had something useful on Hugo Aubert or Charles Hayworth.

“I have to take this.” I took a few steps away, and Marcus walked back over to Sloan. I picked up the call. “Yeah?”

“Hugo Aubert will be in London early December. He’s a member of the Griswald Club.”

Great. Plan A was always to get Hugo to agree to a sale on his own, so hopefully a meeting with the elusive CEO could make that a reality without having to strong-arm his board of directors.

“Anything else?” I glanced up to see that Tristan had yet to remove his arm from Selena’s shoulders. My molars ground together. Another minute and I *would* rip it the fuck off.

“We have some background on Hayworth.”

“Anything I can use?” I tried to pay attention, but the fact that Selena didn’t seem to mind Tristan was consuming every available neuron.

“I’m sending the documents via secure courier to your residence now. There’s a name I think you should be aware of, his wife, Emily Hayworth, née Emily Sheffield.”

My attention snapped back to the call. Sheffield was my mother’s maiden name.

“Thanks.” My mind reeled for a moment. It was a common last name and maybe nothing. But I learned early that the benefit of the doubt was a luxury I didn’t have. It was for people with less to lose. “I’m headed home now.”

I ended the call.

In my world, everyone had an agenda. I had to figure it out before I let anyone close to me. But first. I needed to remove Tristan's arm from my—

From Selena.

I tucked the phone in my pocket and walked over to them.

“Let me guess,” I interrupted whatever Tristan was saying because I had a feeling I knew. “It’s the ‘I learned to walk in the Oval Office’ story.”

Tristan raised a brow and crossed his arms. He threw a look to CeCe, then back to me. “No, it’s the ‘Henry and Sloan crashed their boats in the Hamptons harbor’ story.”

“That was Sloan,” I corrected politely, then turned to Selena, who looked absolutely bewildered. “*Terribly* sorry to interrupt, but I have to go. Winston can drive you home if you’d like.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders fell. “Okay, sure. Let’s go.”

My body tensed with a withheld irritation. Was she *disappointed*? Tristan was not that interesting. She wasn’t missing out on much.

We said bye and made our way to the car.

Once we were inside, Selena was quiet the whole way. I tried not to think about why, because the weekend was over.

I needed to focus.

That meant pretending the kiss never happened and whatever this feeling was I had for her didn’t exist.

CHAPTER 17

Selena



I needed to cleanse. Or detox. Probably an exorcism after that kiss.

The next weekend, after spending five whole days avoiding Henry at work, I met with Isa and Lauren for lunch.

If the Hamptons house, Aston Martin, and private jet didn't drill it in enough, the general excess of the simple Sunday brunch I witnessed had to do it.

I got caught up in a conversation with CeCe, who told me a wild story about how Henry and Sloan almost sank one of their family's boats when competing to see who was better at sailing. His friend Tristan joined in to add that it wouldn't be the last boat Sloan accidentally sank.

The entire morning made me dizzy. His friends were nice and welcoming, but that brunch was the exact reminder I needed to stay away. We were too different.

"So..." I began, staring down at my iced coffee as I pushed the ice cubes around the glass with my straw. Across from me, Lauren and Isabelle decided aloud what they wanted to order. Their voices blended together in a low hum, drifting along the cacophony of noise in the café. "I kissed him."

They stopped talking abruptly and looked at me. Isabelle's eyes went wide, but she remained silent. It was hard to surprise a surgeon, but I managed to do it. I avoided telling Lauren until Isa was there as a counterbalance.

Lauren put her menu down. "What in the actual fuck?"

Henry was dangerous. There were two experiences that made me sure I needed to stay away: Miles and the Waldorfs. He was a combination of both.

“Technically, he kissed me. Then, I kissed him back, and then things got...” I swallowed hard at the memory. I replayed how his hands squeezed my thighs, how he pulled me forward, how he rocked his groin against mine. My pulse ticked up, and if I closed my eyes, I could almost feel him. “Heated.”

Inferno heat. The fires of hell. Maybe the devil didn’t wear Prada. Maybe he wore custom Brioni and summered in the Hamptons.

“Did you...?” Isabelle moved her fork back and forth.

“No.” My body trembled thinking about how badly I’d wanted it. Still wanted it. “We’re pretending it didn’t happen.”

We didn’t say much to each other outside of directly work-related things. He was formal and a little cold. I hoped that would help keep my mind from wandering.

“Good,” they said at the same time. Their relief stung. Was it *that* bad if something more happened?

Yes. Yes, it was. I knew that too.

Isabelle and I went to Columbia together, where Henry’s type was represented in spades. The ones with money and power that were effortlessly charming and beautiful. Fitting in with them was impossible, not that I wanted to, but even if I did, it was something you were simply born into. I kept my head down, got my degree, and preferred to experience their world from a safe distance.

“Everyone is allowed a slip-up,” Isabelle assured me. Her hand squeezed mine. “Doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yeah. And I’m sure he’ll go back to being the guy you hated a few weeks ago,” Lauren added supportively, with a pat on my shoulder.

That was the thing.

I tried to hate him, and I kept trying, but I couldn't.

Isabelle read my deflated expression. "Attraction is perfectly normal. He's a young, gorgeous, and single CEO. That's got all the trappings of attraction."

"Is this supposed to make me feel better?"

The one thing I learned from Columbia was that the Henry-types forgot about you much quicker than you forgot about them.

If something happened, I would become one of the many flings of his past. The ones that made him flinch when I brought them up. He always looked regretful when I did. If things went further, I knew I'd eventually be one of those regrets.

My heart seized for a millisecond. I already was one.

"I'm just saying, it's normal. Don't beat yourself up about it," Isa insisted.

"And who doesn't get a little turned on by the idea of something forbidden?" Lauren added. "All you need to do is hold out till July."

She was right.

There was a time when I considered staying in the city. The contract I signed with the Waldorfs stipulated that I *had* to keep my mouth shut. It also stated I *should* stay away from them. It read like they were forcing me out. The Pearson lawyers said that nobody could make me go, but it felt easier not to take chances.

By this time next year, he will have forgotten about me, and I'll regret having spent so much time worrying about it.

The glimpses of charm and banter were the thrill of the chase. His history made me confident that if he caught me, he wouldn't want to keep me.

CHAPTER 18

Henry



As I walked up the steps to my childhood home on the Upper East Side, the same thought kept circling in my mind.

“Plenty of people see this and run in the opposite direction.”

Selena was going to run in the opposite direction, all the way to L.A.

The staff let me in, and I walked through the main floor entryway where my father was waiting for me in his study. I’d called him after I went over the papers my PI sent last week. I needed to get something from him.

“Why exactly do you need this?” My father asked as he sat at his desk in the study. He handed me an old contact book of my mother’s from the desk drawer.

He also handed me the file of the terms of her old inheritance. The one she’d never actually received, despite having been old enough to take control of it. After her family disowned her, she never pursued it. It wasn’t worth it. Besides, the Amari fortune made that inheritance look like a bar tab.

“For work,” I answered. I sat across from him in front of the window. I loved this room. Sloan and I used to hide from the nannies in here over the summer when we were kids.

First and foremost, I needed a way into the Griswald. I was hoping to avoid using my name to help keep my plans for Verge out of the papers. I was also hoping to avoid anyone who may recognize me, and while I hadn’t seen my maternal

side of the family in decades, they were surely members of one of the oldest private clubs in the world.

“Don’t tell your mother.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” I looked over the book, which was old and clearly unopened for years.

Pearson, Selena’s PR firm, probably had contacts in the UK. I could ask her to get me access to the Griswald, and I would. But for now, I was trying to keep her wishes in mind and keep to myself. Probably a good thing since I couldn’t stop the stupid shit that seemed to pour out of my mouth when I was around her.

“Henry,” my father said. His sunny disposition was little annoying. He was always that way. It made it difficult to get upset with someone who was always so annoyingly cheery. “Things have been quiet lately.”

I was hoping to keep the conversation short and leave after I found what I was looking for. My brows furrowed as I flipped through the old contacts to the “S” section.

“Was there a question in there?” I asked, distracted.

When I was a kid, I distinctly remembered one winter morning when I heard my mother crying on the phone. She was talking to someone named Emily. Her sister.

Based on the background my PI did, Emily Hayworth’s father was named Benedict Sheffield. My maternal grandfather had the same name. And then every Sheffield in that old contact book matched those that I found in my PI’s report. Numbers, addresses, everything.

Hayworth had to know the connection. The fact that the one company I was going after happened to be the one he owned a forty-five percent stake in couldn’t be a coincidence.

After a prolonged silence, my father answered. “Simply a statement. It’s nice to see after all the—”

“Stop,” I warned. I didn’t need whatever backhanded praise he had ready. I had a penchant for unleashing years of

pent-up aggression at my father in the worst ways. In my opinion, he deserved it, both of my parents did. But they seemed to have some bizarre dissociation with my entire childhood. Bringing it up to them was like talking to someone with amnesia—frustrating and useless. “I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“We’ve only ever tried to help you.”

“Help?” I snapped. Unsettled anger seeped into my skin. I recognized the slow poison the second I felt it. “Why would I need *your* help?”

Insulting him was at least quieter than yelling. There was also the additional benefit that he could sit with the words a while. My generally good-natured father became a different person when confronted with the fact that he never lived up to expectations.

“All I meant—”

“What?” I snapped again. “That you could help me fail at CEO like you would have? What’s next, parenting advice?”

“We gave you every advantage we could think of.” His tone kept a steady cadence that only annoyed me more.

That again.

Yes, I was brought up in one of the wealthiest families in the world. I went to the best Swiss boarding school. I got every single leg-up I possibly could have. All so that I wasn’t faced with the rejection my father and grandfather had to deal with.

It didn’t replace having parents, but they sure did try.

“It was for the best,” he continued.

The fibers of restraint that years of living in polite society created began to wear.

“Stop.” My voice dropped low, though the rage that roared inside could wake the dead.

“Henry.” He became stern. “You didn’t like that school, but you met all the right people. Made all the right connections. Nobody will ever question *your* place in—”

The last fiber snapped. I looked up at him and repeated, “Shut. Up.”

I was eight, and apparently that was the age to make sure your kid knew you had no interest in raising him. I begged. Cried. Pleaded with them not to send me back. Every. Fucking. Year. And every year it was answered with the same *it’s for the best*.

Sloan, who was at least spared boarding school, tried to keep me home too. The sound of her four-year-old voice screaming bloody murder every time I had to leave still echoed in my head. I started pretending I wanted to go to save her the agony of begging for me to stay.

We learned our pleas did no good. We held our rage, saved it, kept it as a weapon and summoned it when we saw fit. It was useful. At least it served as the fuel to both our successes over the years.

My grandfather wanted heirs who would be just as successful as he was, and he got that in spades.

After all, pressure made diamonds.

And earthquakes. And volcanoes. And all the destructive shit people tended to forget about because diamonds sparkled.

It wasn’t until college when I met the Suttons that I learned what real parenting looked like. The closest Sloan and I had was our grandmother.

I huffed a frustrated exhale as I stood and walked to the door. Years of this exact argument, over and over... I was sick of it. I didn’t want to fight anymore. It didn’t change the facts.

“Instead of changing the rules that made you bitter, you decided to bend to them. Well, I hope you’re happy, your master class in parenting assured that the Amari name will end with me.”

“Henry...” my father said softly, almost surprised at a truth I made evident for years. The confusion that papered his face crumpled to a deep sadness; one I hadn’t meant to evoke.

My parents were madly in love when they got married. They scoffed at expectation and created the life they wanted. Then, I was born. And just like that, what was meant to shield me from the vitriol my father dealt with when marrying my mother, ended up having the exact opposite outcome.

It crushed me, and I hated them for it.

“And since you seem so concerned over the company you have no idea how to manage,” I went on, stopping at the doorway. “You may want to start being nicer to Marcus. His eventual children with Sloan will take it over one day.”

I left.

I never let myself seriously consider a life with a family, so I never figured out if it was something I wanted. But I knew for sure what I didn’t want, even though it seemed to be the only option available to me.

I didn’t want a trophy wife who was only there for the prestige. I wasn’t going to bring a child into the world only to send them away or create a family in service to a legacy.

I’d rather be alone.

And I was.

CHAPTER 19

Selena



The photo op with the humane society was quick. Henry was, as usual, buttoned up. He did everything I asked for over the last couple of weeks.

Robotically so.

I avoided him most days. He acted the same, usually very formal, sometimes relaxed. Either way, he didn't seem bothered by our agreement.

The fact that I was right, that he'd forget me quickly, didn't help as much as I thought it would.

I stood at the glass doors in the lobby of the humane society building, waiting for him. It was mid-September, but the summer storms still lingered. I grimaced at the gray clouds in the sky as the rain picked up. Why was it that I had six umbrellas in my apartment but none when I needed one? I was pretty sure there was even one hanging on my office door.

Henry rolled his eyes when he walked up beside me and took in the weather.

"You L.A. girls and your fear of rain." He took the umbrella from his security detail and gestured for me to follow. "It's a block to the car. We'll survive."

The large black umbrella opened beneath the overhang of the building, and I tried to suppress the bolt of excitement that his momentary kindness sent through me. It was a refreshing change from his generally polite apathy.

“It’s not a fear.” My breath hitched when his hand found the small of my back and guided me as we began walking. Without a word, he shifted to the other side of my body so he was walking on the street side of the sidewalk. “It doesn’t rain much in L.A.”

The small, strangely arousing gesture warmed me.

“No, the ground simply opens up on occasion,” he said offhandedly, looking ahead.

“The buildings are built with earthquakes in mind,” I teased. I didn’t mind his thinly veiled jab at L.A. since this was the most we’d spoken to each other in days. “It’s not that bad.”

“I’m sure that’s what they say about hell.”

“You’ll have to report back.” I grinned up at him, but his stony façade remained. “L.A. has the added benefit of being a couple hours from wine country.”

“Uh huh. You know, I’ve never experienced an earthquake,” he mused. “What’s it like? Living in what I can only imagine feels like a sunny snow globe operated by a deranged toddler?”

My heart raced. I smiled up at him again, hoping to lure the rest of “charming Henry” from wherever he was caged up. “California is lovely.”

“And wildly unstable,” he added matter-of-factly.

Despite the noise of the rain and the bustle of the city around us, it felt strangely intimate with Henry. My lower back immediately missed the warmth of his hand when he opened the car door for me and held the umbrella up higher to cover me as I got in.

We settled in the car, and I tried to shake off the delightful hum that filled my body.

Apparently, not well enough.

He looked up from reading emails.

“What is it?” he asked in the tone he’d been using since the Hamptons. The one coated in a tact that made my heart hurt, even though I was the one who insisted on it.

“Did they teach you the sidewalk rule in etiquette?”

A grin finally broke the formality when he turned to me.

“I didn’t realize it was a rule or that it needed to be taught.” He leaned into the seat, cocked his head, and crossed his arms. “What kind of men are you dating that don’t know a lady never walks on the street side of the sidewalk?”

I laughed loudly, and it boomed inside the confined space of the SUV. “Someone is out of touch with the modern realities of dating. Besides, nobody walks in L.A. either.”

He scoffed.

“Look, Miss Montez, if he’s not willing to”—he lifted his hand to count off—“get splashed by street water in a storm for you, accidentally get run over, or keep you out of harm’s way, he’s not good enough for you.”

A lump in my throat stopped whatever I planned to say.

“What a gentleman,” I choked out, turning to the window. His eyes caught mine in the reflection.

“A gentleman opens your car door. Pulls your chair out before you sit. Leaves an umbrella in your office, which you still manage to forget because you can’t seem to read a weather report.” His eyes dropped back to his phone, and his voice lowered. “Being just a gentleman is too low a bar for you, and the sidewalk rule is the bare minimum.”



I stared at the umbrella hanging on the back of my office door for almost an hour.

He put it there. I had no idea when, but it had been there a while. I tried to ignore everything the car ride did to me, but I kept wishing he would need me for something, anything.

The rain let up by late afternoon. I wanted to make sure I was on the street before sunset. The beginnings of fall were starting to become apparent in the city. I was hoping to get a few shots of the sunset and maybe a couple in the park before I went home today.

“Those are great,” Henry said as he leaned against my office’s doorframe, his arms crossed against his chest. The late afternoon light flooded the room.

His eyes roved over my desk, looking at the photographs I was organizing into the portfolio. Lauren had taken over my apartment. It was impossible for me to put together some of the collections I normally would in my living room because she was sprawled out all over it.

He walked in and looked to me for permission to page through the book of photos that sat on my desk. I nodded.

“Thanks.” I glanced down at the portfolio featuring shots from a vineyard I went to with my mom the last time I went home. “My abuela gave me my first camera. It was one of those instant Polaroid cameras.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s a hobby.” I’d spent the last week making sure I didn’t hang around Henry’s office more than I needed to. He’d been doing the same, until just now. The drive back from the humane society tangled up how I felt even more, but the sting in my chest that persisted since the Hamptons suddenly lightened. “Do you have any time for those?”

A smile tugged at the side of his face, and his eyes met mine. “I like chess and boxing. Boxing has the added benefit of getting to hit Marcus.”

I wasn’t even sure if that was funny, but I found myself giggling. Maybe it had more to do with the warmth oozing

through my veins at the way he looked at me. Like he missed me.

“But bruises would probably make your job a little harder,” he went on as he came in and sat down. His eyes went back to concentrating on paging through my photographs.

I tried to distract myself by putting a few things away in my purse. “You’ve been making it easy.”

“Have you ever considered making a portfolio?” he suggested. “You probably already know everyone you’d need to know to break into photography.”

His ignorance was cute. When you were worth more money than royalty, you didn’t have to worry about silly things like the bills.

“I considered an intensive at Columbia a while ago...” I began, thinking back to the class I waffled over signing up for every year. I always found a reason not to enroll. “Pearson pays better. Besides, I don’t know if I’d like it if my livelihood depended on it.”

He looked up at me with an intensity that made me sure I was in trouble. “You’re...” he began.

A dull ache settled in my chest. My abuela always told me to pursue it, to take my *sueñito*—my little dream—seriously. Just like my abuelo had, and he’d become great. Choosing money over a craft that I enjoyed, something I could have been great at, I knew what I was. “A sellout?”

He shook his head.

“Remarkable,” he murmured to himself, and his gaze drifted back to the photographs.

The sound of my phone vibrating on my desk caught my attention. It was an email, from Rita. It was probably her assistant, scheduling our next check-in.

I stood up and tried to shake away the fog in my head. I immediately remembered why I was here in the first place. Henry was good at making me forget the reasons I needed to

keep my distance. The valid reasons why indulging in the attraction was a bad idea. But Rita's email was a good reminder that I'd been down this road before. And what awaited me if I just made it through this year.

"I should go." I grabbed the rest of my things and put them in my bag.

He looked like he wanted to say something but shook his head. The muscle in his jaw flexed.

"Yeah." His voice dropped as he handed my portfolio to me. "I should get back to work."

CHAPTER 20

Henry



Selena forwarded me an overnight article in the morning. It wasn't much of anything.

Amari's Wild Weekend in the Hamptons

"It's a little late to publish something about Labor Day weekend, it was weeks ago. And it's not even close to anything in the morality clause." Sloan read the article on my phone.

I *wished* I'd had the fun described in the article. The only part the press got right was that I was "canoodling"—their words, not mine—someone, but the extent of it was relatively tame.

"All hearsay, no pictures, I'm not worried," Sloan went on as she handed my phone back. "What did Selena say?"

"Same thing." I tucked my phone in my pocket. Hopefully then I'd stop checking to see if she texted me. It was Sunday, she had no reason to. Yet, I waited like it was going to happen.

Sloan nudged the food in front of me closer. Sunday brunch this week doubled as planning for the Diwali party she was hosting. Our grandparents used to throw an elaborate one every year when they were alive. Sloan inherited the family compound in the country and intended to throw the event there.

I sat at the kitchen island talking to her and Marcus; trying to force myself to let go of my grudge.

If Sloan wasn't worried, I wasn't going to spend any more energy thinking about it. Selena and I would talk about it tomorrow morning anyway, which was the only time I got to see her. She spent the rest of the day in her office, planning appearances and getting her journalist contacts to put out flattering puff pieces.

I was seeing her less and less, and still she consumed all of my thoughts. The only silver lining to Selena avoiding me the last few weeks was I didn't have to see her walking around in summer dresses anymore. The cooler October weather gave me a reprieve, not that it helped.

She looked just as good in sweaters.

We went along like the kiss never happened. Like there was nothing between us. It gnawed at me.

I liked her. She was drop dead gorgeous, but it wasn't just the attraction. I saw her every day and found myself wanting to see her more. I wanted to know more about the backstories to all the cute little things I noticed about her.

She loved arepas and always ordered them for lunch. She hated the idea of a driver and security, even though she always seemed to be looking over her shoulder. Bracing for something.

The one person I actually wanted to spend more time with was the one person hell-bent on keeping away from me.

"Why do women date me?" I was thinking it and made the mistake of saying it out loud.

I wasn't complaining. Handsome billionaire was a good hand to be dealt in life. Women's motives never bothered me until Selena.

But Selena, I wanted her to want *me*.

Although she made it more clear with every passing day that she never would.

Marcus looked uncomfortable from across the island. "I don't think that's a question for me."

“Or me.” Sloan grimaced beside him. She looked across the room to the couch where CeCe was paging through an invitation book. “Hey CeCe, is Henry attractive?”

“That’s not what I asked.” I rubbed my eyes.

The only thing I was absolutely sure of was that Selena was attracted to me. It was everything else that seemed to drive her away. That was what I needed to figure out.

CeCe inhaled deeply, tilted her head, and walked over to me.

“Of course he is. Who called you unattractive?” She sounded almost motherly when she cooed.

I’d known CeCe for years, we grew up in similar circles.

“That’s not helping, Ce,” I groaned. I was thankful nobody else made it to brunch this week. CeCe was only here to help Sloan with planning.

“Well, if I didn’t know you, I would definitely sleep with you, regardless of your trust fund,” CeCe assured me.

Xander laughed so hard he nearly sprayed his coffee all over the counter. “Aww, see Henry? It’s not your face, it’s your personality.”

“Why did I come here?” My face fell into my hands.

“Why the sudden interest?” Sloan asked as she exchanged a curious look with Xander. At least I knew my secrets were still safe with Marcus.

“I can’t really date for a while, might as well figure out what went wrong in all my previous relationships.” Sounded like a good enough excuse to figure out why Selena was avoiding me, outside of all the obvious reasons.

“I don’t know if I would call them relationships.” Xander scrunched his nose and sat down next to me.

The idea of a committed relationship didn’t scare me. It wasn’t realistic, so I hardly ever gave it thought. But, Selena had me questioning everything.

How could you ever know a person's motives? It seemed too complicated an endeavor, one that could end badly.

"I don't know if you should be judging." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Never mind, let's drop it."

Everyone nodded in agreement, then pivoted the conversation toward the upcoming party.

That was what I desperately needed to do. Pivot, move on. Think about something else.

For some reason, I couldn't. I kept reminding myself to keep a clear head. This year was too important to have my vision clouded.

All I had, all I was, was Amari Global. I couldn't mess it up.

CHAPTER 21

Selena



Lauren ended up getting the job as a sous chef and started a couple of weeks ago, which meant she had her daily pre-dinner service meeting around two in the afternoon most days. The restaurant was close to the Amari Global building, and she'd occasionally bring by some of the food she made for lunch.

Today was one of those days.

On the days she visited with food, I had to fight the urge to drop into Henry's office and offer him some after she'd leave. But I would leave it on his desk when he was in an afternoon meeting, and he'd usually leave a "thank you" on a Post-it and stick it to my computer screen after I left for the day.

The distance we put between us was working. We didn't have any slipups. But I found myself missing him, even though I saw him every day.

Lauren was experimenting with different desserts with the restaurant's pastry chef. They were in a French mood this morning, so lunch included spiced croissants.

"Your pastry skills are getting good." I took a large bite of the crispy croissant. The butter layers melted in my mouth.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but how would you know?" she asked.

"Excuse you. I have an extensive viewing history of baking competitions. I know a soggy bottom when I see one."

She laughed, high-pitched, squeaky, and infectious. It was nice to see her finally finding her way here, even if it was temporary.

“Sorry to interrupt. This came for you.” Bridget knocked on the doorframe and dropped off a package. She smiled and closed the door on her way out with a *look*.

Lauren grimaced. “Too loud?”

I shrugged and opened the large envelope. The Columbia-blue folder was embellished with the school’s crest. Inside was the syllabus and course materials for a landscape photography intensive taught by one of the best landscape photographers in the world.

It was offered every year at Columbia for a month and was something I wanted to do when I was an undergrad. It was an additional class on a course load and tuition payment that were already too high. So, I’d decided against it.

The last page had my old student ID number and the completed registration information. The class was set and paid for. All I had to do was attend.

“You’re finally doing it!” Lauren’s cerulean eyes skated over the page, and she scooted to the edge of her seat at the opposite side of my desk.

“Uhh, yeah...”

“You deserve to treat yourself.” She beamed.

I tucked the folder in my desk and tried my best to hide how winded his gesture made me.



Lauren left twenty minutes later, and I finished a call with the Amari family foundation for an official statement on the latest donation. This time it was for an early education center in the Bronx.

It was a little before our normal chat in the afternoon, but his door was open as I hovered around it nervously. “You can come in, Miss Montez.”

I ignored the dull twinge of disappointment whenever he called me that. The way he said *Miss Montez* felt frosted with an indifferent formality, without the playful teasing that used to envelope it.

I walked wordlessly to his desk and put a box with a croissant I saved for him on the corner. His gaze flicked over to the box, and he stopped reading the papers in his hand. I could see him trying to smother a grin. He reached over and scribbled on a Post-it, then handed it to me.

My heart dipped. I was getting too attached to the way he’d be adorable, despite himself. I was letting myself think that maybe there was something real there.

Maybe for you.

For him, I would be a sultry anecdote. An affair. One among many he’d have before finding a more suitable partner. I wasn’t a part of this world, the Waldorf’s made sure I knew that.

“You’re welcome,” I said after I glanced at the “thank you” written on the Post-it. I lifted the folder in my hands. “What’s this?”

His face became unreadable. He looked back down at what he was reviewing before I came in. “It’s a hobby, right?”

“I can’t accept this. I’m working.”

“I’ll be fine without you,” he said plainly. Emotionless. The otherwise dull words felt razor sharp.

“It’s a whole month.”

“I know how to read a calendar.”

“It starts at four most afternoons. We usually meet—”

“We can meet a little longer in the morning. I’ll have Bridget adjust my schedule,” he shot back politely.

“I’ll miss some of the meetings that I usually—”

“I’ll fill you in.” His voice pulled as frustration crept into his words.

“It starts next week.”

“I’m aware. If you don’t have time for it, you don’t have to go.” He faltered for a moment, and his eyes shifted in thought. “I apologize... I overstepped—”

“I do, have the time. I just—”

“There’s no point in you staying here babysitting,” he pressed, finally turning back to me. The austerity faded. “I promise I won’t stick any pens in the electrical outlets.”

“Why?” I murmured. He couldn’t be this nice... this *perfect*.

“Because it’s dangerous. I’m a little concerned you didn’t know that.” All his seriousness melted away.

I stifled the laugh, but the smile was less compliant.

“Not that. Why this?” I lifted the folder again, and the laugh snuck through.

“Don’t defer a dream on my account.”

Anytime we got close to something similar to friendship, it shook loose too many feelings that made me want more. I wished I could find a middle ground. Henry was kind and funny. I wanted to spend more time with him.

His eyes stayed stuck on mine. A thread we kept tugging at, strong and enduring.

Blinking away the thought, I looked down at the folder for a second. Without another word, I walked over to his desk and stuck a Post-it I wrote on in my office on his computer screen.

He read it and laughed. One of the real ones that set wildfires ablaze all over me. “You’re welcome.”

CHAPTER 22

Selena



The next week followed the same.

I sat across from him at his desk as he paged through a proposal for the next Amari Foundation endowment. He was essentially silent around me, only speaking the exact number of words he needed to get an idea across, like he was watching his word count. We didn't find ourselves getting caught up in conversation anymore.

He didn't mention the gift. When I'd leave early every Tuesday and Thursday, he wouldn't acknowledge it. The intensive was amazing. I was beginning to consider working less once this year was up and maybe taking time to pursue photography more seriously.

The gesture was stuck in my heart. Rich people gave each other extravagant gifts all the time, and it meant nothing because to them, money was nothing. This was different.

Henry had to rearrange his schedule to accommodate me leaving early. It meant he had to catch me up on the few meetings I wasn't able to attend. He could've had Bridget do it, but he didn't.

For people like Henry, nothing was more valuable than time, and he'd given up some of his for me. In service to something that would make me happy.

Henry was pulled from his quick review of the endowment proposal when we heard a loud laugh.

We turned to the door when Henry's office phone rang.

“CeCe is here, can I send her in?” Bridget’s voice came through.

“Yes,” he answered. The vice grip he had on the pen he was holding during our meeting loosened. A smile spread along his face. The first one all day, first real one anyway.

CeCe swept in and filled the room with her soft giggle, and Henry got up and hugged her. They were friends, I knew that. I met her at that brunch, but none of that abated the jealousy that bubbled up.

The charismatic blonde was the image of everything I would never be. Rich, effortlessly polished, and already a part of his world. She fit perfectly in it. When this year was behind him and Henry was CEO in perpetuity, he’d probably date someone like her.

Or maybe her.

A painful tightness thorned my chest. Over the last few months, it was clear he was past the more debauchurous parts of his life. He worked late almost every day. He took my advice like gospel. The next step was obvious—the perfect woman at his side.

I should have been grateful. He made my job easy.

I sucked in a breath and tried to keep my voice steady. “I’ll come back.”

“Oh no, please stay, I’ll only be a second,” she insisted. I wanted to get the hell out of there, but my legs weren’t steady enough to make my exit as breezy as her entrance. “I came to deliver these.”

She reached into her Birkin and pulled out two ornately decorated red envelopes.

Henry looked them over, and his shoulders fell. “She needed this hand-delivered?”

“Sloan wanted to make sure you got it and that I was witness to you saying you’d attend.” CeCe paused for a moment, and her smile turned a little crooked. If it were

possible, she looked even prettier. “She said things have still been a little weird since she and Marcus got back from London. Besides, ‘full-time socialite’ leaves some more time in my schedule than you all have.”

Henry’s chest rose and fell with a heavy exhale. “Thanks, Ce.”

“You’ll be there?”

“Yes, report back that I agreed.”

She smiled.

“There are two.” CeCe ran her fingers over Henry’s to fan them apart and turned her cerulean eyes to me. “Selena, the other invitation is for you. It’s the second weekend in November, feel free to bring a date if you can make it.”

CeCe paused, looked at Henry for a few seconds then back at me. Finally, she turned and, put both of her hands on either side of his face. A smile erupted, and she winked. She took a step back and motioned her finger up and down like she was assessing his suit.

“I meant what I said on Sunday,” she said softly, almost flirtatious.

Henry’s laugh rolled out of him, completely unfettered, and he lifted his arm and pointed to the door.

“Get out,” he commanded to her lightly.

His laugh was the kind that made my stomach flip. I looked at the floor, but the ache sharpened.

Her soft feathery giggle lingered in the office after she left.

I didn’t know what was going on between the two of them, and it wasn’t my business. They were being discreet, and even if they weren’t, the press would love CeCe.

We didn’t have anything left to discuss for the morning, so I excused myself.

I felt sick.



“Do you have any contacts at the Griswald Club in London?” Henry asked when he saw me enter his office for our brief afternoon meeting.

I was surprised at the question. Henry’s mother’s side was a powerful family in London. They were the type of old wealth that the Griswald catered to. Surely, he had a connection there of his own.

“No, but someone at Pearson definitely does.” The international consultants who worked with Henry’s brand of wealth knew everyone in the old money world. If there was an introduction he needed, they would have the right people to call. “I’ll call Rita before I leave.”

He nodded.

“Everything okay?” I asked, standing in front of his desk.

“Yeah.” He looked down at his desk, which was wildly messy. “Trying to get my head around the emerging gene therapy market.”

“All the clinical studies,” I said slowly.

He was always reading them on the way to photo ops or anytime he was alone in a room with me and we weren’t actively discussing work. Whatever the project was that he was working on, it seemed to consume him. I could tell why. He was trying to earn his place here.

“If I’m going to attempt taking over someone’s company, I should learn about it first.”

“You surprise me sometimes.” It squeaked out of me when I meant to stay silent.

He chuckled and stood. “Bet you didn’t think you’d say that when we met here a few months ago and you stole my umbrella.”

The lightness in his voice made me pause. It felt good. I wanted to fall into it. “You gave it to me.”

“A lot of good it did.” His brows furrowed as he read a few papers in his hands before dropping them on his desk. “You always forget it.”

“And that’s not the first time we met.” I muttered to myself as a reminder when I sat at the conference table.

A silent moment passed.

“Black cocktail dress. Nude shoes, red lipstick. Gin and Tonic. Poor balance,” he listed off and looked up at me.

My breath tripped.

“I remember, I just assumed we were ignoring it,” he added, walking around his desk and taking a seat across from me. Henry looked at me differently this time. *That* look. Not a smirk or a smile. Like he couldn’t look away.

“Oh.” My mind blanked, and I tried to regain some sense of control. The knowledge that he’d forget me was the only thing that kept me steady, and now I wasn’t sure. “It was a vodka soda.”

“You looked bored that night.”

“I was working.”

“You don’t look like that here.”

Because I can’t stop thinking about that kiss.

“You should take CeCe to your sister’s party,” I blurted out. Genuine surprise swept across his face, and my heart sank into my stomach. “Or the Augustus Charity Dinner you have next weekend, somewhere you can be pictured together.”

It was something I rolled around in my head all day after CeCe visited this morning. She was a reformed party girl, and these days she chaired foundations and made it in the society pages for her philanthropy.

The article wrote itself. The society princess and her perfect prince. Everyone ate that shit up.

“That’s not...” He mumbled something I didn’t really hear. Probably because all the blood rushed into my ears.

I clapped my hands together, inhaled deeply, and looked up with all the excitement I could pull together. “The entire board consists of society types. They’ll love CeCe. It would look appropriate and dignified.”

She was perfect for him.

He looked down, and the muscles in his jaw flexed. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” My entire body was shaking. “Trust me, I’m very good at my job.”

CHAPTER 23

Henry & Selena

HENRY



The next day, I went over the idea with CeCe. She wiggled her nose uncomfortably.

“That’s kind of weird. But I’m fine with it. Can’t hurt.” She insisted.

When CeCe texted me earlier that morning to tell me brunch was going to be at Xander’s this weekend, I’d invited her up to my office to see what she thought about the idea Selena suggested yesterday.

“Yeah?” An uncomfortable chill ran up my spine at the idea of going on a date with CeCe. She was a catch, just not one for me.

“If it gets you good press, why not?” she said half-heartedly. She looked at the floor. “I didn’t mess anything up, did I? I thought it would help, but I miss the mark *a lot*.”

“There’s nothing to mess up,” I assured her.

Selena was maniacally happy to set me up with CeCe. If that wasn’t a clear rejection, then I didn’t want to experience one. I could take a hint, but she was determined to paint me a fucking billboard.

I needed to focus on something realistic.

Work. The Board. Verge.

“I guess I can think of worse company over dinner.” Her shoulders fell, and sadness filled her face.

Oh goodie, another woman practically depressed at the prospect of spending an evening with me. “You okay, Ce?”

She shrugged. CeCe was the type of person who wore her heart on her sleeve. A sleeve that constantly got caught in doors, elevators, and anywhere else it could be crushed. If catching up with CeCe over dinner as friends while the tabloids went crazy over it meant I was one step closer to ridding myself of the morality clause, it seemed like an easy task.

“We might be two of a kind,” she said softly as she lifted herself off the chair. In classic CeCe fashion, she reined it in and became a ray of sunshine. “Where are you taking me on our fake date?”

“Nowhere good. Augustus Charity Dinner.” I chuckled. “We’re never going to live this down.”

She made her way out of the office, stopping at the door. “You know, the Selena thing would be an excellent scenario to run by a best friend.”

“Not you too,” I groaned. I knew I had to work through my issues with Marcus. I didn’t need the reminders.

“I’m just saying.” She put her hands up.

I rolled my eyes. “Bye, CeCe.”

Her laugh bounced through the hallway on her way out. Not much could keep her down.

“Bye, Henry. See you on our hot date,” she called.



CeCe had a point. Bridget pushed my afternoon meetings a bit later so I could box with Marcus. It was a welcomed distraction from the general frustration I felt around my office.

I wasn't in the mood to talk, but boxing meant I could throw a few punches.

That always had a way of making me feel better.

Afterward, Marcus walked back to the office with me to say hello to Bridget. She'd known him since he worked here a decade ago. It would be harder for Marcus to get back in her good graces. I wasn't the only one still pissed about his total abandonment for a couple of years.

"Henry," Bridget greeted me warmly, then dropped her smile. "Mr. Sutton."

Before he could say anything to defend himself, the elevator doors dinged open, and a delivery man walked in the direction of Bridget's desk. He was carrying a large arrangement of flowers.

We watched in what felt like slow motion as he put the flowers down and Bridget signed for them. The three of us exchanged glances and waited until the elevator bell rang to ensure the courier was gone before our attention darted to the card.

Marcus plucked the card from the flowers before Bridget or I could.

"Oh." Marcus's victorious smile dropped when he read it. "They're for Selena."

I grabbed the card. A low hum of anger got louder as I read it.

Missing the beach.

Missing the impromptu photoshoots.

Missing you.

Love,

Miles

“Who’s Miles?” I could barely hear Marcus’s question over the sound of blood rushing through my ears.

“I don’t know.”

I put the card back on the arrangement and shoved my trembling hands into my pockets.

Marcus and Bridget exchanged looks.

“You all right?” he asked.

“I should get back to work,” I told them both, then walked to my door. “Bye, Marcus.”

I shut my office door behind me and paced back and forth, trying to clear my cluttered mind. Every few seconds, a new question popped into it, each one more infuriating than the last.

Were they together?

Was it serious?

The world around me went blurry. My thoughts raced, and I couldn’t make sense of them.

All I knew was that I was angry.

Angry at Selena for being so damn perfect. Angry at this new guy, whoever the fuck he was. Angry at myself for feeling this way.

How long would it take to track down this Miles person?

I could always ask Selena, but that would mean having to tell her that she consumed every one of my thoughts while all she wanted was to get away from me.

A thorny grip took hold of my chest.

I didn’t know how long I paced, probably ten minutes, but at some point, Marcus walked in and sat silently.

“Miles Asher.” Marcus’s voice stopped my pacing a couple of minutes later. I looked up and saw him reading off his personal phone. “Movie star.”

“Should I be concerned you got that information so quickly?”

“That’s entirely up to you. You don’t think I’ve dug up every skeleton on *every* one of Sloan’s exes?”

“Healthy,” I retorted sarcastically.

He shrugged. “Baby steps.”

“That’s the idiot from all the superhero movies?” I started pacing again.

Marcus scrolled through what looked like pages of information he managed to get in the last few minutes. “Yeah. He’s in town next week.”

The jealousy poured into my veins. I needed to know more. “How long have they been dating?”

“Not clear. They’re good at covering their tracks. But there are a couple of pictures from as far back as a year ago.”

A year. It’s serious. The barbed grip around my ribs tightened. I spent too much time wondering why she wanted to move back when it seemed like everything she loved was here.

He was there.

“Anything else?” I demanded.

“Bank accounts, address, blood type, food allergies...” He looked up, and his eyebrow raised. “That could be useful.”

I walked behind my desk and sat down. With a long exhale, I buried my face in my hands. I’d not only kissed an employee, but I kissed one in a relationship with a highly public figure. The tabloids would *love* that.

That had to be why it felt like my rib cage was being ripped open with an ice pike.

“Fuck,” I cursed. She’d been seeing him for years. That meant it wasn’t something fleeting. It was probably—my molars ground against each other—*love*.

Good for her.

She was sweet and caring. Smart. Fierce. Fucking perfect. She deserved happiness.

“He’s staying at the Mandarin while he’s in town the next few weeks. It can look like an accid—”

I looked up from my hands and shot him a glare. “That’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny. And very much within the realm of possibilities.” His work phone rang in his pocket again. It was probably the fourth time since he came into my office.

“Go back to work. I’m fine,” I insisted.

“You know where I live.” He pushed his hands against the armrests. “If you want to talk.”

“What if I show up and you’re gone for another couple of years?” I asked. It was what happened the last time my life began to unravel.

He paused and sighed. “You know I’m not going anywhere.”

“Because of Sloan. Your best friend and your little brother weren’t enough to stay?”

Indecision etched his face. “Can we hash this out now?”

“No.” I sank into my seat. “Today is already a mess.”

He nodded, and the nearly imperceptible laxity in his shoulders told me he was disappointed. We needed to talk, but not now.

SELENA

“Hey, Preston.” I smiled as I walked onto the private elevator with him. I realized weeks after working here that everyone on the executive floors used them to avoid stopping at every floor.

Preston began regaling me with a story about his boat, or something. I stopped paying attention. I was coming back from a late lunch with Lauren because I didn’t want to catch anymore visits from CeCe if she came back to the office again. I spent an hour telling Lauren how okay I was with the possibility that Henry and CeCe could be a real item. Based on her reaction, Lauren didn’t believe I was okay with it either.

Henry seemed to enjoy her company. Maybe I suggested something he’d been considering for a while.

“And that’s how I learned you always go head to wind from starboard tack.” Preston chuckled to himself. He was talking about sailing? I couldn’t remember. “Rookie mistake.”

The elevator *dinged* when I reached the top floor.

“See you later.” I waved off, not sure if Preston was done with his mind-numbing story. That man could talk about boats for a lifetime and never get bored.

I was a few steps off the elevator and saw a large arrangement of flowers sitting on my desk. They were down the hall, but I could see a bright gold card sticking out of them. I glanced to Bridget’s desk, but she wasn’t there.

Mortification took a firm hold of my mind. They were from Miles, they had to be. There was no scenario in which I was explaining the flowers to Henry, so I’d either be hiding them or throwing them out covertly.

I walked as quickly as I could without looking like a maniac running through the hall to get them until I was stopped by what felt like a brick wall.

I stumbled back and felt strong hands hold my shoulders to steady me. It was Henry.

“Keep barreling into me and I’m going to start taking it personally,” he joked, but his voice stayed serious. His eyes refused to meet mine. “Are you all right?”

“Uh, yeah.” Shaking my head clear for a moment, I looked up at him.

My shoulders immediately missed the warmth of his hands when he dropped them back to his sides.

I wondered if he saw the flowers, but he seemed distracted, so maybe not.

“I set up a meeting with Rita to get some contacts for the Griswald,” I told him.

“Oh.” His eyebrows lifted, and for the first time, he seemed lighter. “That’s great news.”

“I’m meeting her on Monday. I was going to take the rest of that day off if that’s okay with you?”

“Next week?” His eyes became lost in thought, and his jaw flexed. “Yeah, of course.”

“Thanks.” I immediately started toward my office to dispose of the flowers.

“Oh, by the way...” Henry called as I walked away. He didn’t look at me, instead his gaze fixated firmly on the phone in his hand. “CeCe and I are going to the Augustus Charity Dinner next weekend.”

“That’s great.” My heart thudded to the bottom of my stomach.

He looked up at me with a tight smile and walked to the elevator behind me.

CHAPTER 24

Selena



The following Monday, I stopped at the Pearson offices first thing in the morning. The list had names I was expecting. Rita also included some prominent members in the club, such as the Sheffields. If I was correct, they were Henry's maternal side of the family. It was odd that he didn't know they were members.

Chloe, Rita's assistant, stopped me on my way out of the office. She motioned me over to her desk and opened the top drawer. "You had a couple of deliveries over the last few weeks."

She pulled out a small stack of cards. "They were mostly flowers, and one was a box of expensive-looking chocolates... I don't know what happened to those."

There were two small gold-colored cards. Each with different messages from Miles.

"Someone is trying to get your attention," Chloe teased.

"Thanks," I said, and then made my way to the elevators, turning the notes over in my hand.

Including the flowers, Miles sent four different gifts. We ended things on okay terms. When things fizzled out, I called him and we agreed it was over. Clean and easy.

Guess not.

It was clear I needed to call him and tell him to stop, but I really didn't want to. Why was it my job to teach him how to

take a rejection?

When I made it outside, I spotted Drake standing by the town car waiting for me on the street. I smiled and slipped into the back seat where I started my review of the list Rita gave me.

Ever since the night I worked late with Henry, he would send me home in a town car whenever I worked past sunset. Then it became every day after work. Then Drake began picking me up too. Now there was a car waiting for me before and after work.

Drake admitted once that he wasn't to leave my side until I was safely at my destination, on Henry's orders. I wanted to protest, but I couldn't. Whenever any emotion moved past mundane around Henry, something happened to me. I needed to keep our conversations as bland as possible.

Drake was silent and a little scary. He was an ex-marine turned private security. He assured me his only job was to ensure my safe passage, but it seemed like overkill to send a former special ops sniper to drive me around.

Henry's protectiveness made it clear that I needed to keep my wits about me. He was too good at making me feel safe. But even I had to admit, after a lifetime of looking out for myself, it was nice to be looked out for.

"I have the rest of the day off, so you can drop me off at home," I told Drake from my seat. Taking the afternoon was a welcomed reprieve from the last week. I was going to lunch with Isabelle and Lauren, and Drake knew that.

Drake gave me a half smile through the rearview. "You know I can't do that."

I sighed and told him where to drop me off for lunch.

The notes from Miles were becoming a little more than annoying, and I considered telling Drake. But I knew Drake would tell Henry, and that meant I would have to talk to Henry about Miles. That was a conversation I never planned to have.

I could handle it with a text I should have sent weeks ago.

ME

Hi, Miles. Thank you for the gifts, but it's not appropriate.

ME

They need to stop.

A few dots appeared, then disappeared. Hopefully that meant he got it.

CHAPTER 25

Henry



I'd been out with CeCe a million times. Known her my entire life. But all of a sudden, getting within five feet of her filled me with nausea. She looked as if she felt the same.

"At least try to look less uncomfortable," I begged as we took seats at the head table.

"Who's uncomfortable?" CeCe said as she fidgeted with her napkin. She looked around to see all the heads that had turned when we walked in together. An Amari-Cummings pairing would definitely make the society section. She took a large sip of her wine and sighed. "Besides, *you* look like you're going to be sick at the table. What's wrong?"

Aside from the fact that Miles was in town for the next few weeks? Knowing she was probably *with* him every day when she left the office—left me—made me fucking crazy.

"Other than a date with a woman who's practically my sister." I chuckled, trying to find some levity in the fact that Selena added "matchmaker" to her job description. "Nothing."

She rolled her eyes. "If you can't tell your fake girlfriend, who can you tell?"

I replayed that night in the Hamptons all the time, endlessly. I kept getting stuck on how much fun it seemed like we were having. Or every conversation we'd had since, even when she avoided me. It couldn't only be me.

“What makes us two of a kind?” I pivoted when I was reminded of what she said in my office, and I had meant to see if she was all right.

“Hmm?” CeCe looked up from swirling her glass of Beaujolais.

“My office, you said we’re two of a kind.”

“Oh, nothing.” The blond waves in her hair bounced as she shook her head lightly. “Not a big deal.”

“You sure?” I leaned forward and rested my arms on the table. Somewhere on the Upper East Side, my mother was clutching her pearls and having a panic attack. “Who are Xander, Rohan, Tristan, and Jax going to pay a visit to?”

CeCe was upset, and wherever someone broke her or Sloan’s heart, those four weren’t far behind to rectify things.

“Nobody.”

“Ce,” I drawled in jest. “If you can’t tell your fake boyfriend...”

“I’m fine.” She sighed. “Really. No need to summon the four horsemen of the apocalypse, especially when you’re deflecting from the”—her voice dropped to a whisper—“Selena situation.”

“There’s no situation.”

“I didn’t get that from how she looks at you,” she pondered in a hushed whisper. She crossed her arms, then lifted one to take a judgmental sip from her wine glass. “I’ve never known an Amari to back down.”

I sat up straighter, trying to remember where I was and not let something stupid slip out about how I felt about Selena. “It’s a little different. She’s seeing someone.”

“So?” CeCe shrugged. “I’ve been a size-two socialite since I was eighteen. I know what a hungry woman looks like.”

She gave me a provocative and knowing smirk.

A sudden burst of relief spread through me. CeCe picked up on it too. Selena *had* to feel something.

“Can we drop it?” I needed to figure it out, but not here.

“Sure,” she conceded. “Oh, I meant to ask you, that British guy you were here with for lunch a few months ago. Older, kind of smug. Is he going to be back for the regatta again?”

I paused. My lunch with Charles was his first time visiting either of the Augustus Clubs, or so he said. “What?”

“Well, since this is a fake date, I may as well get some work done. I’m planning next year’s Hamptons Augustus Regatta. He was there at this year’s one in May and awfully chummy with Preston, so I figured he was one of your guests. I can’t remember his name, but I wanted to send an invitation.”

I froze. My family missed that event because it was right after my grandfather’s passing.

The coincidence of it all had been bothering me since I found out Emily’s identity. Preston found out about Verge on purpose. Charles was the one to plant the seed. But why? “Charles Hayworth?”

She snapped her fingers. “That’s it! Thanks, Henry.”

I nodded.

CeCe and I spent the rest of the evening catching up. In the last couple of years, I’d fallen into a pit in readying myself to lead. Instead of leaning on the few people in my life, I drowned the self-imposed loneliness in booze and women. Then I used that bitterness as a way to reinforce the grudge I kept against Marcus for leaving.

We ended the night early. I dropped her off at her place and on the way back to mine, I rolled the option of actually pursuing Selena around in my head. I looked at the time. It wasn’t too late to drop by Sloan and Marcus’s unannounced. The last thing I needed was to walk in on something, so I texted Marcus.



Madeline, their house manager, let me in. It was a little before ten. They were sitting on the couch, reading and drinking wine.

“Sorry we missed the Augustus dinner.” Sloan grinned and flashed a knowing smile to Marcus.

I rolled my eyes and looked at him. “You told her?”

“CeCe told her,” he corrected, and put his glass down. “It’s going to be in the papers soon enough.”

“It’s a little early in the night,” Sloan teased. “Thank you for not sleeping with one of my closest friends.”

“At least one of us can say that,” I retorted, and her grin dropped. I looked at Marcus. “I need to talk to you.”

Marcus stood, kissed her on the head, and nodded for me to follow. We settled in front of the chess set in his office, and he made the opening move. He sat quietly and waited for me to explain the unexpected visit.

“If you could do it again,” I began, moving my pawn first. CeCe was right. He was my best friend and had been trying to help for months. “Would you have stolen Sloan from whoever she was dating when you realized you had feelings for her?”

The words were barely out of my mouth when he answered with certainty. “Absolutely.”

He moved a pawn to the center of the board.

“Okay. I remove the boyfriend. She still works for me.” I moved my bishop next, setting up my opening. “She’s still off limits.”

He didn’t say anything as he studied the board. After a long pause, he made his move, sacrificing the pawn, and

looked back at me. “King’s Gambit? You’re predictable. And to your point, Sloan was off limits for me, but here we are.”

I recognized his counterattack, took his pawn, and switched strategies. “You and Sloan were different.”

“Yeah. She’s my best friend’s little sister. My brother’s shadow. Not to mention, my mentor’s granddaughter. And the competition.”

“All that proves is you have no respect for boundaries.”

He laughed. “Maybe not, but I have Sloan.”

I couldn’t focus on the board. I walked to the bar cart in his office.

“Selena works for me,” I reminded him.

“Temporarily. And *technically*, she works for Sloan.”

I poured two glasses of whiskey. “She moves back to L.A. next summer.”

He paused when I handed him a glass, his lips curved at the corners. “Thinking about the future?”

“I’m simply pointing out that it’s not worth imploding my life over something that ends in eight months.”

“Counting the months?” His grin grew. “You like her.”

Yeah, I did. A lot more than I was willing to admit to myself. Originally, the idea that she was leaving in less than a year was the reason to pursue her. I could finally have her and get whatever it was that was stuck in me out of my system. And then, she’d be off to L.A.

But now, I couldn’t figure it out. I wanted her to stay? For what? I wasn’t filling my head with romantic notions of weddings and children.

“Can you focus?” I snapped.

“Can *you*? You’re willing to get rid of her boyfriend but not figure out a way to keep her here if it works out?” Marcus scoffed.

“I can’t try to keep her here.”

A wave of guilt drowned me. I couldn’t attempt to destroy her relationship with someone she may actually love. Not to have a few months of what would probably be explosive sex. She deserved more than that. I cared about her. I wanted her to be happy.

That. That was why I didn’t like getting involved in relationships. Too many competing priorities. Too many chances for my judgement to be clouded.

“I can’t offer her anything more than a few months,” I told him. Maybe I just needed someone else to tell me to stop feeling what I did for her.

A few moments passed. Marcus’s brow furrowed. “You sure about that?”

I groaned. On the long list of things I didn’t need, lecture about falling in love from Marcus was one of them. I topped off my glass and saw something Marcus left out on his desk.

Curiosity got the best of me when I saw a familiar name.

Julian Waldorf. Sloan’s ex.

I picked up the paper, and it looked like accounts from around the world. All mostly empty. It wasn’t a secret. The papers were laid out on his desk for anyone to see, and Marcus didn’t make mistakes. Especially not careless ones. Whatever he was doing, he had Sloan’s blessing.

“I knew you were a little much, but are you seriously planning something sinister against Julian Waldorf?” I laughed and picked up the paper. I scanned the list of companies and saw a name that seemed oddly familiar. Heritage Limited. I’d seen that name before.

Marcus turned and got up. He walked to the other side of his desk and pulled out a few more papers.

“It’s not like I’m trying to kill him,” he defended. “If I were, he’d be dead.”

“That tracks.” I looked through some of the papers. They looked like statements for shell companies.

“Although, he may wish I had after all of this.”

“All because he dated Sloan?”

“No.” He raked a hand through his hair and tipped his head in the direction to our seats. “Sit.”

His face became serious, even for him. Spindles of concern crawled around me. Julian bothered Sloan a while after their breakup, enough that Xander mentioned it once in passing.

“What did he do?” I demanded as calmly as I could.

Marcus pointed to the seat and took one himself. I sat down.

He exhaled deeply and took a second before he began. “After she broke up with him, Sloan was out with everyone, and he happened to be at a bar they went to. He tried to yank her into a corner. Julian got rough with her, and Tristan saw. He, Xander, and Rohan dragged Julian outside and beat him within an inch of his life. She was fine.”

I twitched. *What?* Sloan and I had our share of family drama, but she was still my baby sister. Why didn’t she tell me?

“And he’s still fucking breathing?” I spat. A building rage began to fog my mind. Why didn’t *anyone* tell me?

Tension lined Marcus’s jaw, clearly offended at my critique of how he handled it. “Long game.”

It was like talking to the fucking Riddler. “And by that you mean...?”

“After all of that, Sloan and Xander had a few investigations opened into the family’s financial affairs based off what Sloan knew about them. In a stroke of luck, or maybe karma, all the family’s many crimes leaked to the press, and that made them scramble to hide assets. They were messy, and Xander was able to find them all. He’s been working like a

shark over the last few years to find them and hand them over to the Feds.” He paused then, and a look of quiet pride washed over his features. “Anyway, Xander told me about it late this summer. I told Sloan, and now I’m telling you. Any accounts the Feds can’t access, I’ve been buying out and handing over to expedite matters.”

“Drain the accounts. What then?” I asked, even though I knew the answer. For the Waldorfs, a family that had been in the upper echelons of society for over a hundred years, losing their money was one thing. But they’d lose their social standing. That was a fate worse than death, and Marcus knew it.

“Watch it all fall down,” he said, an icy chill in his tone. “Once they’re irrelevant, nobody will care what happens to him.”

I sat stunned for a second. I’d become so involved in myself I had no idea what was going on with my own sister. Again.

“Now that I’ve told you that, it’s your turn. Why’d you come here?” He crossed his arms and tried to shift the conversation back to Selena as though he didn’t just drop a bombshell. “To get me to convince you to back down, or to find reasons to chase her?”

I wanted to chase. I wanted to catch her. But there were too many other factors to consider.

With Selena, nothing was simple. Not how I felt about her, not my pursuit of her, not even what I was willing to do to have her.

And that willingness was terrifying. I was always taught that fear was instructive. It warned you when it was best to reconsider or strategically retreat.

I had to consider the press, the board, everything.

I turned the glass in my hand. “The press?”

“Don’t tell them.” He said it flatly, like it was obvious or easy. I would love for my life to be that simple. The press always managed to find things out about my life because they’d always gone looking. “Keep it quiet a while. If it gets out, well, I guess it’s a good thing she’s in PR.”

My shoulders fell. “I can’t fuck this year up.”

I really couldn’t. It was too important. After a lifetime of learning everything I could from my grandfather, a few years of poor decision-making threw my entire future into jeopardy. It made me question everything.

“You won’t.” A seriousness reemerged. “The job is hard for you because it’s hard for everyone who does it.”

The words pinched. It was so fucking easy for him to say. Everyone expected perfection from Marcus Sutton, and he always delivered. “You built the largest biotech company in the span of five years.”

“I had help. Help you don’t have.”

When Marcus set off to start Sutton Industries, my grandfather was there for guidance in his first few years as CEO. To say my grandfather was proud of him was an understatement.

“As for the press,” he continued. “You think I’d be in any different position than you right now if I was born with a recognizable last name?”

“I guess.”

“Dating someone doesn’t breach the morality clause, obviously, or you wouldn’t have gone out with CeCe. That was never the concern.”

“Still, the optics are shitty,” I added. “The board may not like it.”

“Putting the board and public perception ahead of your happiness?” he began, his lips thinning. “Some asshole gave me pretty decent advice once: Don’t turn into Rishi Amari.”

I gave Marcus that advice when he almost imploded his relationship with my little sister by acting in my grandfather's best interest instead of hers. A mistake he didn't make again.

"Smart asshole," I corrected, resisting the smile that tugged at the side of my face. I missed my best friend. I was sick of being angry at him. It stemmed from feeling forgotten, but he was one of the few people in my life who didn't have an ulterior motive for being there.

I finished the glass and got up. "Thanks."

He nodded.

I stopped in the doorway. "Want to box after brunch this weekend?"

He chuckled and nodded again.

I made my way out but first went straight to the living room. Sloan still sat on the couch, reading her book. I knelt down on the floor ahead of her, and she looked at me, bewildered.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked softly.

My little sister had been my best friend for so long. Our entire childhood, it was us against everyone else.

It hurt that she kept something like what happened with Julian from me, but what hurt worse was the knowledge that over the last few years, I pushed her away far enough that she felt like she couldn't tell me.

"He told you." She sighed. "It was a rough time for you. Last thing you needed was to be on trial for murder."

"I know a great lawyer," I reminded her. "Besides, I wouldn't have gotten caught."

Her eyes softened. "Henry, I'm fine."

"Good. I like the plan."

"A little diabolical for Xander," she mused softly. "Don't worry, Julian will get what's coming to him."

After I left their place, an encrypted email from Marcus came in with everything he had on Miles. I wasn't planning on using it, but it was good to have.

I'd get Selena the old-fashioned way.

CHAPTER 26

Selena



Manhattan Society's Perfect Pairing

Front and center of the society section were photos of CeCe and Henry. It was the PR version of a rave review.

I stared at the newspaper on the way to a press event I didn't know anything about. It was late afternoon when Henry texted me to meet him there.

I'd been avoiding him all week. The nervous excitement that used to skate through me when I saw him was replaced with a deep ache.

One of the photographs was of CeCe walking into the Amari Global building. A photographer must have taken it the day after she dropped off the invitations. I made a note to call my contact at the tabloid to see how they managed to get the photo. Probably a lucky shot they happened to buy first. But still, it was weird.

The rest of the pictures were from the Augustus Club. They looked perfect together. There were a few candid ones too. Henry was laughing and looked relaxed. Happy.

Despite having done exactly what I set out to do, I wanted to cry.

The paper trembled in my hands. I did my best to steady them when I arrived and the car door opened. I stepped out

and looked around the block. We were in front of a small gallery near the Brooklyn Center for the Arts.

Henry stood outside at the glass doors, hands in his pockets, wearing a boyish grin. He was in a good mood. A certain blonde heiress was probably the reason. The afternoon sun poured over him, making his brown eyes radiate with warmth.

The tightness in my chest intensified.

“It’s working,” I whispered to Henry quietly when I got out of the car and handed him the society section. I tried to ignore the smell of his cologne when I leaned in that close. Cedar and spice. “They love you two.”

“Yeah, about that.” He rubbed the back of his neck, and the chilly November breeze rustled through his hair. He immediately threw the paper in the recycling bin. “That’s a non-starter.”

I didn’t say anything as waves of queasiness settled and were replaced by curiosity.

“The dinner was fine, but I can’t pretend to date CeCe,” he explained, tipping his head in the direction of the door and motioning for me to follow. “She’s like a little sister.”

“Oh.” My body suddenly felt lighter. I could take deep breaths again.

The ease that overcame me must have been visible because he smiled. One of the devastating ones.

“Nice try though,” he taunted.

“Where’s the press?” I wondered aloud as Henry opened the door for me and I entered the studio. There were a few people hanging around, but it looked like I missed the press event.

“It was a small event, shake a few hands, take a few pictures,” he told me as he walked down the first corridor to a large room with an entire exhibit of photographs. “All of these are by high school students in the area.”

“Oh.” My heart skipped. Normally, I would have been the one to set everything up, and Henry would simply sign off on the donation.

The realization drizzled onto me like a light rain when you forgot your umbrella.

This was a surprise.

For me.

The world felt like it slowed, but my heart raced.

“Why?” I didn’t know what I was asking. Why this donation? Why the surprise?

“A kid with a Polaroid camera their abuela gave them might be the next Ansel Adams,” he said nonchalantly, his eyes slowly assessing the landscape photograph in front of him. “Seems like a good investment.”

Every voice that told me to run away was silent. The excitement, desire, and sheer giddiness formed a lump in my throat. I couldn’t speak, so I walked past to the next photograph, trying to anchor my unsteady heart.

We stayed like that, admiring the photographs, for a while. I stopped at one of a tranquil lake surrounded by towering trees, and Henry followed. We stood there silently, taking it in.

“Take a little field trip with me.”

Henry took hold of my hand—the most forward he’d been since the Hamptons—and gestured to the door. He didn’t ask, but I followed without objection.

“What?” I stammered.

He hadn’t been at the office all day. Now, instead of going back and working until well into the evening, he wanted to go out? My head couldn’t deal with how quickly he jumped between pushing me away and pulling me in. But my heart didn’t seem to care. Not when the pull felt so good.



We ended up at the Museum of Natural History.

It was one of my favorite places in the city and the setting for my favorite movie as a kid, *Night at the Museum*. Henry clearly remembered the offhanded comment I made months ago.

My heels echoed through the grand, empty atrium where a large dinosaur skeleton stared me down. He took my hand again and led me up the staircase.

“I think it’s closed.” I looked around and didn’t see another person in sight.

“Yeah...” Henry chuckled. “It is.”

He had the museum closed. For me?

Today was throwing me through a loop. The gallery, the museum, my heart skipped a potentially fatal number of beats when I reached the top of the steps and saw a table set for two.

“I used to love coming here as a kid,” he told me as we walked over to the table, stopping every few steps to look at the exhibits around us. I took a second to marvel at the large models in the ancient African mammals wing.

“A museum?” A rush of courage overwhelmed me. The man who seemed to have complete control over every one of my desires was once a geeky little kid? “You were a loser too?” I beamed and yanked playfully on his lapels.

He gave me an unamused look. “The Museum of Natural History is cool. And a national treasure,” he warned. Feeling a jittery excitement vibrate through every muscle, I walked ahead of him. “Watch your mouth.”

I flipped a glance over my shoulder. “Or what?”

“Stop.” His soft command wisped over to me and settled in my stomach.

I stopped.

He loomed behind me, laying his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t move.”

His breath tickled my ear. A wave of chills rippled through me.

Henry walked ahead another twenty feet or so, then stopped and turned around to face me. His mouth moved, but whatever he said was too quiet for me to hear. A millisecond later, I heard it. “It’s a whisper chamber.”

I froze. He remembered what I said at brunch about my favorite movie and brought me here. He remembered that day at the Ritz, back when I believed I could hate him if I tried hard enough.

“Do you remember everything people casually mention to you?” I muttered softly, waiting the half-second for his reaction with bated breath.

He shook his head.

“No.” The whisper made its way to me.

Just me.

“You should have the next board meeting here. Morgan Parker would love the bird exhibit,” I whispered. A second later, his chest shook with a silent chuckle.

“Grand Central Station has a whisper chamber too.”

“Do these interesting New York City facts work on...” I stopped myself from finishing the question.

“You?” he offered quietly from his side. He may have been twenty feet away, but he surrounded me.

The thundering in my chest drowned out the rest of the world. He walked to the table and pulled out my chair, put his

hand up, and motioned for me to join him. The table, perfectly set, had a stack of boxes in the center.

I looked at the boxes. It was the Thai place where Lauren was sous chef. The first lunch we ever shared was the one he stole from me. The one that Lauren made when she was practicing for her interview.

I sat down, mouth agape with disbelief.

“I owed you a lunch,” he reasoned. “Even though, technically, you cheated.”

I didn’t even try to contain the smile that stretched across my face. “How did you know which restaurant it was?”

“There’s only one ‘new and trendy’ Thai place by the office that’s close enough to walk to during lunch,” he noted casually like it wasn’t adorable that he figured out where Lauren worked so he could recreate our first meal together.

My heart skipped way too many beats again.

“Did you have anything to do with Lauren getting the job?” I didn’t know whether or not to be annoyed. It was a huge deal for her. She was over the moon.

“No.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I passed along her name to make sure they gave her a fair shot. The restaurant group that owns it are friends of the family. She got it on her merits.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“You don’t know Lauren...” I trailed off.

“No, but you do.” His eyes moved from mine to the food in front of us, and he grabbed the chopsticks and handed them to me.

“Careful. It’s spicy,” he teased.

“I’ll be fine.” I grinned, thankful we’d swept past that heaviness. If he said any more, there was a good chance we’d

be having sex in a museum. “My abuela’s family was from Tonalá in Guadalajara. She could make a spicy pozole that would knock you on your ass.”

He paused and looked like he was solving a puzzle in his head. “The arepas?”

My heart wouldn’t survive much more of this. He remembered my lunch orders.

“My grandfather was from Cartagena,” I answered.

“You never mentioned him, only your grandmother.”

The bar. The umbrella. The photography intensive. The museum. The whisper chamber. The arepas. He was paying close attention all this time.

“I don’t remember all that much,” I admitted. “Just that he called me *pájaro* because I would eat the grapes right off the vine at the vineyard he worked at. He died when I was a kid.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, it was a long time ago. We moved from Central Valley to L.A. after that.”

His eyes flickered around the room in thought. Another puzzle piece fell into place in his mind. He had the same look every time it happened. “The pictures of all the vineyards.”

“He was a winemaker at a big vineyard. Only one of a few in the business that were of Latin-American descent at the time,” I said proudly. Abuelo had broken a lot of norms. He was a master sommelier and had a discerning palate when it came to wine. “He always wanted to start his own label.”

“Is that the reason you want to move back?” There was a pitch in his voice I’d never heard before.

Regret ratcheted up my throat. I wish I hadn’t told him I was leaving. I didn’t think he’d ever ask why or care, but now, it made me wonder if that was the reason for all of this.

“No, it was his dream, not mine.”

He leaned forward in his chair and opened his mouth to say something but stopped.

“What’s yours?” he asked a few seconds later.

“I don’t know.” I sucked in a deep breath. After college, my job with Rita paid ridiculously well, and I wasn’t going to question it. Now, it felt like it was the safe thing to do. It was practical. I wasn’t going to give up an insane salary to chase a dream, especially if I wasn’t sure what that dream was. “Maybe I’ll figure it out one day.”

A soft, comfortable silence filled the room. He looked at me in quiet observation, listening intently, like he was memorizing everything I said.

“You didn’t have any adorable nicknames?” I asked when the weight of his full attention was too heavy.

He shook his head.

“Not really. The nannies called me Mr. Amari, which was weird to call a five-year-old,” he mused.

I waited for him to continue when he stopped short.

“What about your family?” I prodded.

Indecision passed over his face for a few extended seconds.

“No, I hardly saw them. I was at boarding school and never really came home,” he answered. A sadness flickered over him, passing as quickly as it came. “But Sloan uses a shorthand for everyone. I guess that counts.”

“That’s a lot to put on a kid,” I murmured.

Henry looked and acted like a high society fever dream.

Polished. Charming. Powerful.

I was realizing that it was carefully crafted. His life was like a Monet, stunning at a distance. Envious. When you inspected it intimately, it looked like a constellation of duty

and expectation. Based solely on the virtue of his last name, he was destined for greatness. And a lifetime in golden handcuffs.

Henry shrugged. “My grandfather was focused. He won at any cost. I was every hope for the future. His legacy. He treated me as such.”

I had no place to judge, but the idea of being sent away made my heart ache for him. I knew the enormous weight carried by the children and grandchildren of immigrants. We were tasked with ensuring every sacrifice was worth it. My family never put that kind of pressure on me. Rather, they encouraged me to chase my dreams, even if I chose not to. No amount of money would make me trade that in for what Henry grew up with.

He read my silence for exactly what it was, pity.

“Try not to feel too bad, I did get that excellent office.” His features lightened.

He was impossible to resist when he was *this* Henry. The one who loosened up. The one who didn’t speak in a high society vernacular. The one I was beginning to realize was the real Henry.

I liked seeing him like this. Relaxed. Vulnerable. I needed more.

“Henry,” I began cautiously, a little unsure if I wanted to know. “Are we on a date?”

He shook his head. “No.”

My heart fell into my stomach. “Oh.”

He leaned forward, lifted my chin with an index finger, and stroked my cheek with his thumb. “When I take you on a date, I’ll ask you first.”

When. I felt weightless. “So... what’s all this?”

He looked around, then back at me. “A night at the museum.”

CHAPTER 27

Selena & Henry

SELENA



Security at the Amari country house peered at us again.
“Please put the phone away,” I begged Lauren.

As she and I walked through the grand foyer, we were greeted by intricate cascading floral arrangements, accentuated by scented candles and golden lanterns, filling the air with an enchanting fragrance.

Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, casting a shimmering glow over the marble floors below.

I wasn’t planning on going to the Diwali party, but when the coordinator called to confirm my address to send dresses over, I decided to roll with it. Several options arrived at my apartment a few hours later, all from the famed designer Rahul Mishra.

Someone RSVP’d yes to the party for me, and I hoped it was Henry. Although, the coordinator said I’d responded yes with a guest, so that didn’t add up. Unless I misread everything.

“No way, I’m getting so many views. I’m glad I was able to come tonight.” Lauren spun on her toes as she recorded the opulence of the party. She was planning a trip to Boston to stay with a friend from culinary school. She was heading there tomorrow but managed to make it here tonight with me. “Besides, *they* can take from you, but you can’t take from them?”

I ignored the urge to correct her. The jabs were starting to bother me. Henry was kind and deeply caring. It wasn't the same, and it always pinched when she said something off-handedly like that.

I was planning to go alone, but Lauren overheard the conversation and was too excited to let down.

We spent at least ten minutes in the entrance of the house trying to figure out how someone would actually *live* here. Not that anyone did, this was their country home.

It was like a ballroom attached to a house attached to a hotel, and I swore I saw stables when we drove up.

"Well, I'm glad you've warmed up to my new job." I said as I turned to Lauren and handed her a drink. We stopped at the bar stationed in the grand foyer, one of many, and made our way inside.

She raised an eyebrow.

"I never said not to enjoy it. Just don't get caught up in it," she warned.

Did wanting to see Henry count as getting caught up?

"Whatever that means." I shrugged.

We greeted Sloan and Xander on our way in and Marcus a few minutes later. I saw everyone in Henry's circle, except for him. We spent some time exploring the parts of the house guests wandered through. There was a library and a stunning terrace.

"Selena!" a familiar bubbly voice called from behind me. "I'm so glad you made it."

"CeCe." Any other words were washed away by the anxious wave that crashed over me. I was so blinded by the excitement to see him, I forgot she'd be here.

"I hope it wasn't too presumptuous to RSVP yes for you." She beamed. CeCe did it? "I figured I owed you one date you didn't agree to."

“I’m sorry about—”

“Please, don’t apologize.” She laughed an airy, beautiful laugh. “A platonic dinner that everyone reads into is basically the entrance fee to our little group.”

“I’m glad you’re not upset.”

“Not at all. Spending a night catching up with Henry was nice, but I think he would’ve probably had a better time with your attention,” she teased. Her gaze was drawn to someone else, and she waved. “Come to brunch again soon. I’m sure I’m not the only one who’d like to see you there.” She winked again before running off.

Jackson Prince, a friend of Sloan’s, managed to get Lauren’s attention, and they disappeared somewhere, even though Lauren had been the one to discourage all of the fraternizing before tonight.

It was easy to get swept up here.

HENRY

By the time I arrived at the country house for the party, my family was already there. I avoided my parents and enjoyed the crisp autumn air outside. My parents had a proclivity for ruining a good mood, and I was in an exceptional one.

It didn't even bother me that I spent Saturday morning at the office in meetings with legal, and then finance. I was wary of Preston, so I had one of the VPs look at the acquisition details. They came to the same conclusion Preston had: we were in the clear.

Outside of him speaking with Charles Hayworth last summer, I had no reason to question Preston's loyalty. He'd served my grandfather well, and I'd known him for years. I trusted him.

Hayworth's involvement still felt off, but everything checked out. I was one step closer.

First Verge. Then CEO. Then Selena.

Or whichever order. I didn't care. I'd handle Miles. If there was one thing I was sure about after that night at the museum, it was that she wanted this too. I wasn't going to cross a line with her but simply show her what her options were.

"Sloan almost sent bounty hunters." Marcus walked up beside me and handed me a drink.

The party was held in the ballroom, which opened out to the terrace and overlooked the large south lawn of the compound. Because it was mid-November, a large section of it was enclosed in a glass greenhouse, which was erected every year for this party.

"I've been here an hour," I told him as I took a sip of the whiskey. The smell of pine trees mixed with the smoke from the fire pits and the cold autumn air brought back memories of

my grandmother. She loved this house. “I came out here to avoid my parents.”

I knew I should go in and greet the executives and board members, but the quiet out on the lawn was seductive.

“I figured as much.”

The outdoor greenhouse was warm, but people didn’t generally make their way over until later in the evening.

“Bored?” I asked. Usually, at these parties, Sloan and Xander would bounce around playing their random party games and being some level of chaotic. It would leave Marcus and myself to talk most of the night.

“No, I came looking for you to tell you something.” His gaze flicked to the terrace that served as a go-between from the party space in the house to the greenhouse. “Selena’s here.”

My heart rate ticked up. I didn’t think she was coming. She hadn’t mentioned it. “Did she bring—”

“Yeah, one of her friends.” Marcus’s penchant for interrupting was probably something he picked up from me. This far into our friendship, we usually knew what the other was going to ask. “Lauren, I think, is her name.”

I grinned. Selena brought her friend to the party. Not a date. Not Miles.

“I introduced her friend to Jackson, so Selena is probably in need of some company. I hope you don’t mind,” Marcus noted.

Since I was eighteen, there was one person who always had my back. In monumental ways, and then in small ones. “You’re a good friend.”

“I’m good at most things,” he said offhandedly. I rolled my eyes, and he nodded in the direction of the west lawn. “Say hi to Sloan at some point tonight, preferably before the fireworks.” He turned to walk off. “Oh, and she’s going to be pissed you’re not dressed,” he called.

Shit.

I knew I forgot something. I was supposed to get changed into a kurta when I got here, but I forgot and was wearing the suit I wore in my morning meetings. I wanted to care, but knowing Selena was here occupied every brain cell.

A few minutes later, I saw Selena walk out onto the terrace, alone. The tight silver cropped top she wore fit her snugly. The flowing lengha skirt was a vibrant shade of blue, with shimmering silver details that caught the moonlight with every step she took.

My legs moved before I realized it. Her eyes scanned along the expanse and finally met mine. She smiled. That smile. It could light up the city during a blackout.

“You aren’t dressed,” she pointed out softly as she descended the steps from the terrace toward me. “Would it kill you to wear anything other than a suit?”

“Maybe. Why risk it?” I offered my hand to help her down. She took it. “You look...”

She came down the final step and looked up at me from beneath her dark lashes, waiting for me to finish my sentence. She was magnificent, striking, resplendent, gorgeous.

“No word is sufficient.”

“Is that purposeful, or are you stuck on the Prince Charming setting?” Her head turned faintly, but she held my gaze. She didn’t pull her hand back.

“I switch between as I see fit.”

“Between Prince Charming and what?”

“If you want to know,” I whispered, then brought her hand up to my lips and pressed a polite kiss on the back. “You’ll have to find out.”

Crimson spread across her cheeks. Her collarbone lifted with a deep inhale, and she looked around at the property. The sun set an hour ago. The darkness was embroidered with the

sparkle of lanterns scattered throughout the gardens. “The gardens are beautiful. I wish I brought my camera.”

“Next time,” I assured her. “Want to see the grounds?”

She nodded, and I took my suit jacket off and threw it over her shoulders. The silver embroidery on her skirt glimmered along the curves of her hips as she moved.

We walked in silence for a few minutes across the south lawn to the garden.

“Why didn’t you use your mother’s connections? For the Griswald?” she asked. That was unexpected. My family never talked about it.

A drawn-out silence followed.

“Sorry, we don’t have to talk about it,” she sputtered.

“No, it’s fine. We don’t really talk to that side of the family. I guess, to be more accurate, they don’t speak to us, and we never accepted their attempts to reconcile.”

She looked back up at me. “Why?”

“My high society English mother fell in love with my new money Indian-American father,” I began with a deep sigh. “And the rest, I’m sure you can guess.”

She nodded, and her hand found mine again.

It hurt my mother, but the outright rejection fundamentally affected everything about my father. He spent his life trying to make sure nobody had a reason to reject someone he loved, so Sloan and I had no choice but to be remarkable.

When the time came for Amari Global to appoint a new leader, he stepped aside because nobody would question one of his perfect, society-raised, well-mannered, well-educated, exceptional children.

Toxic perfectionism was our family’s brand.

“They reached out a few times since,” I continued after a comforting silence. Sloan and I spent our childhood ignored

by that family until they decided we might be acceptable. “I decided against contact.”

Everyone had an agenda. Charles Hayworth was proof of that fact. I couldn’t trust many people around those I loved.

“You were never curious to meet them?” Her soft voice warmed the chilly night air.

“Maybe.” I paused. “But not enough to do anything about it.”

Selena didn’t say anything. We kept walking down the grounds until the path ended. Mesmerized by the sky, Selena kept walking, and her hand slipped from mine. This far out in the country, almost every star was visible.

“Selena?” I called.

She looked back over her shoulder. “Hmmm?”

“Why are you going back to L.A.?”

She paused. Her eyes scanned the night sky. “It’s home.”

“New York can be home,” I reminded her softly. July was getting too close with every passing second. I wanted the one thing I couldn’t buy—more time.

She shifted, then stumbled when her heels sank into the soil. I stepped forward quickly, and my hands found her hips. I caught her, and she looked up at me with a mix of surprise and irresolution in her eyes. For a moment, we were frozen.

My heart beat wildly beneath her hand when she steadied herself by leaning it against my chest. Instead of letting go, I leaned in and wrapped my arm around her. I swept the silky brown locks that fell forward out of her face.

She belonged here. On this coast. In *my* arms.

“You have to stop doing that,” she breathed, her hand slowly closing to a fist around my shirt and pulling me closer.

“Doing what?” I leaned in, and she closed her eyes as I brushed my lips against hers.

“Making me—”

A loud crackle interrupted us, drawing her attention to the sudden burst of light on the west lawn.

Shit.

The fireworks were Sloan’s favorite part of the holiday, and I’d spent almost the entire evening avoiding my family.

Selena read in the indecision on my face and pulled away. “We should get back to the party.”

I followed a step behind her as we went back inside. The way she looked, engulfed in my suit jacket, did something to me. It was hard to feel anything other than a deep desire to hold her close and never let go.

CHAPTER 28

Selena



I was never more excited for a Monday.

The apartment was quiet since Lauren left for Boston yesterday. I enjoyed the solitude of my living room, replaying the party in my head over and over all evening.

If the fireworks hadn't interrupted us, I was sure Henry and I would have finally finished that kiss we started in the Hamptons. We were drawn apart shortly after that when Lauren caught up with me, and I didn't want to explain to her what happened in the garden. I knew she'd have judgment I wasn't ready to hear, so I spent the rest of the night with her. I did, however, exchange the occasional glance with Henry.

I couldn't wait to see him. He had me rethinking everything. I knew I needed to be careful, but I was enjoying the free fall.

I stood in the entryway and threw my coat on, doing a quick check of my hair before heading out. I twirled a few strands nervously through my fingers.

When I walked out the door, the pad of my foot gave way, slipping on something. I knelt down and picked up the golden envelope beneath my shoe. My heart fell into my stomach, and I looked around.

I locked my door quicker than I ever had before, and when I turned, he was there. Blond hair, hazel eyes, unwarranted swagger—it was him.

Miles, with his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, took a couple of steps toward me.

“Miles?” My shaking hand shoved him back. “What the fuck?”

“Can we please talk?” He put his hands up and smiled. The same boyish one that had all the girls falling over themselves for. He nodded his head in the direction of my apartment door.

“No, Miles, I’m late for work, and I meant what I said when I texted you.” I waved him off and quickly began down the hallway as my pulse became the only thing I could hear in my ears. I was a little scared. I didn’t want to admit it to myself, but I was.

“I wanted to revisit that,” Miles said casually, following a few steps behind. He said it like tracking me down and arguing with me about a breakup that happened months ago wasn’t the most inappropriate response. A breakup that he’d seemed perfectly fine with at the time, might I add.

“Well, too bad.” I stopped and turned around, even though I knew I should just get to the lobby. “Stop following me, stop texting me. Seriously, it’s not funny, it’s not cute, it’s not romantic. It’s fucking weird, and I’m pretty sure it’s also illegal.”

He raised his brows and blinked a few times in surprise.

“You’re not serious,” he scoffed lightly, tilting his head to the side and looking at me like I was missing something obvious. “Come on, Selena.”

. I’d been starry-eyed at the glitzy Hollywood parties he took me to. Not because I wanted to be there, but because I wanted to forget the hell I went through before him. But in his mind, I was a regular person. What kind of regular person wouldn’t jump at the chance to be with a celebrity?

“Leave me alone, or I will make you,” I threatened, though I had no actual plan. But I was sick of being pushed around by the tide, drifting wherever it decided I should go. I was sick of being terrified to make waves.

“Selena,” he repeated, more surprised this time. I turned to go to the elevator, but he grabbed hold of my arm.

Something came over me, and my entire body filled with a rage I’d been keeping a lid on for over a year. The fury wasn’t directed at him, but if he wasn’t going to let go, I was going to make him.

I reacted. I turned, swung my arm, and my closed fist connected with his jaw.

The next thing I knew, an electric pain shot through my right hand, and Miles stumbled back and hit the floor.

I was frozen for a split second, taking in what I’d just done.

I punched him.

Hard.

“I meant what I said,” I threatened again, then turned around and ran to the steps.

I kept moving until I could feel the gritty texture of the sidewalk beneath my heels. My eyes darted across the busy street, and I saw Drake’s familiar face jogging toward me.

“Miss Montez?”

I opened my mouth to explain, but could only manage to squeak out an “ow.”

A searing heat in my hand worked its way up my arm. It was only then that I realized tears were streaming down my face, and blood was trickling down my knuckles.



Once the blood was cleaned off, it didn’t look nearly as bad. Drake brought me to Isabelle’s hospital so she could see me quickly. I’d called her with my good, non-bloody hand on the way over.

“You’re going to be fine. It’s a minor boxer’s fracture.” Isabelle stood in front of the x-rays in mint green surgery scrubs and a scrub cap. “A splint for your hand, and that’s it.”

“Are you sure?” I pulled the hospital blanket up to my chin. The ER was freezing, and the vent was blowing cold air on top of my bed.

“No.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm. “In the four years of med school and three of my six years of residency so far, nobody taught me how to read one of these.”

“If you’re going to be mean, I need more of the good drugs.”

“All we gave you is some ibuprofen,” Isa countered. She grabbed a chair and pulled it up next to me. She picked up the ice pack to check on the swelling. “Looks good.”

“Thanks for patching me up, Isa.”

She smiled. When I first got in and she saw that I was mostly fine, she howled with delight when I told her I decked Miles for bothering me.

“Okay... two things,” she began. “First off, well done. I wish you’d told me he was being weird earlier.”

“I know,” I sighed. “Honestly, I just wanted one less thing in my life to worry about. I figured if I ignored him, he’d go away.”

Miles was a lot of things. Impetuous. Bizarre. Conceited. But I really didn’t think dangerous was one of them, until today. I had a hard time reconciling the insistent man in the hallway with the one who’d helped pick me up after the Waldorfs pummeled me to the ground.

“And two. You need to file a police report.”

“Isa—”

“I can’t force you, but stalking is abuse. I have to report anything I suspect.”

She was right. I knew I should. But why was I the one who had to deal with him being a psycho *and* the one who had to go through the pain of reliving it all for... a police report. One that I knew wouldn't amount to anything because he'd find a way to bury it. It wouldn't do much to stop him if he was determined to continue being a narcissistic creep.

"I'll figure it out," I assured her. She gave me a skeptical look. "I promise."

"You sure you're doing okay?"

I nodded. I actually felt pretty good.

While I was a little concerned about what would happen now that I'd confronted Miles, when I punched him, I hadn't felt scared.

For the first time in a while, I felt powerful. Like I finally had some control over what was happening to me.

"Good." She lifted the ice pack and placed it back on my knuckles. "It looks clean, but you were bleeding. That means you probably clipped his teeth, so you need to keep the cuts clean and dry."

"Selena." Henry's deep voice sliced through the room. It was deceptively calm, given the distress etched on every inch of his gorgeous face. It pulled me in the second I heard it. His hair was disheveled, like he'd been raking his hand through it. Isa moved away from the bed, and in a few long strides, Henry was by my side. He cupped my face in his hands, and his thumbs stroked my cheeks. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. A small shudder of relief rolled through him.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Isa dramatically clutch her chest and mouth the words "Oh my god."

"Clipped *whose* mouth?" Henry asked. The dangerous undercurrents in his voice began to sneak past the surface.

"I'm fine. You could have called." I squeezed his hand. The look in his eyes made my heart sink. Deep pools of

uneasiness and anxiety swirled as he struggled to maintain control.

“Oh fuck, I wish I thought of that,” he replied drolly. “Check your phone.”

“Oh.” I winced when I saw the four missed calls from him. It was sitting face down on the bed on silent. “Sorry.”

“Clipped whose mouth?” he repeated as he pulled away, took off his suit jacket, and draped it over me. “What happened?”

“I’m going to get the dressing for the splint,” Isa interrupted, and shot me a look before she left. Curious, excited, and mischievous all in one smile.

I looked back to Henry, trying to avoid his question. “You should see the other guy.”

“I intend to.” He gripped my chin gently but firmly. “Who?”

I knew he’d figure it out on his own if I didn’t tell him. That or Isa would rat me out. “This morning, when I was leaving my place, my ex was in the hallway.”

His eyes got lost in thought. “Your ex?”

“Yeah. He’s—”

“Miles Asher.”

I nodded.

“He sent you the flowers.”

“You saw those?” My stomach sank. I was embarrassed and marginally mortified. As if things between us weren’t complicated enough, he knew about my oddly persistent ex. “I thought if I ignored him, he’d get the hint,”

He sat down at the side of my bed. “How long has he been bothering you?”

I hesitated for a moment. “A few months.”

His hand found my uninjured one again and held it, stroking the back with his thumb. “Don’t worry about Miles. I’ll take care of it.”

Five words, delivered in his deep, sweet voice, made me feel safer than if an army of guards were at my side. A slow relief washed over me.

I wanted to question what he meant, but I didn’t. When people in Henry’s position asked for someone to stay away, they did.

“Southpaw,” he noted as his hand grazed my injured wrist.

“What?”

“You’re left-handed but punch with your right.” He mentioned that he knew I was left-handed casually. Like it wouldn’t send static all over my body. “Southpaws are left-handed boxers. They use a right-handed stance, lead with right jabs.”

He demonstrated playfully with his own hands.

“But then cross with the left,” he explained. I sat up straighter, and he leaned in. “And end with an unexpected right hook.”

He brought his fists down and tucked back a lock of my hair that fell forward.

“It’s a knockout,” he whispered.

A familiar pull wrapped around us.

I’d been drawn to Miles because of everything around him, the promise of forgetting. But with Henry, I was drawn to him despite the fear I may never forget him.

My pulse ticked up to a pace I could feel beating through my injured hand. His lips brushed against mine, and a heat swept through me.

“Okay!” Isa burst into the room, looking at the supplies in her hand.

I jolted back.

“Sorry,” she said when she registered the frustration on my face. “But I need to put a splint on her. I’d come back, but you know, lives to save and such.”

I wanted to slap her with my good hand.

She sat on a chair on the other side of me and started splinting quietly. Henry hadn’t moved from his spot on the bed and didn’t seem to mind Isa being witness to his gentleness around me.

A silence enveloped the room as Isa worked. Henry’s eyes got lost in thought.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He shook off whatever he was thinking about and looked at me, then gave my thigh a reassuring squeeze. “Yeah. I don’t like hospitals.”

“Does anyone?”

“Hopefully the doctors.” The matter-of-fact way he said it made Isabelle laugh.

“And he’s funny?” Isabelle interrupted her work and smiled wide. When we turned to her, she bit down on her closed fist provocatively.

It was enough to make Henry smile and my entire face heat up. “Isa!”

“The overachieving friend?” he asked. I’d mentioned Isa one of the nights we worked late together.

“Henry, this is Dr. Isabelle Mercado.” Isa secretly loved being addressed as doctor. “Isa, this is Henry.”

I stopped before I finished that sentence. The idea of having to introduce him as my *boss* felt insulting to what was going on between us.

“Overachieving?” Isa feigned offense. She looked over her splint work and sighed with satisfaction. Only then did it click

that she probably gave up an interesting surgery to take care of me. She looked back over to Henry. “What else does she say about me?”

“All good things,” Henry assured. His fingers tapped rapidly along my thigh. “What does she say about me?”

“Oh... It’s *good*.” Isa teased with wide eyes. Heavy innuendo soaked each word. Thankfully, her phone rang a few times in succession. I knew the sound well by now—she was getting called to surgery. She paused, read the messages, and sighed. “Ooh, Selena, you’re lucky I love a good rotator cuff repair.”

“Bye, Isa.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Mercado.” Henry flashed me a self-assured smirk. His voice was smooth and confident. “And thank you.”

CHAPTER 29

Henry



Once Isabelle finished splinting Selena's hand, she went to the OR, and we waited for her discharge paperwork.

There was a silence that filled the room after she left.

"Selena." I lifted her chin with my hand again and grazed it with my thumb. "You're coming home with me."

Her amber eyes went wide, lighting up. I could have worded it differently, but I wanted to see her reaction. It was the one I hoped for.

"Not for *that*," I said.

Definitely for *that*. But not right now. Right now, I needed to get a handle on the Miles situation. I didn't know the whole story, and I didn't need to. Selena was in a hospital bed. That was more than enough. I'd take care of it.

She swallowed hard. "Hmm?" A soft sigh was all she could muster.

Fuck that's cute. And I wanted to hear more.

"You can't go back to your place. He knows where you live."

"I can clearly protect myself," she retorted playfully, holding up the bandaged hand as if it were proof of anything other than the fact that she needed additional security.

"You're running out of hands."

She giggled, and her eyes sparred with mine. “I’ve still got the one.”

She laid her hand on my chest and gave me a gentle push. I moved out of her way so she could swing her legs over the bed and stand.

“Look,” I commanded gently. I put my hands on her waist and yanked her close. My thumbs stroked her sides. “I can’t get that call again, Selena.”

There were too many terrible memories tied with that particular phone call. The call from Sloan when the Suttons were in their accident and passed on the way to the hospital. By the time Marcus and I arrived, his parents were gone. We were barely out of business school. We may not have been blood, but they were more like parents to me than my own.

Or when that exact call came in a few years ago when the only real parental figure I had died. Then the call I got a few months ago to make me aware my grandfather passed. That one flipped everything on its head too. It moved up my ascension timeline to CEO much faster than anyone had intended.

The morbid anticipation of *that* phone call made missing a call from anyone important to me feel like whiplash.

The tension must have been apparent. In an act of uncharacteristic boldness, Selena slid her arms around my waist and rested her cheek on my chest. “Okay.”

A tremble of relief moved through her when I stroked her back. She stirred a deep, primal protectiveness in me. I’d keep her from anything that would hurt her.

Drake peered in at the prolonged silence. When his eyes caught mine, I mouthed, “Find him.”

He nodded.



Selena agreed to stay at my place for a few days. I sent Mallory, my house manager, and Drake to get some of her things. By the time I got back to the office, the sun was beginning to set.

Every cell in my body screamed to go home to her, but I needed to take care of something first.

“Alexander Balakin is here to see you,” Bridget informed me with a disapproving look when she opened the door.

Balakin, my private investigator, was more of a fixer of sorts. He was a federal agent who moved to the private sector. He had a covert team that took care of things that skirted along the edges of legality.

Balakin took the private entrance and elevator to avoid anyone seeing him. Normally, I would have met him at my house, but Selena had had enough drama for one day.

“Thank you, Bridget.” I leaned forward and gestured for him to take a seat when she let him in.

If life was a game of chess, people in my position were kings, and private sector security were our loyal knights. While I wanted nothing more than to make Miles bleed with my own hands, true power was quiet. It hid in plain sight.

With Selena safely tucked away in my house, my knight would do my bidding. I was no grandmaster, but I knew how to protect the queen.

“I need you to deliver a message,” I told him.

He nodded.

Before we left the hospital, Drake located Miles, and Balakin’s team was keeping an eye on him.

Miles had clearly never been to etiquette, so we'd have to administer a lesson in manners. One did not touch what wasn't theirs. And more importantly, nobody touched what was *mine*.

"If you could politely inform him that if he goes near her again, his career is over. If he touches her again, his life is."

"Anything else?"

"Selena's hand is in a splint," I informed him mildly, despite the fury that roared in my chest. Her injuries were minor and would heal quickly, but that didn't pacify my desire to make him bleed the way she had. "Let's, at the very least, even the score."

He agreed and left a few minutes later.

CHAPTER 30

Selena



I woke up the next day in a guestroom in Henry Amari's palatial Upper East Side home. Alone.

Henry got back late in the evening last night. All he told me was that I didn't need to worry about anything. I should have protested to staying here. I could have stayed with Isa, not that she was ever home. But her place was safe in that Miles had no idea where it was.

But, I wanted to stay here. Seeing Henry outside of work was addicting. We had dinner together last night, and he was a perfect gentleman.

"Henry asked that I make sure you don't help," Mallory, Henry's house manager, told me gently when I tried to clear a few plates from the table.

I sat at the table finishing up breakfast with a book. She directed the rest of the staff. I'd been around enough of these types of families to understand how it all worked, but it was wild to be a guest in it. They were there, but you never saw them. His chef prepared the meals, and the staff served and cleaned them up.

It was also interesting to know that none of the staff called Henry anything other than his first name.

"In my house, if you didn't cook the meal, then you cleaned it up," I told her lightly. For some reason, I really wanted to make a good impression. I tried to pick up my napkin, but the maid was like lightning.

“Things are done a certain way.” Mallory smiled warmly. “But if you will be around more, I’m sure we can make any changes you’d like.”

My heart skipped at the idea. I tried not to think too much about it, or about how nice being around more sounded.

“So...” I took my coffee cup and followed Mallory as she walked into the kitchen. I knew she was probably busy, but I had to know more. “You’ve known Henry for a while?”

She turned and stopped, silent for a few seconds; assessing me.

“I raised them both, Henry and Sloan. I oversaw their nannies. Once they were grown up and on their own, I stayed on in the Amari house until Henry came home from business school. Then I started here.”

“Does this happen a lot?” I winced at my own question. I’d seen enough tabloid articles to know the answer. How many women asked that exact question the next morning? At least they had the benefit of having sex the night before.

“*This* has never happened.” Her eyes ran over me again, then she smiled.



Later that afternoon, Isabelle sat beside me in the sitting room off the entrance of Henry’s house.

“I didn’t realize doctors still made house calls.”

“They do when their patient’s *boyfriend*”—she waggled her eyes playfully—“calls the chief medical officer of the hospital and requests a personal follow-up.” Isa took a sip of her coffee, then put her cup down on the table. “He donated a new building tower and asked that I be the one to check on you.”

The butterflies in my stomach were hosting a rave. I kept telling myself not to let my guard down, but he made it so hard. He wanted to protect me, and I wanted to let him.

“I hope you didn’t miss anything interesting.”

“Selena. I’m a third-year resident. I don’t splint hands, but I needed to see *that*. The two of you are magnetic. I was happy for the early dismissal,” she insisted, picking up my hand and examining it. Turned out, boxer’s fractures were actually relatively common and not a big deal. Most healed without much intervention in a couple weeks. Isa checked the mobility of my fingers, then put my hand down, her dark brown eyes alive with excitement. “He likes you.”

“I like him,” I finally admitted out loud. “A lot.”

There was an uncomfortable pause in conversation. Her expression shifted to something more serious. I knew what she was worried about. The Waldorfs.

“Are you okay? If all this”—her hands motioned around the room—“happens?”

I wasn’t sure. The sensible part of my brain had been blaring alarms since I met him, telling me to run at every turn. My heart wasn’t as compliant. And now, I wanted him in so many ways. I wanted to share in his victories and ease the sting of his losses. I wanted to be with *him*. All of him.

“I think so.” I nodded.

“So...” Her smile grew sly with expectation. “How was last night?”

“Nothing happened.” I groaned with the same disappointment I felt. Henry had been a perfect gentleman. Where was the billionaire playboy from the papers? I hadn’t actually seen that Henry yet.

“Oh.” Her shoulders fell. “Well, the sex would be—” She bit down on a closed fist again. Isa was about to say something, probably inappropriate, when we heard the front door open and close.

“Dr. Mercado.” Henry’s voice lifted us from our conversation. He stood in the entryway to the sitting room, the afternoon sun bathing the suit he wore in a light glow. I slept in and hadn’t seen him when he left this morning. “How’s her hand?”

He was talking to Isa, but his gaze stuck to mine the second I caught it, looking at me like I was the only water in a desert.

It was only four in the afternoon. He never left his office that early.

“Call me Isa.” She fanned herself dramatically at the palpable tension, then stood and shot me a knowing look. “And she’s perfectly fine. I should go.”

Henry glanced at her for a moment before his eyes slid back to mine.

“Oh.” Isa stopped at Henry’s side on her way out of the room. She patted his shoulder. “She needs to rest the hand for another week, but she’s cleared for all other physical activity.”

Seeing Henry genuinely surprised was rare. He usually tried to keep that look tamed. But his entire face burst into an ear-to-ear grin at her words. Isa turned to me for a quick second and winked.

“Our girl doesn’t love cardio. Maybe find a way to make it... enticing,” she told him.

“Noted,” Henry said slowly. His chest rose with a deep, hungry inhale.

“Oh, one last thing.” Isa’s voice became serious, and she looked Henry squarely in the face. “Keep in mind, I have access to paralytic agents and a bone saw.”

Henry was surprised twice in less than five minutes. “What happened to ‘Do no harm’?” he teased.

“You first,” she challenged, walking back to the door. “Unless, of course, Selena likes it,” she called as the door opened, and then she left.

“Ignore her,” I begged. Every drop of blood in my body found its way to my face.

“Not a chance.” He chuckled and sat beside me. His hand stroked my injured one. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you sleep okay?” he questioned as he peeled off his suit jacket and loosened his tie.

I could have used an orgasm as a sleep aid.

“Yeah.” There was so much I wanted to say, but my voice was caught in my throat. He looked so good.

He laughed again. “Are you flustered?” His eyes searched mine with amusement, and he pressed a short peck on my lips. My heart raced. He moved his lips to my ear. “I intend on following the doctor’s orders.”

“Promise?” I asked. The dizzying fog lifted when he pulled away.

He gave me another peck and nodded. “I need to make a few calls, but I’ll be back in a bit.”



Henry was becoming less formal around me. It was never more evident than at dinner. We ate in the dining room, yet the entire atmosphere felt intimate. Henry was *affectionate*. He sat beside me at the head of the table, and his hand stayed firmly planted on my thigh whenever it wasn’t otherwise engaged.

We talked about everything, his family, mine. His time in boarding school and my love of vineyards. He seemed like he was finally completely himself. He was reeling me in, despite the strong current against him.

Once we finished dinner and the staff cleared the table, I lingered in the dining room, admiring the art that adorned the

walls.

“Are you always dressed for dinner?” I asked as I walked over to a beautiful painting of the Matterhorn, my back turned to him.

Despite having been home for hours, Henry was still in his suit. For me, the second I walked through the threshold of my apartment, it was pajama time. I felt a little silly in a pair of joggers and fitted T-shirt.

“Sometimes.”

He hadn't moved from where he stood at the head of the table, watching me. I felt the heat of his stare on my back.

“Sometimes?” I walked slowly past the dining table to the painting on the other wall. “As you see fit?”

I wondered when the rest of the gentleman would fall away, the part that hadn't made a move yet, and everything he restrained would come loose. I ached for it.

“Something like that,” he answered from behind me. My eyes wandered around the room, wondering if there was any more staff. I knew Mallory already left. My head shifted as I glanced around, and he caught it. “I sent everyone home. We're alone.”

The electricity in the air crackled between us. “Oh.”

“Selena.” His voice carried over the thick haze. His tone was controlled. Commanding. “Come here.”

When I looked over my shoulder, the storm in his eyes sent lightning up my spine. “Is that an order?”

There was an intriguing tilt to his smile. “Yes.”

My legs could barely carry me the twenty steps to reach him. The familiar pulse in my core grew stronger as moisture slicked between my thighs. I leaned against the dining table, in front of him.

He didn't take his eyes off mine when he lifted my injured hand and kissed it. My pulse ticked away wildly beneath his

lips. He continued lining kisses up my wrist and arm until he made it to my collarbone.

A low groan rumbled out of him onto my neck. The hot breath swept goose bumps across my skin.

“Suddenly, I’m starving.” His graveled voice filled my ear.

I swallowed hard. “Here?”

“Do you want me to stop?” His fingers began to undo the drawstring of my joggers.

I let out a shuddered sigh. “No.”

The joggers pooled at my feet.

“Good.” He put his hands on my waist and nudged me to sit on the edge of the table. “I know exactly what I’m in the mood for.”

He leaned to kiss me, tentatively at first, before he took control. His fingers curled around the back of my neck, controlling the pace and intensity.

I ran my hand up his shirt, finally feeling the rigid muscles that’d tormented me for months.

His lips left mine and moved to my neck, kissing the hollow in *just* the right spot.

Oh god. My breath hitched again, and I arched into him.

His weight pushed against me, nudging me until I could feel the cool walnut table at my back. Henry leaned down to follow and encouraged my legs farther apart, pushing himself against me.

“You look good enough to eat, Selena.”

His palm slid down and caressed my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers before he moved lower. His thumb began to tease my clit through the fabric of my panties.

The slow graze shot electricity to my legs and up my spine. My nails dug into the fabric of his shirt.

“Henry,” I breathed.

He kissed me deeper this time and bucked his hips. His thick arousal was stiff against my inner thigh.

“You’ve been torturing me.” Henry’s voice was hoarse and heavy when he pulled away.

I swallowed a breath. “Do something about it.”

“I’m going to.” He pushed my panties to the side and sank a finger into me. I inhaled sharply. A soft whimper escaped my barely parted lips. “Here. In bed. And everywhere else I want you.”

He sank another finger. They moved slowly at first as his thumb traced circles around my clit.

He watched as my body quaked. My eyes caught the glimmer of light reflecting off the crystal chandelier hanging above my head. My uninjured hand got lost in his hair, grasping at anything to ground me. His fingers curled in and stroked me in just the right spot.

“Henry,” I cried out. My entire mind became cloudy.

He grinned.

“What do you want, Selena?”

The measured cadence.

The calm tone.

The wild look in his eye.

My heart raced. I wanted more.

An incomprehensible string of sounds slipped out of my mouth. I couldn’t form a clear thought, let alone answer a question. My hand grasped hard at his hair.

“Selena.” He tsked in disapproval when I couldn’t answer and removed his fingers. I whimpered at the loss and tried to suck in some air before his next bombardment. He yanked off my panties, parted my thighs, and dragged me, ever so slowly, to the edge of the table.

I looked down my body to see him, sitting casually in his spot at the head of the table, a hand on either of my thighs. “You wanted to know what came after Prince Charming?”

The air was suffocatingly thick. His fingers slid back in, and his tongue replaced his thumb on my clit.

My head arched back. *Holy hell.*

His touch lit me up, but his mouth on me, that was fireworks. Every lap of his tongue applied more pressure, pushing me closer to the edge. I whimpered again, impatient.

“Henry. *Please.*”

He chuckled against my skin. “That’s my girl.”

His fingers bent and stroked me masterfully while his tongue pushed and sucked on my clit. The vise grip his other hand had on my waist kept me in place.

I hooked my legs around his neck, and he plunged deeper. The buttoned-up society gentleman switched between fucking me with his fingers and his mouth.

My body writhed. A spring at the base of my spine wound tighter and tighter until my eyes slammed closed. The pressured pulses burst, and the orgasm seeped through me.

“Henry,” I moaned, my voice cracking.

The sound echoed through the enormous house.

He continued with more force to draw it out. I gripped his hair tighter as the final waves of the orgasm broke over me. Goose bumps swept everywhere when the final shudder rippled through.

He slowed to a stop and pulled away, taking a few moments to watch me come down from the high, and dropped a few more kisses along my thigh. Before I could say anything, he moved up to cup my face, and his mouth caught my shaky breaths. I lay there, boneless on his dining room table, locked in a soft adoring kiss.

“Let’s go to bed.” His thumbs still stroked my cheeks.

I nodded. Before I could attempt to get up, his arms swept beneath me, one behind my back and the other hooked below my legs. I instinctively threw my hands around this neck as the surprise registered. The devilish grin didn't leave his face.

He carried me upstairs.

I pressed a kiss below his ear. "Prince Charming is back."

"Not for long," he warned.

"Do they teach you this in etiquette?"

"Sweeping you off your feet? Maybe." We reached his bedroom, and he swung the door shut with his foot. He laid me on his bed and loomed over me, caging me between his arms, and pressed a kiss along my neck. "Everything I'm going to do to you? Absolutely not."

His brown eyes held mine as he pulled my shirt off, then my bra.

"Fuck, Selena." His body shuddered beneath a powerful, controlled exhale as his eyes roved over my naked body.

I watched as he undressed. His body looked like it was sculpted for the Acropolis. A frisson of excitement and anxiety vibrated between my thighs at the sight of his impressive cock, jutting out hard and ready to do all the things I'd been fantasizing.

"If you insist," I breathed.

The dark, wicked smirk returned. Prince Charming was long gone. "Turn around."

He rolled a condom on, and I turned and leaned on the mattress with my elbows. He returned to the bed, gripped my hips, and teased my entrance with his tip. "I should have bent you over my desk and done this months ago."

"Then do it now," I challenged as molten heat ran down my spine. I needed more.

He gave a low, dominating chuckle before he leaned forward. His breath scorched the nape of my neck. "Selena, do

you want me to fuck you?”

I groaned in frustration.

“Selena,” he warned in slow drawl. His fingers teased my clit, and he pushed into me tentatively, only to pull out seconds later.

“*Diablo.*”

“That’s right.” His breathing was ragged. “And I’ve come to collect.”

He buried himself in me, pushing all the air out of my lungs. He glided in without resistance, but his sheer size and force left me breathless.

A loud, tortured grunt followed. “Fuck, Selena. So fucking tight.”

I’d never heard his voice like *that*.

Jagged. Sinful. *Improper*.

The prickles of pain quickly dissolved to pleasure. He started slow, his massive cock pushing against me like I’d never felt before, allowing me to adjust.

A hand gripped my hip while the other ran up the slope of my back, stopping at my head and roughly fisting my hair. He thrust into me harder, bubbles of euphoria floated through me and popped indiscriminately.

“You don’t want a gentleman?” He taunted. I felt every inch of him as he dragged his cock out of me, only thrust back in a second later.

“No,” I panted. Outside these walls, he seemed to treasure me. Protect me. But inside them, I wanted him to *fuck* me. Hard, possessive, filthy. I wanted him to be completely untethered, for the gentleman to finally fall away. And I wanted to feel every bit of it. “Fuck me hard, Henry.”

“That’s my girl.” He yanked my hair back and slammed into me harder. Faster. He was ruthless.

Another incoherent symphony of raw moans spilled out of me. His pace, his size, and his possessive touch all melted together.

I began to tighten around him.

Right as the spring in my core coiled one last time, he pulled out and flipped me around. My back hit the mattress as I let out a surprised gasp.

Henry loomed above me, a thin film of sweat glistening over every delicious muscle of his body.

“I need to watch you come for me.” He plunged back into me, and his thumb stroked my sensitive clit, moving faster.

“Right... there,” I cried out. My hips rolled against his. He got faster and more savage, and my nails dug into his back.

“Henry,” I moaned, and the climax came in an intense bolt, the light of a thousand flash bulbs, each bursting in concert, a flurry of blinding sensation.

Moments later, Henry jerked forward, deep inside me. He stilled and let his own climax wash over him.

My arms slackened around him. He groaned again, and the roar of my heart beating as I came off the high muddled everything around me for a few foggy minutes. Henry ran kisses along my neck and chest, caressing me softly after his earlier, blissful brutality.

He rolled over and pulled me close. “You okay?”

Henry’s fingers skimmed along my ear. I lay on his chest, and his index finger tickled the length of my neck as it drew directionless lines along my skin.

“*God* yes.” I reveled in the afterglow.

“I meant your hand.” He chuckled, low and rich. An ember reignited deep inside me. “But thank you.”

“Oh. Yeah, it’s fine. Orgasms are effective pain killers,” I ruminated, looking up at him.

“In that case.” He lifted an eyebrow and pulled his arms around my waist. “I’ll make sure you have a few at the office.”

He shifted, turned me around, and spooned me. His hand ran slowly up and down my thigh.

Billionaire playboy, Prince Charming, proper society gentleman, CEO. My favorite Henry was the one who cuddled me after roughly fucking me.

Just as I began to succumb to sleep’s seductive pull, a sense of dread snuck past the haze. It reminded me that this was a fantasy. It couldn’t possibly last, and I would be a fool to think otherwise.

You had high hopes with Allister too.

I ignored it and snuggled into him. Henry felt like everything I could get lost in, a free fall into the unknown. But I knew one thing: this was going to hurt.

And I didn’t care.

CHAPTER 31

Henry



I always woke early, usually around 5 a.m., so I could work out before getting to the office. Sleeping in used to be a vice, but now it was an indulgence I hardly ever allowed myself. It was never more tempting than this morning.

Selena was sound asleep when I got up. Her hair fanned against the beige pillow. Watching the gentle rise and fall of her chest made the idea of crawling back into bed and staying tangled in the sheets with her nearly irresistible.

Last night was something else. Habit-forming in a way I'd never felt before. I'd be seeing her in a few hours, and still, I didn't want to go.

She was intuitive and unyielding. Quick-witted and kind. Seemingly incorruptible. She was Eden.

I knelt down next to the bed. She slept on her side, her injured hand safely out of the way. I kissed it, then her cheek when she stirred.

"Henry." She smiled, but her eyes stayed closed. Her soft voice, raspy and heavy with sleep, called for me. It made me rethink going into work at all. When I didn't answer, her chest rose dramatically on a sharp inhale. "What time is it?"

"Early. Go back to sleep," I whispered, then pressed a kiss on her lips. I swallowed hard against my dry throat. All she had on was one of my T-shirts. "Relax, have breakfast. Take your time."

She nodded her head and quickly drifted back to sleep.



If having Selena around the office before was distracting, then I was utterly derailed today. Now that I knew how good she tasted, I couldn't think about anything else. Not when the scent of her perfume would waft by me in the hallway. Or when she'd discreetly sneak me a kiss in the private elevator.

And that was all in one morning. It was a state of bliss.

I groaned loudly, and Selena shifted in my lap.

"Get some rest. I want you in my mouth next," she whispered against my lips.

I exhaled hard and closed my eyes for a second, my breath finally getting under control. "You're going to kill me, Selena."

She had come into my office to review plans for a benefit on New Year's. The second she was within arm's reach, I couldn't keep my hands off her. She rode me on my chair until I took control and fucked her on my desk.

She ignited my entire body. I wanted to touch every part of her, all at once, and simply burn.

She giggled and got up to retrieve the panties I'd pulled off her a while ago.

"What a way to go," she replied.

I grabbed her hips and yanked her back into my lap once we'd pulled ourselves together. "Come to London with me."

She paused, and delight slowly worked its way into her smile. "You're asking me to go on a trip with you?"

"I'm not asking, I'm telling. But yes."

She swatted my shoulder playfully. "That's a little presumptuous."

“I prefer intrepid and charming.”

“I’m sure you do,” she countered.

“I want to take you out on a date. A real one, out of the public eye.” I wanted to give her something like that night at the museum again.

Her eyes fell. “Right.”

Selena was the one to insist on discretion when she came in this morning, stating the board wouldn’t care if I was dating someone seriously but mixing in the fact that she worked for me made it the type of scandal she was here to avoid.

I didn’t really agree with it, but I didn’t say anything.

It was the first thing she said to me when she came in. Like she was second-guessing everything.

“Bring your camera,” I added.

“Okay.” She nodded and ran her fingers through my hair. “Back to the party. The Hightowers threw a New Year’s benefit last year, and everyone seemed to forget that they bribed Congress to approve their energy merger.”

“You can’t expect me to think clearly after that, Selena.” I groaned again, and wrapped my arms around her tighter.

“You and your family are hosting it,” she told me. God she was sexy when she was demanding. “Make sure they know that.”

“Okay,” I agreed as I tried to keep her from getting up, but she pushed my hands off her. I glanced at the clock. I probably should’ve been getting back to work.

“I meant what I said. I’ll be back later for it.” She bit the side of her lower lip. “You’re not the only one who’s good with their mouth.”

Fuck. “My place, tonight,” I told her.

“Yes, boss.” She looked over her shoulder and smiled.



“I have Charles Hayworth on the line,” Bridget’s voice said over the phone’s intercom.

“Thanks, Bridget.”

We spent over an hour on the phone; Charles had never been one to pick up on conversational cues. I was grateful for it, though, since it saved me from having this conversation in person when we eventually sat down for a meeting in London. I tried to ferret out what exactly he knew about my family and my company.

“I look forward to being in New York City more,” Charles said politely over the line.

He still hadn’t brought up the fact that we were related, and since he was smart enough to have found a way in via Preston, I knew it was intentional. He was hiding something, and I just needed to figure out what it was.

Once I got off the phone, I looked over the list of other board members I was planning to meet in London.

Just as I was about to call one, something struck me. Heritage Limited was a company in Charles Hayworth’s portfolio. The same one the Waldorfs cashed out of a couple years ago.

It was a familiar name, and I couldn’t remember where I saw it. A moment later, it clicked. I opened my desk drawer and flipped through the list of my mother’s inheritance assets, the ones she never received. Heritage Limited was also one of the investments listed there, in the same amount Charles’s initial investment was into Verge.

I was about to call Bridget in when I heard her practically cheer from outside my door. Moments later, I heard Sloan’s laugh.

I did a quick scan of the room to make sure nothing incriminating was lying around.

“Hi, Hen,” Sloan said as she entered the office. Some concern passed over me. There was no way Sloan had the free time to come all the way here to chat about something mundane.

I sat up straighter. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t stay long. I have some information that might be of value to you. I wanted to tell you before you left for London.”

“This sounds serious.”

“Sutton Industries is out of the running for Verge. And there have been a few offers, but all of them fell through,” she said as she sat down. “I checked.”

I knew Sloan wouldn’t be able to resist. She had far too many connections at the firm, which made it easy to get information on any pending acquisitions.

“That’s highly unethical,” I reminded her.

“Can’t let you and Marcus have all the fun,” she noted nonchalantly, and leaned back into the seat.

“Does he know you’re here?” I asked. Sutton Industries was my biggest competition in getting the deal, there weren’t many other companies large enough to stage a complete buyout.

She laughed. “He was going to come by himself to tell you, but I hadn’t seen Bridget in a while.”

“Any idea why all the other deals fell through?”

“No, but I had one of the associates look for press releases, and nothing came from the CEO’s desk. Maybe Aubert’s not really in charge here.”

I was beginning to realize that. It lined up pretty neatly when I thought about his motive. Trade in a board seat in a small company for one at the largest in the world.

“So.” I crossed my arms on my desk. Despite the complication with Hayworth, things seemed to be moving in my favor. Verge was going to be mine, Selena *was* mine, and Sloan and I were able to have a conversation about Amari Global that didn’t have hostility woven through it. “You have the second largest stake in the company. What would your next move be?”

Before she went to London for the firm last year, things were pretty awful between us. We traded vicious insults and could hardly make it through a conversation without breaking into a screaming match, each of us angry at the other for getting something we felt the other didn’t deserve.

“Since it’s a clear field, name whatever price you see fit. Buy them and take them apart. Don’t give any of them board seats in Amari Global.” She rattled off the exact plan I intended.

When I said Sloan was a viper, I meant it. She had all the killer instincts she would’ve needed had she taken over. Guilt rattled in my chest. It was an opportunity she never got because I was always the heir.

“I have no plans to give anyone a seat on the board.” For a moment, I considered whether or not I should tell her about the Hayworth complication.

The rejection Sloan felt from the Sheffield side of the family affected her life profoundly. She’d spent a lot of time trying to become someone they’d accept. She was past that now, but I wasn’t sure how this development would affect her.

“Good.” She stood and she made her way to the door. “We’ll see you at brunch when you get back?”

I nodded. I’d tell her once I knew exactly what Hayworth was after. Besides, if I wanted to prove myself, I needed to handle this.

“Sloan,” I called after her. She stopped at the door and turned. “You know I’m happy for you, right?”

She cocked a brow.

“Finally found someone good enough for you,” I explained.

She lit up. “Not that it changes anything... but you approve?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Obviously,” I drawled.

“You know, you’re good at this.” She glanced around the room. “It suits you.”

She didn’t wait for a reply but waved and shut the door.

I looked back down at my phone and called Balakin. Part of his team had a forensic accountant. I wasn’t sure what Heritage Limited was, but there was a connection that was buried for a reason.

CHAPTER 32

Selena



I stood in my kitchen and watched as Lauren meticulously prepared one of my favorite foods.

“Sancocho?” I asked, taking a deep inhale. The familiar scent warmed me.

Lauren nodded. “Yes. I’m spoiling you.”

She came back from her trip to Boston yesterday, and I told her what happened with Miles. Since I hadn’t been home in days—having spent the last three nights at Henry’s, getting very little sleep—Lauren coming back from Boston was perfect timing.

Miles was handled, but that didn’t stop Henry from posting security at my door.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I could’ve told him to take a hint.” She sighed.

My plan was to take her out to dinner so she could have a night off and tell her about Henry. But when I got home, she was hard at work cooking almost all of my favorite foods.

I stood across from Lauren at the countertop and nervously played with the sleeve of my sweater.

“I’m seeing Henry,” I finally blurted out.

She stopped stirring and went quiet. She didn’t look at me.

“We’re together,” I continued.

Silence suffocated the kitchen.

“This guy is literally both of the things that have turned your entire life upside down.” Her tone dripped in disapproval.

“It’s different,” I urged. Miles was a distraction. The Waldorfs were a harebrained Count of Monte Cristo-style plan that went off the rails. “Henry isn’t like them.”

“No. He’s much richer, with much more power,” she said flippantly. She turned off the stove and walked out of the kitchen. I followed her and stood against the wall as she paced the living room. “*They* tried to ruin your life. And your mom’s.”

My legs became gelatin, and I slowly slid to the floor. I hated thinking about it.

A couple years ago, when I told my mom offhandedly in conversation that I would be working for the Waldorfs, she lost it. She flew in to convince me not to. After a dramatic weekend of tears and screaming, she finally told me about my father.

Allister Waldorf.

She met him when she moved out here for a few years after undergrad. He was married at the time, something she didn’t know. They had a short affair, and when she found out she was pregnant with me, he tried to pay her to leave the city and never come back.

But she was a badass and refused. Then Allister began to make more serious threats against her, and me. She took the money to start a new life in L.A. That way, I’d be raised around family, my grandparents.

“Hey.” Lauren finally spoke again. Her hand found my injured one. I blinked a few times and wiped at the tears I hadn’t noticed streaming down my cheek. She sat on her knees in front of me. “I’m sorry, I’m just worried.”

My mom begged me to leave it alone, and I tried to. But when my work with the family was wrapping up, I made the mistake of thinking he wouldn’t be a monster to me, to his daughter. I told him the truth of who I was, and I was quickly

silenced with an army of lawyers who made thinly veiled threats if I ever spoke a word of it.

That day, something inside me snapped.

They made me feel powerless, so I decided to show them just how powerful I could be.

I took all the evidence of their crimes and sent it to the press. Those leaks kicked off the massive investigations that were already brewing. It wasn't long until they pieced together who orchestrated it all. They forgave the NDA breach, and I signed a new NDA where I agreed to keep my lineage a secret.

"I know." I swallowed hard. I felt stupid for even considering this thing with Henry could be real. But then he'd do something to flip that assumption on its head. "It feels different."

My heart ached for my mom. She never trusted anyone, and I spent my life knowing the only person I could rely on was myself. There was no calvary to come save me. Self-sufficient was the only setting I had.

Lauren stared at the floor. "I'm not too surprised. You've been working late and practically giddy to see him."

The way he looked at me, touched me, kissed me—it wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before.

"We're going away together in a couple of weeks, to London," I added. Delivering all the news at once seemed easier. "He's different, I really believe that."

Don't make promises to yourself. He won't keep them for you.

Maybe he would.

A cautious smile emerged, and she nodded.

"The deeper you go, the harder it'll be when it ends." She sighed. "But there are worse ways to occupy a few months."

Lauren stood and walked back to the kitchen.

When. *When it ends.*

This was temporary. That had to be the draw for Henry. I was moving in seven months.

The sound of dishes clacking in the background got drowned out by the realization. I felt sick.

Telling Lauren about Henry was supposed to make me feel better, so why did I feel worse?

CHAPTER 33

Henry



Hugo Aubert had still been rather indecisive about the sale when I met with him earlier in the morning at the Griswald in London. That, mixed with the fact that I was clearly a mark, made me consider walking away from the acquisition entirely. If it wasn't for my situation with the Board, I would have.

After spending the flight to London inducting Selena into the mile high club, she was at my London property sleeping. While I spent the morning at the Griswald, she was planning to take some pictures after she woke.

"You let me worry about Hugo. He'll see the light," Charles assured lazily from the other side of the table. My meeting with Hugo Aubert had been fine but hardly progress. He was exactly the eccentric startup founder I expected him to be.

"If you'd like the sale, you're going to have to help him," I retorted politely.

He didn't like that.

"The Griswald is one of the oldest clubs in England, making it the oldest dignified club in the world," Charles Hayworth began again after the awkward silence. He said it with an air of condescension. His general demeanor didn't surprise me, but the level of entitlement from someone on the brink of financial collapse was... interesting. "I'd be happy to put in a good word for you."

“How kind.” I reminded myself to play nice. I needed the acquisition as much as he needed the money from the sale.

I sat through another hour of poorly veiled insults. I hated every second I sat there, but if there was an amicable way to secure Verge, I had to try.



“When you said ‘trip to London,’ I figured we’d be here longer than a day,” Selena said. The satin fabric of her blue dress swept past me as she sat down. She leaned her head against my chest and settled back on the Amari jet. “You’re not going to tell me where we’re going?”

“That would defeat the purpose of a surprise. But it’s a date.”

“You know, you never *actually* asked me on one of those.”

I took her hand and kissed the back. “Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to an undisclosed location for an undisclosed amount of time to do undisclosed activities?”

“How romantic.” Selena look up at me and smiled. “And I know what ‘undisclosed activities’ is code for.”

The flight was short, and we landed in Alsace some hours later. The small wine region in western France bordered Germany and looked like it was plucked straight from a fairytale. Selena was fizzing over with excitement when we deplaned and got into the SUV on the private tarmac.

She took a deep inhale of the chilly, mountain air and said nothing. Rather, she pulled out her camera, and the shutter clicks didn’t cease. Not even when we were in the car. The window was down almost the entire ride despite the winter chill and the flimsy dress she was wearing. It was late November, and at this elevation, snow capped some of the mountain peaks.

We drove up to a large chateau. Easily six hundred years old, it stood tall at the top of a series of rolling hills. Bare ivy vines climbed up the walls of the weathered stone façade. Selena's eyes went wide as I opened the door for her and offered my hand to help her out of the car.

“If you tell me this is your castle, I'm leaving,” she said flatly as her eyes scanned the massive structure.

The original owners of the chateau were a noble family who owned the land and used it for viniculture. Today, the chateau and lands were a winery and boutique hotel.

Winemaking may not have been a dream of hers, but Selena often inspected the bottles of wine we finished. It was a cute ritual she did almost every time we opened a new one.

“It's not.” I ran my hand down the slope of her back as I led her down the path into the chateau. The gravel crunched beneath the soles of my shoes. “But if you like it...”

She shot me a look.

“I'm kidding.”

I wasn't.

I now fully understood why Marcus showered Sloan with so many surprises. It was fun. The look of excitement on Selena's face was reward enough. If she wanted a castle, I'd buy her one. If she wanted the world, I'd acquire that too. “I want to show you something.”

The large wooden door at the entrance opened slowly, creaking the entire way. We were greeted by the staff who gave us a quick tour. It had a restaurant, a tasting room, and a few larger rooms that could be rented for overnight stays. I'd decided to rent the whole place out for the rest of the weekend. Selena and I had it till Tuesday morning.

“Henry...” Her attention kept diverting to the bare vineyards and stunning views outside each large window we passed on the way to the dining room. There was one table set,

with a bottle of wine chilling. I pulled the chair out for her to sit, then sat across from her.

She let out a soft sigh, running her eyes over the ornate dining room.

“Henry...” She left the word hanging, losing her train of thought again.

“I haven’t even told you the surprise yet.” I chuckled. We were keeping things quiet and couldn’t have real dates back home. I wanted to give her one she wouldn’t forget.

“There’s more?”

I nodded. “This is the vineyard and winery that made the bottle of wine you loved in the Hamptons.”

She inhaled sharply and immediately sat up straighter.

“Wait.” Her eyes darted to the wine chilling at the side of the table, and she grabbed the bottle. Her gaze moved slowly across the label. I didn’t tell her the part where every existing case of that exact vintage was being shipped to Manhattan as we sat there.

“You okay?” I asked. She was the sole owner of that specific vintage now. That could be a surprise for later.

She was speechless for another prolonged silence. “This is *amazing*. But... why?”

“I’m attempting to reverse your stance on gentlemen.”

She shook her head. “You called my bluff weeks ago.”

My hand reached under the table, landed on her thigh, and squeezed gently. Then I grabbed the leg of her chair and dragged it along the marble floor, the sound ringing through the room. Her eyes widened and her jaw hung slightly open; she was now so close that our knees kissed. “Damn right.”

Her hand ran up my chest. “This is *a lot* for a first date.”

“If it makes you more comfortable, I’ll make sure the next one is terrible,” I whispered in her ear.

Her soft laugh filled my entire chest with a heavenly warmth. “I don’t believe you.”

“Good, because I’m lying.” I poured her a glass of wine. The last few weeks felt like a different reality. I was happy. I needed more time with her, and if that meant sweeping her off her feet to keep her with me a few months longer, then... “Prince-fucking-Charming won’t be able to meet the bar I set.”

CHAPTER 34

Selena



After dinner, Henry and I took some time to explore the castle.

Remnants of the winter sunset streamed through the narrow windows, casting long shadows on the worn stone floor. I imagined how beautifully I could capture it behind a lens but settled for committing it to memory. We wandered deeper into a great hall and stopped to take in the intricately carved arches in the ceiling. I made a mental note to come back here with my camera before we left; the towering pillars would look incredible in the morning light.

Two elaborately carved walnut chairs beckoned us from their proud position in the center. My mouth hung slightly open with awe at the historic beauty. They were regal in both size and stature, I didn't think I'd ever seen anything like them.

“Are you sure you don't want it?” he asked casually with his arm thrown around my shoulders.

I was still processing the leaps my heart took each time Henry discovered a new way to sweep me off my feet. I knew I should've been realistic and remind myself that this was temporary.

But for the purpose of this trip, I was fully invested in the fairytale.

“Nah, it's a little old.” I scrunched my nose and trudged ahead, pausing only to throw him a wink.

I got close enough to inspect the detailing, running my hand along the medieval carvings, stopping on what looked to be a family crest engraved along the backrest.

“You think these were thrones?” I wondered.

“Probably,” Henry answered, watching me from where he stood before strolling aimlessly through the room. “Alsace-Lorraine flipped between French and German rule for hundreds of years.”

There was a hypnotic charm to Henry’s intellect. He wasn’t boastful. If you didn’t ask him something specifically, he would usually stay quiet, even if he was well-read on the subject.

Gentlemanly. Dignified.

His brilliance came through in random moments when he was relaxed.

“Oh yeah?” I grinned and took a seat. My fingers traced over the dips and curves of the engravings.

He nodded, and his eyes moved across the high vaulted ceiling. “This was probably the seat of power for the region. Flanked between two mountain ranges, next to the Reine river, it’s the perfect place for it.”

“He plays chess, dabbles in military strategy...” I mused out loud. “Maybe you should sit here.”

“I chalk up the military strategy to my grandfather’s fondness for Machiavelli.” He turned, and his brow raised as he watched me on the throne. “And I think it looks better on you.”

My face warmed. “What does?”

“A throne.”

When he looked at me like that, like I was the only one in the world he could see, a sentiment that felt like it was stolen from me returned. I felt like I could raise an army. I felt powerful again.

“And speaking of chess,” he went on as he walked over to me. “You know what I always found most interesting about that game?”

“When it’s over?”

“No.” He leaned in and ignored my teasing, bracing himself against the decorated arms of the throne. His voice lowered, and his eyes caught mine in a heated stare. “The king is the most important piece because you need it to win. That also makes it the most vulnerable.”

He watched me carefully. He wasn’t playful anymore.

“Oh...”

The light air hummed between us.

“But the queen...” His breath warmed the nape of my neck, sweeping goose bumps down my body. “She moves wherever she wants.”

“That sounds nice,” I whispered, my nipples hardening against the silky fabric of my bra.

“Captures who she wants.” He dropped a few soft kisses along my neck.

“Henry...” My head tipped back as my eyes fluttered closed.

“The king is valuable.” He ran a finger along my collarbone. Moisture gathered between my legs, knowing exactly what awaited me from the tone of his voice. Low, controlled, self-assured. “The queen is true power.”

My eyes fluttered open when he pulled away, but he didn’t go far. He knelt in front of me.

Henry Amari.

On his knees.

For me.

“Henry, what are you...”

Gaze locked on mine, he ran his hands beneath my dress, found my panties, and looped his fingers around them, brushing his thumb over my clit in a torturous rhythm.

My breath hitched.

“It would be impolite if I didn’t kneel before a throne.” A devious grin tugged at just one side of his face as he inched my panties down my legs. I lifted my hips momentarily to let him. “And I am nothing if not polite.”

He hiked my dress to my hips, gripped them tightly, and pulled me forward.

My mind went completely blank, focused only on the heat of his touch and the sparks his hands left as they parted my knees.

He lined a few short kisses along my inner thigh before drawing my clit into his mouth, stroking it with his tongue.

I arched back, letting my head fall against the solid backing of the throne, and stifled a moan. Without thinking, my legs wrapped around his neck. It felt *so good*.

“What if someone...”

His thumb replaced his tongue, and his fingers slipped into me slowly. My back bowed as tendrils of pleasure moved down my body. I threaded my fingers through his hair, desperate to keep him where he was. Doing what he was doing to me.

“Do you think I’d *ever* let anyone see you like this?” he grunted against the slickness on my inner thigh. His fingers and thumb moved in concert together. “Panting for me? Desperate for me?”

My body short-circuited, overcome with the heady realization of where I was, what I was doing, and who was doing it to me. My eyes closed again, allowing his touch to pull me under.

“No,” I breathed, and his fingers pushed into me deeper.

No one would see us because Henry wouldn't allow for it. I knew that. There wasn't much in the world Henry couldn't control.

"That's right. You're all mine," he whispered. His mouth moved back to draw my clit in again. Another finger sank into me. Electricity shot through my navel at the feel of his fingers stretching me.

I whimpered. My hips rolled toward him. He was going slow, the lazy possessiveness of a man who knew exactly how to make me come but waited to draw out every second.

"Tell me, Selena." Another rough graze of his teeth ran against my clit. His fingers moved more forcefully inside me, and the pressure at my core intensified. I trembled in the anticipation of it breaking loose. "How do you want to come? On my mouth? My hand? My cock?"

My eyes opened. I looked down my body to meet his heated stare. His chest rose and fell heavily with a ravenous desire.

My hands made their way to his shirt and yanked at it.

"Your cock," I stammered.

Through the haziness, I could hear a low chuckle.

"That's my girl." He pulled away and put his hands on my hips. Before I could tell what was happening, I was lifted to my feet. I wobbled and steadied myself on his shoulders.

Henry immediately turned me around, and his hand caressed my back, bending me over in front of the throne. My arms stretched forward to the armrests.

"Are you going to be able to brace yourself, Selena?" he whispered hotly in my ear.

I nodded, even though my legs felt like they'd buckle at any moment.

"Good." He stepped back momentarily, and the audible shuffle of his belt coming off and the sound of foil ripping

open filled the airy silence before he was behind me again. He shoved my dress up my hips.

He entered me slowly, and I drowned in the gratifying sensation of his size stretching me.

“Is this how you want to come, baby?” His hand on my hip steadied me while his other hand slipped under my dress and massaged my breast, passing my taut nipple between his fingers.

“Yes,” I panted softly. My nails dug into the weathered wood. His strokes started slow, pushing the air out of my lungs.

“On my cock.” He thrust in harder, rougher. *This* Henry. The one who lost all the pretense. He made my blood ignite with a desire I’d never experienced before. I wanted it all, as rough and indecent as he would give it to me. “Bent over a throne while I fuck you senseless?”

“Henry,” I moaned in a broken sob. My arms began to wobble as the overwhelming pleasure consumed every muscle fiber.

“That’s right, baby,” he grunted through gritted teeth. Both hands created a vise on my hips, and he was fully unleashed. “Let me hear you.”

My eyes closed, and my senses filled with the sound of his low grunts, the filthy echo of our hips colliding, and the creaks along the floor. I could only imagine what I looked like, bent over being fucked mercilessly by a man who felt like equal parts power and sheer vulnerability.

His hand teased my clit before giving it a rough pinch.

Every neuron sparked out of control, and an incoherent mix of sounds flew out of me. My orgasm consumed me in a scorching wave.

“Henry,” I cried out again as each aftershock rolled through me. A cold sweat covered my body like a fever had finally broken.

I felt a forceful jerk forward and pronounced shudder down his body as his bruising grip on my hips tightened. Henry grunted, his climax taking control of him too. “Fuck, Selena.”

After a few moments, we stilled.

As my overly sensitized body began to give way, Henry’s arms wrapped around me and pulled me into him. I could barely stand, but he held me close, taking my weight so I could simply revel in the afterglow.

My head arched to rest along his shoulder, feeling the rise and fall of his chest against my back.

He pressed a kiss along the nape of my neck.

I looked down at the seat in front of me. “I think we just defiled this room.”

Henry’s short chuckle reignited an ember in my core. “This place is six hundred years old. We can’t be the first ones.”

CHAPTER 35

Selena



The Pearson PR offices were decorated with holiday wreaths, holly, and poinsettias. I loved it there around the holidays. Even though I wasn't using it for the year, my office still had a wreath hung on it. Growing up on the west coast, I was used to a true California Christmas: warm weather, palms trees, and zero chance of snow. Being in New York during the holiday season felt like living in a movie.

I smelled the faint scent of peppermint as I walked into Rita's office. I hadn't checked in with her in a while and probably wouldn't until after the holidays since I planned to go home and see my mom for a couple weeks over that time.

Rita was amused when I walked in and Drake took his post outside the office door. She raised her eyebrow, a curious smile tugging at the side of her face. "You come with a security detail now?"

"It's new, given the leaks, to protect the—"

"Family, yes, that's commonplace," she finished for me. I wasn't going to say family. I wasn't sure how I was going to finish that sentence. "But you aren't family."

A quick but blistering prickle skittered along my chest. Despite the fairytale the trip to London and Alsace had felt like, I knew I wasn't and would never be family.

Henry's surprises were sweet and well thought-out. Getting caught up in the fantasy was tempting. But I knew

better. His world was quicksand, and I didn't have the trust fund to get sucked in.

"There were some security concerns that came up around Miles."

"Speaking of the movie star." Rita busied herself by searching for something in her drawer. It was an envelope, which she handed to me. "This came from Miles's team. They asked specifically not to bother you with it. It's addressed to me, but it reads like it's written to you."

"Oh," I said, reaching over for the note. I opened the bi-fold and read.

Rita,

I apologize for crossing a line with Selena.

I hope to see her again, to apologize in person.

If she'll be at the New York premier of the next Vengeance release, I look forward to seeing her.

Please tell her I'm sorry and that I miss her.

Miles

I didn't know what to make of it, but it was in that second I realized why I hadn't wanted to take Miles's previous correspondences seriously.

I didn't want to believe he was dangerous because that would have meant I was in danger. And the idea of having to protect myself, physically and mentally, from a constant barrage of hell was getting exhausting.

"Can you tell his team not to attempt contact again?" I asked sharply.

Rita raised her brows and nodded. “Of course. How are things otherwise?”

I tucked the note into my purse. “Pretty good.”

I was having the best sex of my life with the most gorgeous man I’d ever met. Good was an understatement.

“Seems like the press has been relatively tame,” she noted with a hint of pride. “You’ll be on your way to L.A. before you know it.”

“Yeah...”

“That’s still what you want, right?”

I paused. “Yeah, of course.”

She let out a long sigh. “Now, on the topic of Miles. He took a spill and apparently broke his hand during the press tour in New York. But the premier is still on schedule for the first weekend of June. You’re still on the company’s guestlist with a plus one.”

I nodded. “Yeah... I’ll be there.”

It was one of the fringe benefits of the job. I got to go to amazing events, as long as I blended into the background.

“Good.” She typed something quickly and turned back to me. “Should I expect your security to be—”

“No.” My heart hollowed. My contract with the Amaris ended in June. Technically I worked for them through the month, but that would mostly be transition tasks to the company PR team. Everything ended in June. I was going home, as planned. After a few seconds, I realized I hadn’t answered her question. “All of that is done in June.”

She adjusted her glasses and stared at me for a second.

“You know, reading isn’t a favorite pastime for me, but my favorite type of book to read is a memoir.” She stood up and walked to the bookshelf beside her desk. “My only goal in life is to live one interesting enough to warrant a memoir. And you, dear, may have already beaten me to it.”

She looked proud.

I felt ashamed. The one thing I couldn't do was get involved. Again. "I didn't mean for anything to happen."

Her laugh rolled through the office.

"Making mistakes is what your twenties are for," she assured me. "Your thirties are for starting Botox and affairs around the world, forties for winnowing down to a few good lovers."

I smiled, even though it felt like I'd swallowed broken glass. "You're not upset?"

"Just look out for yourself, and keep it quiet for a while," she advised. "The company's no fraternization policy only applies to current clients, and since that is officially Sloan Amari, you're safe."

"Right."

I put my phone in my purse and got my things together. I already told Henry we should keep it quiet for the sake of the board, and he seemed to agree.

As I got up to leave, Henry's voice played on repeat in my head.

"Prince-fucking-Charming won't be able to meet bar I set."

That was what I was afraid of.

CHAPTER 36

Selena



Amari Global Enters the Gene Therapy Market

Henry told me about that article that was published in the *Financial Times*.

He didn't seem too upset when he called and told me about it this morning, mostly annoyed that the information leaked before the company had a chance to formally secure the deal. I read the article and no source was listed, as usual. I clicked my phone screen off and looked back into the mirror.

"You sure this is okay?" I asked as I nervously fiddled with the sequined silver dress again. It was perfect for tonight's New Year's Ball. Isabelle swatted my fingers away when I twisted the fabric in my hands.

I bought it before I left to visit my mom for the holidays and had forgotten how much I loved it. Plus, after spending two weeks at home, I was grateful for glow I'd returned with. California was always good for a Vitamin D boost, not to mention my mom fawning over me and stuffing me with food.

Getting back to the city late last night meant I wouldn't see Henry until the party tonight. He had to go talk to Marcus about something this afternoon, so we'd have to wait until tonight after the ball to make up for our time apart.

"Yes, it's stunning," she answered. We sat in front of my vanity, and Isabelle leaned down in and applied my false

eyelashes for me. The steady hands of a surgeon.

My hands, however, were anything but steady. I'd had a stomachache the entire day. The ball felt like a daunting undertaking, even though my only role was to show up and resist the urge to take his clothes off.

Why was I so nervous?

You don't fit there.

His parents would be in attendance. And now, I felt a crippling weight on my chest at the idea of trying to make a good impression. They didn't know we were seeing each other, so there wasn't any reason for me to speak to them outside of saying hello.

Isabelle finished my lashes, and the anxiety made me want to move. I paced back and forth from my closet to the vanity. Suddenly, my dress felt too tight.

Lauren watched with trepidation. She would occasionally ask questions about my relationship, but she still seemed disappointed in the direction things were going with it. She'd been supportive of my relationship with Miles, but with Henry, she seemed angry.

"Maybe you shouldn't go," Lauren offered. "You look like you're going to be sick."

"You look great," Isa cut in immediately after, shooting a warning glance at her.

I nodded. It was just a party. I could spend the time talking to Henry and maybe a few of the others I knew would be in attendance. Worst-case scenario, I knew how to blend into the background.

"Will you be expected to go to these types of things now?" Lauren complained, ignoring another glare from Isa.

Seeing my mom over Christmas also made me rethink all of this. I didn't tell her about Henry because there was no point if it was all temporary.

“We aren’t public yet,” I reminded Lauren, and filled my lungs slowly in an attempt to get a handle on my nerves. “But, probably a few.”

“If he ever decides he wants people to know you’re dating,” she groaned.

“It’s my idea to keep things quiet for now,” I retorted.

Isabelle stood and laid her hands on my shoulders. She glanced over hers to see Lauren leaving the bedroom. “You deserve to be happy. If he makes you happy, then enjoy it.”

The fact remained that there was an expiration date. All of this, whatever it was, was temporary. A few months of amazing sex with a great guy and nothing else.

That was the draw for him. It had to be. He could have his cake and eat it too. He’d never seriously consider anything long term with me. I had stacks of tabloids as evidence that he was never going to be serious with someone who wasn’t a part of his world.

And that was for the best.

I looked at Isa. “What if—”

“What if you get hit by a bus tomorrow?” Isa interrupted.

“Isa!”

“A lot of bad shit *can* happen.” Her tone morphed into the serious surgeon one I heard her use whenever she reprimanded the younger residents. “All I see, day in and day out, are the results of bad shit that happened. Doesn’t stop me from walking, running, riding in a car, playing a sport, or any number of things that might hurt me.”

I chewed on my lip.

She went on. “Just because bad shit *did* happen doesn’t mean it *will*.”

I turned back and looked at the mirror and remembered why I loved the dress again. It was perfect and fit like a glove.

A renewed excitement ran through me, freeing all the butterflies I wrangled earlier. “I like him.”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “I can tell.”

“Isa...”

“Whatever happens, I’m here for you.” She walked to my vanity and gathered my clutch and threw a few things in it. She picked up the ornate Venetian mask that Henry sent over and handed it back to me, along with my clutch.

“Black lace, cat eye mask.” She shook her head as I tied the silk ribbons around mine. “What is that sex like?”

My entire face heated. Indescribably good. Every part of my body lit up when he touched me. “Life-changing.”

“I bet,” she groaned playfully. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

CHAPTER 37

Henry



The New Year's Ball was a masquerade, and it was in full swing. The glittering masks swirled across the dance floor. The sound of music and laughter echoed through the ornate ballroom, punctuated by the clink of champagne glasses and the rustle of evening gowns.

I spent the morning trying to figure out who in the executive or acquisition team could've let the details of the planned Verge acquisition slip. I made sure the company's forensic IT team did near constant sweeps.

I glanced around the room. Selena was right about the party. I spoke to every board member in the first couple of hours. Despite the leak, it was a great night for the business side of my life. The personal side felt like it was suffocating.

Selena and I chatted politely at an appropriate distance when she arrived. But that was all.

Keeping her a secret felt damn near impossible when she walked in looking like *that*. The silver dress she wore sparkled when the light kissed the curves along her hips.

Slinky and backless and *fuck*.

The black lace mask glittered along the delicate curve of her cheek.

I couldn't think straight. Not when I hadn't seen her in two weeks.

And not when I caught sight of Tristan spinning her around the dance floor. Their bodies were tightly pressed together as he led her through a waltz. Who the fuck taught her how to waltz, and why did that need to happen?

I assumed Tristan saw her alone and gallantly stepped in. It had Xander's handiwork written all over it.

"Just ask her to dance," Xander said as he walked over to my side. "We *all* see it."

I rolled my eyes.

"Fuck, why didn't I think of that?" I shot back dryly. "The entire board is here."

"Are you planning on dirty dancing right here in front of all of Manhattan society?" He smiled defiantly. "No? Then you're probably fine."

Keeping my hands to myself around her was a tall order. "Are you done?"

"No. We both know Tristan won't do anything now that he knows. But you'll have to watch *that* all night." His head nodded to the two of them dancing.

Almost as if the goddess of poor timing summoned her, my mother approached us with someone who looked like a 'Suitable Young Woman'. *Great.*

"Henry." She placed her hand on my shoulder. "This is Blair St. Claire."

Xander tensed next to me as he smothered a laugh.

I mustered all the politeness beaten into me in etiquette.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Blair." I shook her hand.

I looked right past her to see Selena was still dancing with Tristan. Behind the mask, I caught her eye a few times.

Before I could say anything else, Xander stepped in.

"Beatrice." Xander tsked at her. He was the only human on earth who could be so brash with my high society mother. "We

can't let Henry have all the fun.”

With that, he flashed a smile at my mother and at Blair, outstretched his hand, and Blair melted like putty. He led her to dance, and my mother gave a resigned sigh.

“At least one of you will consider happiness.” She huffed and walked off a second later.

I caught Xander nodding to Tristan as he danced with Selena, and I couldn't help but laugh. Sometimes I forgot Xander had an IQ of one-sixty. He was, by definition, a genius. And easily the smartest person I knew. He ran complex finance algorithms in his head one second, then flicked his hair back and charmed every woman in Manhattan the next.

Of *course* he'd pulled a play like this. Having Tristan run defense to ensure any actual suitors wouldn't bother Selena reeked of his meddling.

I should probably thank him at some point.

As expected, once the song was over, Tristan graciously parted with Selena. She walked toward me, and her smile made the whole room shimmer.

“Tristan said you'd like to speak with me.”

“Not here,” I whispered. “There's a small meeting room at the end of the hallway, next to the coat room.”

Surprise glinted in her eyes at the suggestion, and an intrigued smile crept along her lips. She nodded.



A few minutes later, I opened the door to the meeting room and closed it behind me. Selena was waiting. She turned and smiled.

“Hi,” she squeaked. The hitch in her breath told me she was just as excited to see me as I was her.

“I missed you,” I told her as I closed the distance between us. The silver dress bathed her in an ethereal glow.

“Oh yeah?” she taunted playfully. I leaned down and laid a soft kiss along the corners of her mouth. Her breathing slowed. I smoothed my hands up her dress and took a few steps forward. She matched my strides backed herself into the wall.

When I caged her between my arms, she swallowed hard and looked up. Beneath her long dark lashes, her honey eyes darkened. My thumb grazed over her mouth, pulling her bottom lip out from under her teeth.

I hadn't touched her since before she left for her trip home, and every part of me ached to feel her body pressed against mine. To hear her soft moans as they crescendoed to her climax, and the breathy way she called my name when she did.

The air sparked.

“I don't like seeing you dance with other men, Selena,” I growled against her ear. “I don't share.”

“I didn't realize it upset you,” she cooed innocently. Her fingers traced up and down my lower abs through my shirt, stopping to rest at my waist.

“Selena,” I warned.

“What are you getting so worked up over?” With her eyes still firmly set on mine, her hands made quick work of my belt and unbuttoned my pants.

I groaned.

“You're the only one taking me home”—her hand stroked my hard length—“right?”

Damn right. I was the only one ever taking her home.

I kissed her, and my body pressed hers hard against the wall.

She whimpered softly, and the kiss quickly became passionate. I was a man starved, only satiated by her soft moans and the feel of her body. Her free hand moved up my

back and sank into my hair. The other remained stroking my cock.

Suddenly, the kiss stopped.

“I’ve missed something,” she purred. Her hand stayed on my chest, and she took a few seductive steps forward, backing me away.

Without another word, she reached behind her dress. Seconds later, it pooled at her feet, leaving behind only heels and black lace panties.

Fuck. My eyes roved over her body.

“Heels stay on,” I growled. There was a high that came along with the feeling of her heels digging into my back when she came for me. I beckoned her with a finger. “Come here.”

I watched as her chest rose and fell. She nodded.

The lights cast shadows on her nearly naked body when she was finally back within my grasp.

I ran my hand along the curve of her breast, rolling her nipple between my fingers.

“Henry,” she breathed.

“What did you miss?”

Her hands began stroking my cock again, pulling it free from my pants.

“The view.” Her eyes stayed locked on mine as she lowered to her knees. I pushed her hair aside to get her mask off, and she stopped me. “Mask stays on.”

Liquid fire shot up my spine.

“Nobody gives me orders, Selena.”

“Oh?” The gold in her eyes shimmered behind the lace, and her tongue ran along my cock before stopping to lick slow circles at my tip. *Fuck.* “I can stop if you want.”

My hand weaved into her hair.

“Selena...” I warned between heavy breaths.

She slowly took my entire cock in her mouth. I watched as she bobbed up and down my shaft, her hand stroking my balls. Her hair cascaded along her bare shoulders.

My head tipped back, and waves of pleasure rolled up my body. She sucked, licked, even grazed lightly, sputtering as she continued to take my entire length.

“That’s a good girl,” I groaned. My fingers stroked her hair and gently pushed her deeper. She complied enthusiastically, tilting her head up to meet my enraptured stare.

The lace mask, her stunning eyes, her lips wrapped around my entire cock as it slid down her throat.

Fuck. My heart raced out of control.

Her pace quickened, and she let out a long moan along my cock. The vibrations nearly released the pressure building at the base of my spine.

I yanked her away and pressed her against the wall.

Selena gasped.

“A lady always comes first,” I whispered in her ear, nipping the fleshy part of her lobe as I pulled away.

I yanked her panties off, and my thumb found her aroused clit.

I needed to feel her, hold her, fuck her. Like she was mine, because she was. My mouth dropped to her chest, and I drew her taut nipple in. Each languid swipe of my tongue followed in time with every slow press along her clit.

“Oh,” she cried. Her head fell back, and her mouth hung slightly open. Her hips rocked toward my hand. I let them for a moment, enjoying the frenzied way she grinded against me. “Henry...”

My fingers glided inside her slick entrance, stroking her gently at first.

She felt like a dream. So tight I could feel her stretch around me as I pushed into her deeper. Back and forth. Letting her feel every movement as keenly as I did. Every sound she made, every pulse against my fingers, every one of her shallow breaths against my chest—all of it mingled into a drug I was hopelessly addicted to.

“Tell me what you need, baby.” My heart’s rapid drumbeat played in cadence with the throbbing in my cock, aching to replace my hand. But I waited.

I *needed* to hear her say it. My fingers moved faster, and her muscles became taut around me.

“Fuck me, Henry,” she begged.

I pulled away slightly to admire her. There she was, eyes closed and writhing against the wall, wearing nothing but a pleading smile and a black lace mask.

I moved away from her for a brief moment. I pulled the condom out of my wallet, rolled it on, and lifted her. Her legs wrapped around my waist.

I pressed her back against the wall.

In the distance, I could hear the countdown.

“I’m going to fuck you into the new year.” A groan worked its way up my throat, and I sank into her.

Soaking wet. Impossibly tight. Fucking perfect.

Her back bowed from the wall as she adjusted.

“Then you should start.” Selena took matters into her own hands and bucked against me.

“That’s my girl.” I started slow. “So fucking needy for my cock.” Her eyes closed, and her fingernails sank into my back. “In your mouth. In your perfect pussy.”

“Henry,” she begged. “*Please.*”

I thrust into her harder, pausing for a split second each time to hear the breathy gasp she always gave me.

Watching her bounce up and down against me was becoming a new favorite hobby.

“That’s right, baby.” My hand grazed over her nipple, exploring. “Is this what you want?”

A soft whimper answered me. Her eyes opened and met mine, glassy with desire.

“Yes.” Her delicate fingers laced through my hair.

I didn’t hold back. She met every hard thrust with a roll or buck of her hips. I hammered into her deeper and deeper until all she could do was hold on. Her heels dug into my back, and I could feel how close she was.

Curses, soft moans, and whimpers escaped her parted lips in a private symphony, and her walls clamped down around my cock. Her mouth opened with a silent scream as the orgasm rippled through her.

Every pulse pushed against me as each wave of pleasure hit her. I held on for another minute before all my restraint evaporated. My own climax ripped through me in a searing hot flash. “Fuck, Selena.”

Her head fell lazily against mine. I laid a few kisses along the curve of her collarbone, “You know, you have a filthy mouth for a gentleman,” she noted playfully between breaths.

I chuckled against the softness of her skin, enjoying the warm sensation buzzing through my entire body. “Would you rather I whisper sweet nothings in your ear?”

“I never said I didn’t like it,” she giggled.

We didn’t stay like that for long. Basking in the afterglow would have to wait till later. And we still needed to straighten out our disheveled appearance. I helped Selena back into her dress and adjusted her mask.

Once we looked presentable, she pulled me in for one last kiss.

The sound of the door opening didn't register until Selena took a sharp inhale.

Marcus looked marginally surprised for the split second he saw us before his gaze was firmly fixed on the floor. A sly grin spread across his face as he stifled a laugh. "Sorry."

Before I could say anything, his attention was drawn to footsteps, and he slammed the door shut.

"Sloan," he said loudly at the other side of the door, alerting us to compose ourselves quickly.

The voices turned hushed, and I heard laughter before they stepped away.

Selena leaned into me and laughed against my chest.

"I'll go first," she whispered, and walked away too quickly for me to pull her in for one last kiss.

I left a few minutes after. When I got back to the ballroom, I couldn't seem to find her. I didn't see Marcus or Sloan either.

My eyes scanned the ballroom again. I grabbed a drink from a server and waited. I tried my best not to replay the last twenty minutes. I was still coming off the high, and waiting for this party to be over was torture.

I spent the next half hour wondering where everyone seemed to run off too. The masks weren't helping. Marcus walked up next to me a few minutes later and adjusted his tie.

"Considering the precarity of your general situation, you should learn how to lock a door," he suggested.

"You should learn to knock," I retorted. The irony wasn't lost on me that failing to announce myself was how I discovered he and Sloan were together. "Where the hell did you go?"

"I was distracting Sloan. You're welcome."

I looked over in the direction of the hallway and noticed Sloan walking out of the corridor, adjusting her dress, then her

mask. She looked over to Marcus, smiled, and walked to the bar. *Ew.*

“Seriously?” I grimaced.

“I know three ways to distract Sloan,” he said offhandedly. “Do you see first-edition books or jalebi anywhere?”

“Thanks for the warning, I guess,” Selena’s voice called softly. A delightful blush spread across her face when she walked up beside me. Despite knowing I had to be careful about how I acted around her in public, I couldn’t look away. Selena in her afterglow was stunning.

Marcus laughed. “I assure you, the pleasure was all mine.”

He walked off toward the bar to meet Sloan.

The disgusting implication was quickly forgotten when Selena took a few steps closer to me.

“We could leave early,” she murmured. “It’s a little late to be talking business anyway.”

She slinked ahead of me and began toward the entrance of the grand ballroom, then flicked a glance over her shoulder and smiled. Her bright golden eyes shimmered behind her mask. They were too hard to resist, not that I had any intention of trying.

CHAPTER 38

Selena



Sleeping with the Staff

My heart sank when I read the article through barely cracked eyes the next morning. It was from one of the online publications that Isabelle was subscribed to—her guilty pleasure, as she called it—which she’d sent me with a message of “I’m sorry” attached.

When I told Henry it was a good idea to keep our relationship quiet, I stated the board as the primary reason. But I was also protecting myself. I knew what they’d say, and while I tried my best to convince myself it didn’t bother me, it did. I wasn’t some social climber, but I’d worked in media long enough to know that was how they’d portray me.

It was early, and Henry was fast asleep next to me.

My attention was drawn away from the screen when I heard a sleepy groan. Henry turned over and ran his hand down my spine. Shivers followed his finger’s path.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice low and graveled. His eyes adjusted to the light, and he sat up to look over my shoulder, leaning in to kiss the nape of my neck.

“There’s an article with photos of us together, kissing as we got out of the car last night,” I explained as I flicked through the rest of the pictures on my phone. “And a couple more as we came into the house.”

Not even twelve hours ago. It was definitely more than a lucky shot.

“Huh.” He lay back down, snaking his arm around my waist and pulling me onto him. I turned to my side and laid my head on his chest. “The press is getting wily.”

I snorted a laugh, one that made him chuckle. He didn’t care? “That’s all you have to say?”

“What do you want me to say?” His reaction filled my body with a rush of adrenaline.

“Wily?” I looked up at him.

“Yeah, like the coyote.” His boyish smile made my heart dip.

I loved the mornings we slept in together. He was always surprisingly normal for the wildly lavish environment he was born into.

“Swiss boarding schools have cartoons?” I pondered, and leaned on my elbows next to him.

He glanced over to the clock.

“I’m not *that* out of touch.” He sat up in bed and pressed a kiss on my lips. “Well, now that we’re public, come to brunch.”

Anxiety and excitement filled me in equal measure. I’d already been to brunch once, but under very different circumstances.

“What?” I sat up.

“Come to brunch,” he repeated. He pulled me up, and I straddled his lap on the bed. “Unless you have other plans.”

“I don’t.” Obviously, I was planning on spending the rest of the day having orgasms. I shook my head. “You’re sure?”

He nodded.

I raked a few fingers through his hair. He still looked a little stressed.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. Maybe he was more upset about the leak and our relationship being public than he let on.

He tensed for a moment. “That deal, with Verge.”

I knew a lot about the Verge deal by this point, and I knew Henry met with the entire board while in London. He’d seemed a little off then too.

“Yeah...”

“Charles Hayworth is family. He’s married to my maternal aunt.” He glanced around the room. “I haven’t told Sloan.”

I felt a defensive kick in my gut.

“Do you have to tell her?” I blurted. I thought about the pain I would’ve been spared if I’d never learned the truth about Allister. Maybe he could spare Sloan some of that.

He arched a brow. “That’s not what I expected you to say.”

Same.

Lying always felt like sipping from a poisoned glass. It didn’t feel like much in the moment, but after a while the toxin bled into your life in weird ways. I hated it. At times, the similarities between us were striking, especially given how different we were.

“I dunno.” I planted both palms against his cheeks and stroked his stubble. “One of the cardinal rules of PR is not to tell a story when you don’t have to.”

CHAPTER 39

Henry



Being public meant Selena was going to meet everyone in my circle. I figured brunch was the best venue for that since my parents didn't attend. Meeting them was too big a step, regardless of what the public knew.

"Do we wanna play the who-figured-it-out-first game?" Xander winked at Selena from across the table. I knew he meant it all in jest, but I wanted to hit him.

I rested my hand on her thigh.

"Don't wink at her," I told him.

We sat around the table in Sloan and Marcus's townhouse. Brunch today was just Sloan, Xander, Marcus, and Penelope. Penelope was a colleague and friend of Sloan's.

"It was me." He winked at Selena again. "It's always me. I called Sloan and Marcus years ago. And I'm pretty sure my prediction for Penelope here is—"

A blush ran up Penelope's entire face, and she slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shut your idiot mouth," she snapped.

"Sorry it had to come out this way. We aren't great with relationship reveals." Sloan joined us at the table and ignored their snipping. She shrugged and sat beside Marcus. "We need to work on our delivery."

I was glad everyone was so welcoming, not that I expected anything else. Selena would need allies at the society events

she'd be expected at, now that she and I were publicly an item.

"It's okay." Selena sighed. "At least it was a good picture. To get ahead of it, you need to put out a statement. I'll draft one."

She turned to me and pulled out her phone.

"No working at brunch." I put my hand on hers and pushed it down. I lifted her chin with my finger and gave her a peck.

I knew everyone was watching but, fuck, I couldn't help it.

"Are we that bad?" Sloan asked Penelope and Xander when I pulled away from Selena. I rolled my eyes.

"Lord no," Penelope scoffed. "The two of you are far worse."

I grinned.

"Sorry," I told Selena. She was nervous enough. I should've at least tried keeping my hands to myself.

"Don't worry about the press at events," Sloan assured her. "We'll all be there too."

Selena's shoulders relaxed. "Oh good, that's one thing I don't have to worry about."

Everyone at the table knew her concern. Penelope came from a prominent family in Singapore. Sloan and I grew up in polite society. Marcus and Xander didn't, but they'd been in it so long and entered it so young, they basically melted in. Selena was new, and we all knew that meant it would be bumpy.

"Why don't you come along with me and Sloan to Fashion Week?" Penelope suggested after an uncomfortable silence.

My chest tightened.

If this was all temporary, did it even make sense to try? Those events were especially vicious to women and newcomers. Something about the whole situation gave me

pause. Maybe it was the idea that I'd have to explain her absence once she was gone, or that I'd miss her.

Maybe it was both.

"Yeah," Sloan added, taking a sip of her coffee. "It's usually a good time."

Selena didn't seem flustered at all. She took it all in stride. "Sure, sounds fun."



Once brunch was over, we got our things together, ready to head back to my place.

"Sloan." I turned at the door, and she followed a few steps behind.

Something felt off.

The press was annoying to deal with, but this was the first time I felt like they were everywhere. It could have been the utter lack of control but it was a paranoia I couldn't shake.

"Do you have security when you leave the house?" I asked her.

"No," Marcus answered sharply, then looked down at my sister. It was clearly a conversation they'd had before. "But I'm glad someone sees my point."

Her shoulders fell with an exhausted exhale.

"Not you too, Henry." She sighed.

I turned back to see Drake helping Selena into the private SUV.

"Selena has around-the-clock detail." I didn't tell them why. It didn't seem like any of my information to share. "I don't know why this is happening, but you're back home now, and apparently it's open season on news about us."

“Can you imagine how ridiculous I’m going to look walking into the firm with a guard?”

“If that’s the only downside, then that sounds fantastic,” I countered. “Please think about it.”

She nodded and walked back to the kitchen.

“Do me a favor.” I looked over to Marcus. “Look into Heritage Limited for me. Why were the Waldorfs invested in it?”

“Okay...” he said. “Any reason for the sudden interest?”

“It’s Verge related,” I said. Heritage Limited was a real estate development firm owned by Burton International. It made sense that the Waldorfs invested in it, but I didn’t want to leave any loose ends. “And please convince Sloan to get a security detail.”

“Trust me,” he huffed. “I’m trying.”

CHAPTER 40

Selena



Prince and the Pauper

How original.

I rolled my eyes and shut my laptop.

“Lauren.” I sighed, ignoring the prickle of annoyance at seeing what felt like the hundredth tabloid in the past two weeks. “Why are you looking at this crap?”

Lauren looked over from the kitchen where she was tidying up and groaned. “It’s your whole job.”

“Lauren.”

“I dunno.” She shrugged. She’d spent the morning experimenting with different flours for her roux. “You’re not curious what they’re saying about you?”

I knew what *everyone* was saying about me.

It ranged from cute fairytale type stuff to gold-digging social climber. It took every drop of self-control I had not to read too much into it. I skimmed the articles about me and Henry as a couple, just to make sure there wasn’t anything bad, and then pushed it from my mind.

“Not really. Besides, now that you’re so busy with work, I’d rather spend the time with you,” I said. Ignoring all the jabs at my relationship with Henry was getting exhausting.

I didn't want to fight. Especially since we hardly saw each other lately.

“Well, thanks for coming down to earth for a weekend,” she grumbled.

I felt a weight in the pit of my stomach but took a deep inhale. I'd skipped brunch to make time for her on one of the rare Sundays she wasn't working—I was determined to lighten the mood.

“And most of the press isn't... terrible.”

“Not terrible?” she muttered. “He looks like Prince Charming, and they make you look like... nothing. Isn't this the proof you need to stop seeing him?”

Henry tried to keep me from seeing some of the stories. I could see his concern some days, worried his world might hurt me. It pulled at every one of my heart strings. He wanted to protect me from it.

Over the last few weeks, Sloan and their friends had made a concerted effort to include me in their little group, particularly at society events.

If Lauren could see that, maybe she'd feel more comfortable with all of it. “Come with me to Fashion Week,” I suggested. Sloan already told me I could bring along Isa and Lauren, but Isa was working.

“You're going to Fashion Week?” she faltered.

I brushed past the disapproval in her voice. “You can meet his sister, Sloan. And a couple of their friends. They're not what you think.”

I was being pulled in two directions. I knew Lauren was protective and had my best interest at heart, but she was stubborn. She often did things to try to prove her point to me, and the tabloids seemed to do that for her in this case.

“Fine.” She walked past me and over to the entryway table. She sifted through some of the clutter that always

managed to find its way onto it. After a few silent minutes, she turned and smiled. “Thank you, that sounds like a lot of fun.”

What felt like a boulder lifted from my shoulders at her smile.

It fell right back on me when I looked over to the coffee table.

The lease renewal reminder for my apartment came in. I was supposed to provide my move out date if I planned to leave. Technically, I had ninety days to do it. Rita told the L.A. office I wouldn’t start till September, so I had the summer free.

Originally, I planned to move right when I was done. But now I wanted to stay the summer. If I did, then I didn’t need to make any decision until June.

That was, if I stuck with the plan at all.

If.

It wasn’t Henry who made me rethink staying, but it was Henry who made me rethink running. The idea of leaving New York used to make me feel safe, but staying didn’t scare me anymore.

“It’s all temporary anyway.” Her voice carried over the static that filled my ears. She was back in the kitchen, cutlery and pots clanking away.

When she came back out, an uncomfortable tension hung in the room.

“You asked me a while ago to show you how to make parathas. Why?” Lauren asked.

I felt silly. It was his favorite, something that the only real parental figure he’d had used to make for him. I wanted to make it for him, but my cooking skills were non-existent.

“A way to thank him.” I pulled at a thread in my sweater. “For the classes.”

“Come on.” She waved me into the kitchen. “I’ll show you.”

“I thought you hated him.”

“I don’t trust the guy, and I really don’t think you should either.” She sighed. “You’re still moving home, right?”

“Yeah.” My chest hollowed as a pang of sadness reverberated through it.

“Okay, then he’s not so bad. Temporary I can deal with.” I watched as she pulled out some flour and other ingredients. “You’re a terrible cook, so you’ll need to take notes.”

CHAPTER 41

Henry



Is Amari's Sweetheart Collecting Michelin Stars?

**The Couple Shuts Down yet Another Exclusive Eatery
for Date Night.**

I released a frustrated sigh, tucked my phone back into my pocket, and got out of the car.

The press was quiet over the summer, a little more of a nuisance over the autumn months, but now, they were everywhere. Most nights, I couldn't take Selena out to dinner without someone getting a shot of us. The only nights we had some peace were when I covertly planned dates without anyone's knowledge. Not even Selena's.

She didn't say anything, but her soft, pained sighs told me she was uncomfortable. They wrapped around my chest like barbed wire every time I heard them.

I opened Selena's door and held out my hand for her to take. Lately, I'd been taking the newspapers and tabloids and hiding them in my office drawer after she went through them so she didn't have to see them everywhere.

"You brought me here to kill me and then hide my body?" Selena wondered aloud. Her heels sank a little into the cold dirt as she stepped toward the fully abandoned city block in Queens.

She'd spent the morning putting together a press release for Sloan since she was getting a lot more of it now and her assistant was overwhelmed. The fact that Sloan and Marcus got engaged over the weekend in France only intensified the interest.

"If I wanted to kill you, I would make you endure an entire conversation with Morgan Parker about the migration patterns of blue-winged warblers."

"You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"I never met a grudge I didn't like," I told her, then grabbed her hand and helped her to the sidewalk.

"This is what you wanted to show me?" She stepped onto the concrete. "I was sure it was going to be something along the lines of what you tried to do to me in the private elevator this morning. Even though that's exactly the type of press you don't need."

"I told you already, there aren't cameras in the private elevators."

"And why is that?" she asked, crossing her arms and lifting a brow.

"Not for *that*," I assured her. "We occasionally take calls with highly sensitive information that doesn't need to be recorded."

"Whatever you say," she chimed playfully. "So, what am I looking at?"

I turned back to the mostly empty lot and dilapidated building. "My grandfather bought this lot decades ago when the building was condemned. He and my grandmother lived here when they first got married. It's been abandoned for years, and he never did anything with it. He left it to me."

Her eyes scanned across the building. "What do you wanna do with it?"

I wasn't sure why my grandfather held on to this building. He never told me. And I had no idealized memories of him.

He was difficult to have a good relationship with. My grandmother, however, was wonderful. It felt like a betrayal to her to let this go. If I was going to develop it into something, anything other than charitable felt wrong.

“I don’t know. Something for the foundation.” I had no business in real estate, and I’d ignored this building until Selena became invested in the foundation.

“So.” I wrapped my arms around her waist, and she leaned into me. “Thoughts?”

“Well, what would your grandmother have wanted?” she asked. Her words sparked an idea that lit up my entire mind.

“Not sure, I thought maybe you’d have a suggestion.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m glad you brought me here.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded and turned in my arms to face me. “I don’t know if you recognize when you do it, but sometimes you’re asking to talk without asking.”

I realized after we got in the car that I could have shown her the city zoning map for it or simply told her about it to get her thoughts. But the idea of having to come here alone at some point was off-putting.

I’d have plenty of time to be alone once she was gone. I wanted her here with me while I had the chance.

The dull ache that sprouted whenever I thought about her leaving flourished into a deep, visceral pain. One that was beginning to feel chronic.

“Henry.” She laid her hands on my chest and looked up at me. “Why’d you bring me here?”

“I didn’t want to come here alone,” I confessed, and raked a hand through my hair.

“You know, I don’t envy much about you,” she said plainly. “You’re possessive, a little flippant at times. You’re

out of touch.”

“Well, this is fun,” I deadpanned.

She giggled and threw her arms around my neck. “But one thing I do envy is your whole group. Your sister, your friends. You all made your own little family. You, Henry Amari, are not alone.”

Notably, she’d left herself off that list.



Once we got back to the office, I put the zoning map in my drawer and tried to remember the name of the architect Amari Global used for one of our international buildings.

“Bridget,” I called as I sat at my desk.

A few seconds later, she entered with a folder in her hands. “Yes, Henry?”

“Can you get me the name of the architect for the Singapore buildings?”

“Of course.” She nodded and walked over to my desk. “These came for you while you were out, via secure courier.”

“Thanks.” I took them from her and began paging through the files Balakin’s forensic accountant sent over. I was expecting them.

I got to the section that was flagged and stopped when I noticed Bridget hadn’t left the office yet. She stood there, indecision painted all over her face.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“She’s a nice girl.” Bridget’s voice was steely. She pointed her index finger at me in a motherly warning. “Do not hurt her, young man.”

Shame swept around me.

Bridget had seen every part of my life, which included the years I wasn't proud of.

"I thought you looked out for *me*," I joked.

"I look out for your best interests." She crossed her arms, and a knowing smile emerged. "And I know them when I see them."

"I won't hurt her," I assured Bridget.

"Good," she said with a contented sigh. She made her way out of the office and stopped in the doorway. "I know I don't need to remind you, but this building was your grandfather's life. His only life. Don't make that mistake."

My grandfather trusted very few people. He saw it as a weakness, a way to have your vision clouded by competing interests. That meant he oversaw quite a bit personally at Amari Global. It benefitted him, in business anyway. But that method of leadership made for a lonely existence.

I nodded, and Bridget walked back to her desk.

I read the paperwork that was flagged and realized I was right.

My mother's inheritance, the one she was legally entitled to but never received, was used to purchase the investment in Heritage Limited. It was a small subsidiary of the Burton Group, one of the world's largest banks. That investment was then transferred to Aubert in exchange for a forty-five percent stake in his company. Charles was the initial investor, but Benedict Sheffield funded it. All with my mother's inheritance.

"Henry?" Selena's soft voice called from the doorway. The late afternoon light cast around the curves of her body. "Since you're still working, I was going to head home. I'll see you tomorrow?"

I looked around my desk.

It made sense now why Hayworth covered up our connection. Why he approached Preston first was still an open

question. But the development meant my mother could make the argument for his stake in Verge. Heritage Limited only had offshore holdings, meaning it was a matter of time until I had proof that those were dubious.

There was still plenty to do, but the idea of Selena sleeping in a different bed yanked at heart.

I could do some of this at home. All I needed to know was what, exactly, Heritage Limited was.

“No, I was just finishing up.” I stood and gathered some things. “Come home with me?”

She beamed. “If you insist.”

I took a moment to appreciate the rope that Charles was going to hang himself with. I texted Marcus to see if he found out anything about Heritage yet. Then, I met her at the doorway and pressed a short kiss on her lips.

“I do insist.” I exhaled loudly with a playful seriousness. “There’s still the matter of what we didn’t finish in the elevator this morning.”

CHAPTER 42

Selena



For CeCe, six front-row seats at New York Fashion Week were easy to come by. In fact, the designers jumped at the opportunity. That would've been the most surprising part of the day if Sloan didn't happen to know the editor-in-chief of *Vogue*. After the show, she even came by to personally congratulate Sloan on the engagement.

Henry and I congratulated them when they got back last week. Sunday brunch with their group of friends was something I'd begun to look forward to. Isa joined sometimes, though Lauren usually refused. I expected them to be like all the other society types I'd encountered in the past, but they were nothing like them.

They tended to avoid a lot of the society-type activities, which helped. New York Fashion Week was society mixed with glamour. That, I could handle.

"Come on, Sloan, it'll be nice." CeCe's voice pulled me from my thoughts. *Vogue* was vying for exclusive rights to cover the wedding, and Sloan seemed uncomfortable with the idea.

"Maybe it'll keep some of the press from swarming your venue," Lauren said, her second full sentence of the afternoon as we followed Sloan, CeCe, and Penelope out of the Tribeca art gallery where the Lily Langham show was held.

"Yeah!" Sloan whipped around. She seemed relieved that someone understood. Despite Lauren's general silence and

thorny attitude, Sloan and her friends were welcoming and tried to make conversation. “If other press groups try to take our photos, *Vogue*’s lawyers can deal with it.”

“And, um, hello, you’ll be in *Vogue*.” CeCe giggled and turned to me and Lauren. “I’m glad you were able to come along today.”

“Who could say no to Fashion Week?” Lauren’s candy-coated tone bypassed CeCe’s bitch-filter, but I knew what she meant. I smiled politely at her, hoping she’d actually try. After that night she showed me how to cook Henry’s favorite dish, I thought maybe she was warming up to the idea.

“Thank you for trying,” I whispered to Lauren with as much sincerity as I could string together. She didn’t want to be here, that was obvious, but agreeing to come was a step in the right direction.

We followed a few steps behind the others as we left. “I don’t know why *you’re* trying. It’s a fling,” she reminded me.

Lauren didn’t look at me and diverted her attention to Sloan. Particularly, the woman talking to her.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Amelia.” Sloan’s voice didn’t conceal the distaste for the run-in when Amelia Waldorf stopped in front of us.

“I hear congratulations are in order.” Amelia politely stood in front of Sloan and folded her hands together. She said it with all the formal insincerity that most high society mothers carried around like a weapon.

“Thank you, Amelia.” Sloan’s voice changed to the same formal one I’d heard from Henry a thousand times when he covered up irritation.

“And to Marcus Sutton, no less. The Amari taste was always so”—a venomous smile slithered across her face—“common. Nevertheless, the engagement seems to be the talk of the town.”

“The papers needed something to talk about, covering your legal proceedings was incredibly tactless,” Sloan lamented, reaching her hands over to Amelia’s, clutching them with a faux sincerity. “And audacious, if you ask me.”

“Well.” Amelia yanked her hands back. “Judging by that *lovely* ring, audacious doesn’t seem to bother you.”

“Neither do eleven carats,” CeCe cut in, lifting Sloan’s hand to admire her ring. “It’s worth more than you are these days.”

It was the meanest thing I’d ever heard come out of CeCe’s mouth, and I loved every second of it. Amelia held a strange power over me, and it wasn’t just that she and her family could take everything of mine in one swoop if I broke the terms of our agreement.

She made me feel small. Powerless. Watching Amelia Waldorf get brutally put in her place made me wish I had popcorn.

“Speaking of the papers, funny how they seem to be *so* interested in your brother again. It was a quiet summer,” Amelia noted when her eyes landed on me. My heart fell into my stomach. She wouldn’t say anything. A single word of it would crash her life. Even knowing that, my body shook. She turned back to Sloan. “A word of advice, dear, be careful of the company you keep.”

“You’re absolutely right.” Sloan took a step back and linked her arms around mine and Lauren’s. “You have exactly the day you deserve, Amelia.”

CeCe and Penelope followed behind us with hushed and excited giggles.

“My favorite thing about people like Amelia,” Sloan said with a snicker, “is we live in their heads, driving them crazy. All the while, we forget about them the second they’re out of sight.”

I wished that were true.

“Hell yeah,” Lauren cheered, turning the heads of a few passersby. She flicked her cerulean eyes to me, the cheeriness faded, and stared in warning. She’d been uncomfortable all day, and that little run-in only proved her point.

“Come on,” Sloan said as we walked over to where the town cars were waiting. “Let’s take the rest of the day off at my place. Meet you girls there?”

“Sure.” I nodded to Sloan and got into the car that awaited Lauren and I.

After a few silent minutes, Lauren finally spoke in a soft, menacing whisper. “Hating the Waldorfs is something you have in common. Just imagine how they’ll feel when they find out you are one.”

My patience had been wearing all day and finally wore too thin.

“I’m not one,” I snapped, the leather seat groaning beneath my tight grasp. I wasn’t a Waldorf, they made that very clear. And I sure as hell didn’t want to be one. I was a Montez, and we didn’t take shit, especially not from people who were supposed to be our friends.

“No, you aren’t.” Her voice dropped even lower as disappointment replaced the menacing edge. “So why are you playing pretend? Why are you getting wrapped up in it? It’s a fling, you’ll be gone in a few months.”

My hand gripped the seat even tighter. I talked to Isa about it, a lot. Lately it seemed like she and Henry were the only ones who wanted to hear about how I *actually* felt. Hell, Sloan and CeCe were more supportive than my oldest friend, and I’d just met them.

The truth I’d been holding back finally found its way out. “Well... maybe the move is something I need to rethink.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “Suddenly you don’t want to go back home?”

“Keep your voice down,” I whisper-shouted, glancing up to see Drake’s full attention on the road and not us. “It’s not sudden, I was always on the fence.”

The more I waffled over leaving or not, the more I thought about what leaving would mean—they’d controlled me by scaring me away. I didn’t want to run from them. I messed up how I handled the situation, but that didn’t mean it had to become an albatross around my neck.

Lauren’s entire face filled with a quiet rage. I expected her to get upset and finally go off. Honestly, at that moment, I welcomed it. I was sick of the little play we had going where we pretended we weren’t angry with each other.

Instead of whatever venom she planned to spill, she kept quiet. Her shoulders relaxed. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I’m just trying to help you before you get hurt again, but you know what you’re doing.”

The remainder of the ride was quiet. When we got to Sloan’s townhouse, Lauren was polite and friendly. At least on the surface, she was trying. I knew she never felt comfortable in these spaces, which was why I tried to ignore the snide comments. It wasn’t worth arguing over now.



The night was spent eating from take-out containers. The rest of Henry’s friend group seemed to trickle their way in throughout the evening. It was an odd feeling, sitting around her house listening to stories. I expected to feel out of place, but I didn’t, even when the stories were unreal.

Some stories, like when Sloan and Henry pelted the French president with ice cream as children, were wildly out of touch. Others were cute and oddly relatable. Sloan spent almost twenty minutes explaining a long-standing prank war she and Xander had going, and then they spent another twenty minutes

arguing over who'd won the last round. It was endearing and silly. It felt like a family.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and pulled my attention. It was my mom, so I got up to answer the call.

“*Hola, Mami,*” I walked into the hallway.

After a long pause, my mom spoke.

“*Mija.*” Her voice overflowed with concern. “Are you dating someone?”

A chill ran through my body. I never told her. I glanced back down the hallway and saw Lauren talking to Sloan as they paged through something at the counter. The anger that bubbled up at Lauren was quickly doused when I heard a concerned sigh on the other end of the line.

“*Mami,*” I began.

“You know it’s not a good idea.” She knew about Henry. The tone in her voice was one I’d only heard once before, when she told me about Allister. A sharp jab splintered down my sternum. She sounded exasperated. I heard the beeping from hospital bed alarms and muffled conversation in the background on her end. She was calling me from work. “It can get very serious very quickly.”

Her words ran through the phone, tinged with equal parts fear and disappointment.

My mom didn’t read tabloids, and there was no way New York society news was on the front page of any gossip rag in L.A. Someone told her. “How did you—”

“Don’t change the subject,” she snapped sternly.

“He’s different.”

Another annoyed sigh came through. “*Mija.* When are you coming home?”

Today should have been the perfect example of how different Henry and I were. It should have been a blaring alarm that I didn’t fit here.

It wasn't.

"I'll be home this summer."

"Selena, don't fall for the same tricks I fell for." Her voice cracked. "I want more for you."

Before his death a few years ago, Allister's father, Conrad, reached out to my mom. She was sure it was a trap to convince me to sign a privacy agreement. That way, I could never tarnish their perfectly curated image. She never responded.

There was a reason she kept all of that information from me. She did it to protect me so I wouldn't get hurt the way she had.

"Si, Mami."

"Ti amo." She hung up.

I sucked in a deep breath, trying to control my trembling pulse. I looked up at the picture hanging in front of me, the same graduation photo I'd found in Henry's old desk.

He was different. Everything with him felt like something I never knew I was missing. It felt like a lot more than temporary.

I took another deep breath and made my way out to the group, where I saw Henry and Marcus had joined.

Henry tipped his head and gestured for me to join him.

I went to his side and found myself beneath his arm. I wrapped my mine around his torso and breathed him in, not fully realizing how the entire room stopped for a moment and took notice. A few sly smiles lingered, and the cacophony of voices picked up again, submerged in another conversation.

"You okay?" he asked, looking at me in a way nobody else did.

"Yeah." I got on my toes and kissed his chin. "When did you get here?"

“Just now. Sloan tried to keep you here longer by sending Marcus to get dinner with me,” he groaned. I knew he wanted to leave and go back to his place, but I was having a nice time. I scanned the room and sighed wistfully. He chuckled. “Let’s stay a while?”

I nodded. I knew Lauren didn’t want to stay, but at this point, I didn’t care. She had no right to tell my mom about Henry; I was still figuring things out. If she wanted to go, she could. I wanted to stay.

CHAPTER 43

Henry & Selena

HENRY



I leaned on the doorframe of Selena's office. "Ready?" I asked.

She was getting her things together, putting a few items in her purse.

"I need to go to my place first."

"I'm not falling for that again." I shook my head. She spent last night at her place for the first time in a long time. I hated it. In a few short months, she'd become embedded in every part of me. I felt an emptiness when she wasn't around and vertigo when she was.

"I'll meet you at your place, I just need to get something," she added.

"And that is?"

"A surprise," she teased, then grabbed her bag and walked to meet me in the doorway. She shuffled some items in her purse as we began down the hallway to the private elevator, and something flew out and floated to the floor.

"What's this?" I knelt to retrieve the bi-folded card that, and read the short note as I picked it up.

I froze. Blood rushed through my ears. My eyes ran over it again. And then one more time.

Rita,

I apologize for crossing a line with Selena.

I hope to see her again, to apologize in person.

If she'll be at the New York premier of the next Vengeance release, I look forward to seeing her.

Please tell her I'm sorry and that I miss her.

Miles

I should've had Balakin break both of his fucking hands. My heart hammered furiously in my chest.

Selena's voice cut through the static that filled my ears. "Rita gave it to me when I went to see her before the new year."

"That was months ago," I barked, and she recoiled, eyes wide. "You're still carrying it around?"

"Hey." Her soft voice cooled the air. "I forgot it was in there."

She got on her tiptoes and brushed her lips against mine. She steadied my temper when she looked at me like that.

Calm, sweet, irreproachable.

"Why was it?"

"It means nothing. He means nothing," she insisted, turning toward the elevator.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her back to me. "Premiere?"

"It's in June," she explained with an apprehension that passed over her angelic features. "I didn't think you'd want to go. It's right at the end of my contract."

An ache in thorned my chest.

Every time I felt the insurmountable reflex to question her motives, she would remind me that there was no need because she was leaving.

I took a deep breath. My entire body shook. I couldn't tell if it was anger, pain, or jealousy. Probably all three. "I wouldn't want to go somewhere with my girlfriend?"

"Then we'll go." A levity breezed through her voice.

After a couple of frozen and frustrated seconds, I followed a few steps behind her.

SELENA

I understood it didn't look great, but I completely forgot the note was in there. Seeing it reminded me of something Rita said. Miles had been injured, and even though I never asked about it, I had a feeling Henry did more than just warn Miles politely to stay away.

Henry always had the upper hand with things he wanted to control.

"How long have you two been talking?" he demanded, prowling behind me.

"We haven't," I snapped. He stepped into the elevator behind me. "He sent it, I read it, that's it."

I pressed the button to the lobby. Henry looked down at the note and read it again, then dropped it with disgust, like it was covered in a contagion.

The elevator bell dinged, and the doors closed.

"That's all?" His voice dropped, and his jaw tightened.

"Yes."

His eyes were alight with a dark possessiveness. His hand wrapped around the back of my neck, gently, and he yanked me close.

"I'm taking you to the premier." The controlled cadence to his words charged the air.

"Okay." I whispered so quietly I didn't think he heard it. Despite myself, I felt my stomach flip with anticipation.

He drew closer, his other hand gripping my waist, and leaned his forehead against mine.

"I'm taking you home," he continued, his grip around the back of my neck tightening.

My next breath faltered as a buzz concentrated between my thighs.

“I’m fucking you all night,” he growled. My back hit the wall of the elevator, and he pressed himself against me.

“Henry,” I breathed. Electricity filled the elevator car, threatening to ignite at any moment.

“Like I do every night.” His breath scorched the hollow of my neck.

Goose bumps. Everywhere. I arched into him.

“Henry...” My eyes closed momentarily, and my nipples hardened beneath my dress.

Suddenly, his looming body moved away. He turned and tapped the emergency stop button. A bell rang through the elevator before it jostled to a stop.

I gasped, but before I could do or say anything, his lips crashed against mine. The menacing possessiveness mounted a full-frontal assault on my senses. I surrendered to it as my fingers ran through his hair and pulled him closer, molding his body against mine.

The phone in the elevator rang over and over. We ignored it.

His lips, his hands, his body all worked in concert to claim what was his. And I let him.

“Only me.” He pulled away and groaned into my ear. He reached under my dress and yanked my panties down, wetness trailing down my thigh.

His turbulent eyes pinned mine as he lifted me. My legs snapped around his waist reflexively. Pressing me harder against the wall, he undid his pants and rolled on a condom from his wallet with an unsurprising ease.

“Only *I* fuck you.” He sank into me slowly. Bursts of pleasure exploded low in my belly with each sensation. He pulled out at a teasing pace. “Only *I* make you moan.” He

slammed back in, and a loud gasp ricocheted out of my throat. “Only *I* do this to you.”

A moan slipped through my lips, and his thumb stroked my aching clit almost in response. The overwhelming sensation of him filling me overrode every other logical thought I had left.

“Only you,” I echoed in a soft whimper, saying anything to keep him near, to keep his body on mine.

Those two words drained him of whatever control he had left. His hips bucked faster.

“That’s right,” he growled, his teeth grazing my neck. He drove into me harder. His strokes became savage, rough, angry. Beneath it lay the vulnerability that the note unearthed. “You’re mine.”

My head tipped back, dragging up and down the elevator wall as I clung to him. My teeth dug into my lower lip, trying and failing to stop the string of noises and pleas that fell out of my mouth.

“And I don’t fucking share, Selena.”

My toes curled in my stilettos, the heels digging into Henry’s back.

The pleasure concentrated at the base my spine. His final, rough stoke against my clit blew the fuse. A loud moan erupted from me. My legs tightened around him, and the orgasm reverberated through my whole body.

His pace continued until I heard a guttural grunt from him. His muscles flexed beneath the perfectly ironed shirt we just warped with wrinkles.

“Only me,” he whispered into my ear. His voice lost its menacing edge.

We stayed in a comfortable stillness. He kept me wrapped in his arms, his head buried in my neck, dropping a few gentle kisses along the column.

“Henry...”

The phone continued to ring, yanking us from the hazy, post-orgasmic fog. He hit the intercom button, and barked out, “We’re fine.”

He turned back to me and leaned his head against mine. “You’re going to fucking kill me, Selena.”

I cupped his face in my hands. “Will you take me to the premiere?”

His smile warmed, and his brows arched gently. “It would be my honor.”

I unhooked my legs from him. He made quick work of getting himself dressed, then knelt to pull my panties up, catching my eye with a devious smirk.

“You look good like that,” I said. “Henry Amari, on bent knee.”

“I don’t mind the view either.” He rose and kissed me.

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to read into it.”

That was mostly true. I didn’t tell him about the premiere because for a while, I didn’t want to have the uncomfortable conversation where he reminded me this ended in June.

I wasn’t sure if that was true anymore. The insecurity I felt that day in Rita’s office was gone now, replaced with a comforting stability.

Henry pulled the emergency stop button out. The elevator rustled and resumed its journey to the lobby.

HENRY

“All right.” I ran my arms around Selena’s waist when she got to my place. The argument and make-up session in the elevator from earlier only made me want her closer. “Where is my surprise?”

We stayed here most nights since Lauren was still staying with her. I was curious, but Lauren seemed to dislike me. I figured it was best not to ask.

She lifted the paper bag in her hand and smiled. “Kitchen.”

I followed her into the kitchen where she triumphantly held the paper bag up in front of me, the handles hanging on her index finger.

“What’s this?” I set the bag down on the counter and pulled out a small, circular parcel wrapped in foil. The scent of spices hit me immediately. My heart dipped. I knew what it was.

“That night in the Hamptons, you said you loved parathas. So I got Lauren to teach me how to make them.”

I heaved an exhale, unable to speak, every word tangled in the emotions that welled inside.

She unwrapped the package and put a few parathas on a plate. “My first ones turned out a little overcooked and raw at the same time, but I think I got the hang of it.”

“Selena...”

The argument earlier about that note churned up something I wasn’t expecting. Not the acrid jealousy, but the realization that I wasn’t on the fence anymore. I didn’t want this to end.

“Why?” I managed to choke out.

The gifts I was used to receiving were of the ridiculously unnecessary variety, the ones that made me certain the gift-

giver knew nothing about me. The only exceptions were my sister and our closest friends. Even then, it was never anything like this.

Selena couldn't cook. I'd witnessed her attempt to make a pancake, and she nearly burnt down my kitchen. Oliver, my chef, didn't let her near the stove after that. She did this for me.

"You're not the only one who's been paying attention." She took the plates and the parcel of food with her in one hand and led me to the dining table. "And, I dunno, I guess I like you."

She put everything down and took a seat.

"Yeah?" I sat down next to her.

"Not the CEO, the society boy, the heir. They're fine." She shrugged. "But I prefer Henry. He has a soft spot for kids because boarding school did a number on him. He hides how charming he is for some reason," she went on, getting up from her seat and settling in my lap. Her arms swung around my neck playfully. "He tried to have sex with me in the Hamptons house."

"Still trying."

"Oh?"

I nodded. "Let's spend the summer there. I still haven't given you a proper tour."

If she could slip in reminders that she was leaving, I could slip in reminders that she could always choose to stay. At least for the summer.

"Okay." A soft, excited sigh passed through her supple lips. "I know not everyone sees past the legacy, but I do."

Ever dark corner of my chest filled with her light.

She opened the door to a path I didn't think was available to me, one where I could have a life, a real one. She was

making me want things I didn't think I'd ever truly have. Someone who wanted *me*.

I gripped her neck and pulled her into a kiss. We could have dinner later. The only thing I was hungry for was her.

CHAPTER 44

Henry & Selena

SELENA



Ever since Fashion Week a couple months ago, I spent most Sunday mornings with Henry's friends. Most nights at his place. Over the weekends, I would see Isa, but Lauren was becoming more distant. She was working late every night at the restaurant, and our hours hardly ever overlapped.

Today was my first Sunday back at my place since Isa had the day off. Lauren was sleeping off last night's dinner shift in the den.

I sat on my couch and stared at the renewal letter for thirty minutes. I needed to submit *something* soon. It was April, and the lease was up at the end of June.

Isa sat down next to me and handed me a cup of coffee.

"Just because you were friends as kids doesn't mean you owe her your happiness," Isa reminded me softly. "You're *allowed* to want to stay."

I didn't ask Lauren specifically, but I knew she was the one who'd told my mom about Henry. I was angry, but I didn't want to fight. My life consisted of few people I could count on, and the idea of losing one felt like losing an entire piece of myself.

"I know," I whispered, even though there was no way Lauren could hear us. Lately, Isa was the one I went to with everything. She wanted me to stay, sure, but she'd been fully on board with my move until it became something I didn't

want. She wasn't judging my decisions; she was supporting them. "I think I wanna stay."

"Everything with the... *them*," Isa's voice lowered to match the decibel mine was in. She was referring to the Waldorfs. "There's not anything they could do to you, right?"

I shrugged. "I signed an NDA. I can't tell anyone, and I can't go to the press. Outside of that, they can't do anything."

She nodded, twisting her hands around the coffee cup. I knew what she was going to say next, but I waited. "Henry could probably help."

I shook my head. "I want to forget them. They won't say anything, and neither will I. The NDA is signed. It's done."

"You'll have to tell him eventually, if things get serious."

"I know." Things already felt serious. "I will."

It would have to come out at some point. I was hoping it would be when I felt more prepared to relive that awful part of my past. There'd been a knife lodged in my heart ever since that day in Allister's office; I tried to protect that wound. It was beginning to feel like Henry was a safe place to open up about it.

There was a gnawing concern, too. I wasn't exactly proud of my reaction. I'd leaked information to the press, and that was a sore subject for Henry.

With all of that, the acquisition on the horizon, my being under contract with his family, and the board meeting to cement him as CEO in a couple of months, it all felt too complicated. Maybe this summer, when things settled.

"Good, because I've *never* seen you like this." Isa nudged me with her shoulder. "Are you in love with him?"

"I dunno..." I twinned my fingers. Everything with him felt terrifying in the most exhilarating way. "Maybe?"

It wasn't a maybe.

I was in love with Henry.

HENRY

I was in love with Selena.

Or at least I thought I was. I didn't have any frame of reference. My last actual relationship was in business school, and I was a kid.

For a long time, I accepted that I'd float through life alone. I got used to the idea. Comfortable even. It was less complicated that way.

Then Selena swept into my world and shot me right out of the fucking sky.

The realization glimmered slowly over the past few weeks, then quickly, like the rising sun, so bright now that there was no other possible explanation. I found myself teetering between euphoric when I was around her and wrecked when I thought about her leaving.

"It's your move," Marcus reminded me from the other side of the chess board.

Selena had planned something with her friend Isa today, so she left my place before I went to Sloan and Marcus's. After brunch, I stuck around to talk to him.

Now I was too preoccupied to notice I'd walked myself into a trap on the board.

"Checkmate." Marcus moved his bishop, took the queen, and looked up at me with a furrowed brow. It was a rookie mistake. "What the hell is going on? You've had that stupid look on your face all day."

I ignored that. "How'd you know?"

Marcus and I had lived lives that mirrored each other's for years. Busy with work, incredible responsibility, nonstop stress, careless womanizing, then one day he was in love. I

hadn't been around to witness their courtship. By the time I knew they were dating, they were already head over heels. Hell, I was surprised they hadn't eloped already.

What did falling in love even look like?

“Know what?”

“That you were in love with Sloan? What is it supposed to feel like?”

His entire face changed—eyes wide, brows raised, smug grin.

Love changed him. What would it do to me? Trusting people wasn't easy for someone in my position. The idea of jumping without a rip cord was terrifying.

“I knew because the only future I could picture was one with her,” he began, not taking the opportunity to torture me about the development. “I imagine it's different for everyone, but for me, it felt like coming home. I realized home wasn't a place, it was a person. It was her. Wherever I'm not around Sloan, I'm thinking about her. When I'm with her, it's a kind of peace and happiness I've never known before.”

Peace? I felt like I was going insane. “Then why do I feel like I'm losing my mind?”

He chuckled. “I think that's how you know you're doing it right.”

“Seriously? That's your advice,” I grumbled, dragging a hand down the side of my face.

His brow furrowed for a moment. “I tried to acquire Verge last year, while I was in London.”

I sat up, interested as to where this was going. “Okay... what happened?”

“Your sister happened.” He chuckled again and shook his head. “Sloan had a date, or someone asked her out. I can't remember. What I do remember is missing Aubert in London because I was so fucking crazed at the idea that she was seeing

someone.. Then, when Aubert was in Zurich, Sloan and I had our first argument. Instead of convincing him to sell, I spent the entire time finding that ski chalet you guys used to stay at with your grandmother and bought it for her. After missing our meetings twice, Aubert refused to even meet with me this time around.”

Love did *that*? Why the fuck did anyone let themselves get pulled under?

“You ever think it was careful sabotage? She’s still Sloan Amari,” I theorized.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Look, eventually, love makes you less... nuts. You tell each other everything and, without secrets, life runs pretty smoothly.”

“You don’t have any secrets from Sloan?” Skepticism weaved through my question.

“No.”

“None?” I repeated incredulously. My grandfather, who probably respected Marcus more than anyone else, would’ve had the same question. He mentored both of us, and if there was one thing I learned, it was to always have the upper hand. “You have no leverage.”

“I don’t want leverage against my wife.”

“Fiancée.”

“Semantics.” He sat up straighter in his seat. “Look, love *is* leverage. The ultimate leverage. She can tear your entire world down by virtue of being the person you’re in love with. But she won’t because she probably loves you too. Regardless of whether you tell her or not, she already has that power. And regardless of whether you believe it or not, I don’t think she’d use it.”

I ran an anxious hand through my hair. I spent my entire life making sure nobody would ever have that type of power over me. I was careful with every business relationship, knowing that leverage could and would be abused. For my

money, power, lifestyle, whatever it happened to be that someone was after.

Until Selena, I never believed anyone would want anything else.

“She wants to go home,” I told him. It had to be more than that. She’d skirted around the topic the few times it’d come up, so I couldn’t tell if she was being pulled home or pushed.

“You love her?”

I paused again. I did. “Yeah.”

“Henry-trust-issues-Amari, in love... weird,” he mused aloud. He grinned when I gave him an unamused stare. “Convince her to stay.”

“You say it like it’s simple.” I couldn’t make New York home for her. I couldn’t make her feel for me what I felt for her. I couldn’t just *make* her want what I did, and I’d never felt more powerless.

“If she likes your car, get her one and let her race it on her dream F1 track. If she likes reading, find her every book she’s ever loved and give them to her,” he said, listing off all the ways he courted Sloan. “You know her, what’s Selena’s version of that?”

I had a few things I’d been rolling around in my mind. “I have some ideas.”

“Good. Do them.”

I heaved a relieved sigh. At least now I had a plan. “Fuck, are you good at relationships now too?”

“Just the one,” he assured me. “While you’re here, I need to show you something that came in this morning.” He got up, rounded his desk, and grabbed a file. “I mentioned Heritage Limited to Xander since he was the one to find all the offshore accounts.”

He walked back to his seat and handed it to me.

“Anything worthwhile?” I asked.

“Depends on what you need it for.” He handed me the files. “The Waldorfs liquidated their holdings in Heritage Limited a couple years ago, but Xander found something interesting. The Heritage Limited holdings are largely in Japan, Italy, and Mexico. All shells. All aliases.”

The heavy implication clicked as I paged through the investment returns. No investment had that rate of return, not even venture capital. “It’s a front to launder money.”

“For international arms dealers, the Yakuza, the Sinaloa Cartel, and the Nardini family in Calabria,” Marcus went on, and pulled the file that outlined the warrant the Feds used to close in on the Waldorfs. “It’s one of the accounts that helped the Feds make the case to seize all of the Waldorfs’ assets.”

“Preston missed a big fucking red flag,” I spat, closing the file. I trusted Preston, but I had a hard time believing he would miss this.

If I acquired Verge, then I would unknowingly have played party to an international crime. Hayworth would receive the payout of clean money from Amari Global, and I would take on the risk, all without knowing it.

It made sense now why every other company’s deals fell through.

Charles Hayworth couldn’t risk me finding this. By influencing Preston after my grandfather passed, he could ensure that detail got missed. My rapid ascension to CEO was perfect timing. Attempting this sale with my grandfather would’ve been a fool’s errand. The press spent months painting me as the young, inexperienced CEO. He bet I would be too blind to see it coming.

I looked up, and Marcus looked a little confused.

“The money used to purchase the stake in Verge was from Heritage Limited,” I explained.

His brows lifted. “Not to say I told you so, but I did tell you to fire Preston last year.”

Whether Preston was being manipulated or was a knowing party to the deception was an open question. One I didn't need the answer to. I put my trust in him, and like most people, I shouldn't have.

"Shit." I released a frustrated groan.

"It'll be some red tape to get ahead of the acquisition, so what?" Marcus consoled. "You caught it, that's what matters."

"Yeah." I wasn't meant to. Hayworth would've offloaded his biggest liability on me.

I *almost* didn't catch it. Spotting Heritage was lucky.

If I wanted to be better than my grandfather, I couldn't rely on luck. He never did.

At least, in his deception, Hayworth handed me a loaded gun. Now that I knew what Heritage was, I could use it against him,

It was all I needed to get the board to hand over the rest of the stake in Verge.

CHAPTER 45

Selena



“I’ve lived in New York for over a decade. I’ve seen the Statue of Liberty,” I told Henry when the town car pulled up to Battery Park.

I had a feeling we were doing something related to either Ellis Island or the Statue of Liberty. A private boat waited for us on the dock. I looked at it, and then to Henry.

“I figured that. But have you had the entire thing to yourself and a dinner in the crown?”

“You’re really pushing for New York.” I leaned up and kissed him, wondering how many strings he needed to pull to close off a government building for dinner.

Over the last month, Henry had already rented the entirety of Governors Island for us to enjoy some privacy. Not that we left the cabin for very long. We also had a private dinner on the Empire State Building and the entire Onassis reservoir closed so we could have a picnic beside it. As the acquisition approached its closure, his date ideas became more elaborate. All of them were poorly veiled ways to convince me to stay, not that I needed much convincing anymore.

He smiled and took my hand, then we walked onboard the boat and watched the city drift away from the deck.

“Look at that,” he whispered. I leaned against his chest, and his arms bracketed either side of me as he gripped the railing. His warm breath along my ear made my skin tingle.

The city was lit up in all its glory. “That should be all the convincing you need.”



We were in the crown of the Statue of Liberty. There was hardly any space for a small table for two set with candles. The servers stayed in makeshift galleys covered by large white drapes so we'd have privacy. How they both made this work and made it look as unbelievably romantic as it did was incredible.

“See, this is pretty cool,” Henry said, raising his glass. “New York is one of a kind.”

It felt like something out of a movie. I was scared to move as it seemed so fragile. One blink, and the fairytale would fall apart. “I think, technically, we're on the New Jersey side of the river.”

He chuckled. “You're not going to make this easy on me.”

I shook my head and noticed the bottle of wine.

“This is...” I picked it up. It was the same one from the Hamptons and Alsace.

“There are cases in the wine cellar at my place.”

My heart skipped. “You'll do anything not to drink a California wine.”

“We can drink them,” he offered over the sound of the phone going off in his jacket pocket. “Once you agree to stay. We can drink all the California wine you want.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but the phone interrupted again. I lifted my chin as a gesture to insist he look at it.

“Sorry.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket and it was enough for lines of tension to form along his mouth.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing.” He reached across the table and stroked my hand. “It’s nothing.”

It was something. “Maybe I can help.”

“Charles Hayworth.” His chest caved with a heavy breath.

“Yeah...” I entwined his fingers in mine.

“I found a way to get the company without any drawn-out acquisition,” he started as he raked his free hand through his hair.

“That sounds like good news.”

“I need his stake to take over, and I found a way to take it from him. It’ll destroy that family.”

He stared straight out at the city in the distance.

“I don’t want to be like them.” He paused again. His soul seemed to be at war. His own needs against expectations. Henry against The Heir. He turned back to me. “What would you do?”

He looked at me like I was his salvation. It was only then I realized how high up on the pedestal I was, the one he put me on.

“I’d make them pay,” I said plainly. He blinked in surprise.

The way the Waldorfs threatened me after I broke the NDA was evil. I wasn’t proud of how I handled it, but I didn’t regret my actions. They never told their own son he had a sister. Not that I wanted him to know. He was just as despicable as his parents.

They hurt my mom. They hurt me. If I had the chance to do it all again, I would. If that was the kind of pain Hayworth’s family inflicted on him and his sister, then payback seemed fitting.

“Do you *want* a relationship with them?” I went on.

“No, they’re despicable. I still haven’t told Sloan,” he confessed. The tension was apparent. I knew the desire to protect her and be truthful warred with the desire to prove himself with the acquisition.

Henry’s protectiveness used to confuse me. A man with limitless resources should feel perfectly safe. But it made sense now that I knew him, it was the lack of control that gnawed at him.

For so long, he was unable to control his own fate. Sent away as a child, harassed by the press as an adult. A lifetime of questioning everyone’s loyalty. All of it scarred his heart. He may not have been able to protect himself, but he did what he could for the people he loved.

“Tell her,” I said. My earlier advice to keep it quiet was knee-jerk. The truth was always better. The problem was that it often ran counter to what we wanted.

“From what I can tell, she probably feels the same as you do,” I added. I sucked in a deep breath and summoned all the strength I had, ignoring the ache that I knew the memory would bring on. “You asked me why I wanted to go back to Los Angeles.”

He tensed at the mention of my impending move.

“Originally, I didn’t want to. Isabelle is here, and I like my life.” I pulled my hand back and dropped my gaze to the napkin in my lap, twisting it tightly between my fingers. “But I met my father a couple years ago. After meeting him and realizing I would never have that idyllic family I’d always dream about having. I wanted to go home and forget all of it.”

I hoped moving home would pull the knife that felt lodged in my chest.

“Selena...” Henry murmured.

I couldn’t stop or I’d cry.

“He called me a mistake. To my face.” I laughed bitterly, trying to hold back the tears. The banality that Allister Waldorf

said it with was the most insulting. Like I should have been expecting that response from my father.

Henry stood, took my hand, and pulled me into his arms. His fingers ran down my hair, caressing my scalp gently.

I sucked in another deep breath. I couldn't keep telling the story, but for the first time, I felt like I could open up about this. In bits and pieces, maybe, but I could finally *start* to talk about it.

I blinked away the tears. "I told you that because... maybe it's not worth worrying over people who have never worried about you."

His arms held me tighter. He pressed a few kisses on my head.

"You're the greatest thing to ever happen to me," he whispered softly in my ear. "I hope you know that."

I'd never felt more reviled than that day in Allister's office, and never more loved than at that moment, in Henry's arms.

I pulled back to look at him as a few more tears streamed down my cheek.

"You're nothing like them," I told him and myself. He was good and kind. Protective, loving, he was different. "Nothing."

His lips met mine, my face cradled in his hands.

Vulnerability wrapped the kiss in the promise that I wouldn't need to stare down my demons alone. The occasional glints of strength I'd felt with him over the past few months gleamed bright.



"Hey." Henry's hand lingered in mine as we walked into his house. He pulled me close.

After we moved past the seriousness that weighed down our date, we had a nice dinner. Coming back to his place felt like going home.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Anyone *ever* makes you feel less than fucking incredible, they can deal with me,” he told me softly.

“Henry, I didn’t tell you all of that to—”

“I know,” he whispered.

He brought his lips to mine and kissed me softly, without any urgency.

A low groan rumbled up his throat into my mouth when I deepened the kiss. His hands swept below my thighs and lifted me, and he pressed me against the wall. My legs hooked around his waist, and he carried me up the steps like that, only letting me down once we made it to the bedroom.

His eyes held mine, but differently this time. He watched me with what felt like a deep yearning.

He discarded his clothes quickly and helped me out of my tights and dress. The clothes found themselves in random corners of the room. Henry crawled onto the bed to meet me and kissed me slowly.

It was unhurried and sensuous, like he was trying to memorize every inch his lips touched as they trailed down to my chest.

“Henry...” I whispered with a hitched breath. I arched up into him when he took a nipple into his mouth and teased the hard peak with his tongue.

“*That* sound.” The graveled tone made my clit pulse. “That soft moan you make for me. *Only* me.”

Henry’s possessiveness revealed itself in different ways. Sometimes dark and domineering. Other times commanding and powerful. Tonight, it was protective, almost gentle.

His lips moved down from my breasts. My stomach dipped and bowed with each passing peck until he reached the slickness between my thighs.

He swept his teeth gently over my clit before he licked and sucked it softly.

My fingers got lost in his hair, and my hips tipped up toward his mouth.

“Henry...” I whimpered. He was taking his time, cherishing every kiss and every second.

His fingers sank into me, and I braced myself against the perfectly made bed.

He curled and stroked with the precision of a maestro, hitting every note he knew would elicit the ovation he craved.

“You belong here,” he urged. I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself. Either way, he was right.

The beautifully aching truth passed over us. The one I was too scared to give voice to, but the one that was evident in every touch. In every heavy breath.

This was love.

His fingers twisted and curled, faster, stronger. The pleasure vibrated through my clit and into my legs and navel.

“With me,” he begged with a graze against my clit that sent shockwaves through me.

“Henry,” I called desperately through a broken sob. The orgasm rocked me, pulling loud cries from my mouth and tears from my eyes. All I knew in that hazy instant was that I needed him. With me. In me. Deep inside, stretching and filling all of me. I needed to be completely his, like he was completely mine. “I need you.”

He stopped, moved to the nightstand, and rolled on a condom. The mattress dipped when he returned to me, and our eyes connected.

They exchanged the same knowing look. The same heavy emotion whispered between us.

He leaned in, pulled me into a slow kiss, and released a shuddery breath as he slowly pushed into me. His groan followed the drawn-out pace.

The weight of his body, the tenderness of his touch, the fullness from his cock. All of it overwhelmed me.

The passionate kiss became more desperate until he finally pulled away.

“I need you,” I panted again.

“I need *you*.” His husky voice sent goose bumps all over my body. He smoothed a hand over my leg, then swept it over his shoulder. The other followed moments later. “You belong here.”

He stayed close, my body nearly bent in half, and pushed himself even deeper. His tongue played with my taut nipple as his thrusts got faster.

“With *me*,” he repeated.

“Henry,” I breathed. He pulled back, and our gazes locked again.

“You can’t leave,” he groaned through clenched teeth between the quick and deep strokes. His command was rough, but the look in his eyes was anything but.

It was vulnerable.

Pleading.

Every thrust got me close and closer until the sound of our heavy breaths and hips crashing against each other filled the room.

My vision went starry, and I sucked in a deep breath with a gasp, feeling muddled, like I’d just resurfaced from the depths of the ocean.

“Henry...” I cried out. Pleasure poured over me as we reached our climax together.

That was how he asked me to stay. In his way. There wasn't a situation in which Henry Amari needed to ask for anything. But in that instance, he begged.

Henry stayed on his elbows and swept a kiss along my lips. The taut muscles in his chest expanded and receded in a decrescendo as he caught his breath.

I cupped his face in my hands. “I want to stay.”

His head fell in relief, and he released a short exhale.

“Selena.” He pulled out of me and rolled to my side, arms slipping around my waist and pulling me close. “I can't let you go.”

I didn't want him to.

CHAPTER 46

Henry



The bizarre piece of artwork that hung on Sloan's office wall looked haphazard at best, like a multitude of colors smeared across drywall, but I was hardly an art critic.

"What the hell is that?" I asked as I took a seat at the conference table in Sloan's office at her law firm.

She blanched and shuffled in her seat next to me. "Art."

"If you say so." I looked back down at the papers in front of me. Sloan's firm was handling the Heritage Limited ownership litigation. We had to keep it quiet to assure Hayworth would be in the dark until it was done. "You sure about this?"

"How many times are you going to ask me that, Hen?"

After the past weekend with Selena, everything felt *right*. I was happy. I knew I needed to talk to Sloan. Everything seemed to be going well, too well. It was unnerving.

"Even Mom is on board," Sloan added.

After I explained the entire situation to her, we moved quickly. First, we went to my mother and had her sign her claim to the company over to the Amari family trust. Then, we had lawyers deliver an immediate transfer in ownership considering the contested payment. Hayworth could fight it, but he didn't have the resources in what would be a lengthy and costly legal battle. Our normally reticent mother was surprisingly animated at the idea. I had a feeling she was more excited at the prospect of being asked to help.

“She hates them,” I reminded Sloan. “She has a reason to, we don’t.”

“That’s where we disagree.”

“I don’t want to win at any cost.”

“We’re nothing like our grandfather. And we, most certainly, are nothing like Mom’s family.” Sloan’s hand covered mine. “We’re Amaris, not Sheffields. They made sure we knew that. I say we return the favor.”

A renewed sense of pride swept through the room. She was right.

“Maybe being raised to be vipers wasn’t a terrible thing,” I mused.

Sloan got quiet.

“Hen.” She sighed deeply. “I don’t know if we’ll ever get an apology for how Mom and Dad were with us when we were kids.” She slumped into her seat. “For sending you away, for the constant competition. I’m pretty sure they’ll insist on rewriting history to gloss over those parts, but try to let it go. Not for them, but for you. Holding on to it is poison, trust me.”

I knew she was right, holding a grudge never served me well in the past. “I know.”

The sound of the door opening pulled us from the seriousness of the discussion.

“Your one o’clock is here,” Laney, Sloan’s assistant at the firm, said politely.

We both sat up straighter, the formality we were able to shift in and out of back in full swing. Sloan nodded at her assistant. “Thanks, Laney, you can let him in.”

“This will be fun,” I assured her.

“The takedown?” Sloan was practically giddy. “It’s my favorite part of the job.”



Charles was clearly perturbed by the time he arrived. He'd been reaching out for days, and I was ignoring him while the firm worked to get everything in order. His only other connection to Amari Global, Preston, was kept out of any and all updates.

"You'll receive formal notification of the change in a few days," Sloan said with all the gentle politeness of a mountain lion. She explained, in a patronizing fashion, the entire endeavor. Watching the realization that he'd not only lost Verge but most of his capital in one swoop was delightful. "That means the Amari family trust owns that forty-five percent stake in the company."

His rage almost got the best of him, but he kept it confined, like a dignified gentleman. "We shall see if that flimsy claim holds up."

"It will," she shot back calmly.

"I assume you both received a proper enough education to understand my forty-five percent stake doesn't give you control. And now, I can assure you, it will never be yours," Charles threatened, his voice reaching a pitch that he was *not* going to continue using in front of my little sister.

"The nine-percent that sits with your board members was signed over almost unanimously this morning," I cut in politely. "They were surprised to find you used investments that were both stolen *and* invested into a company that's known to launder money for arms dealers. No wonder it went from the small inheritance my mother would have received to enough money for near-controlling interest in Verge."

"You dirty little—"

"You can sign over the stake now, or you can bleed whatever is left of your fortune while we take it," I snapped.

“Because I promise you, if you don’t go quietly, we’ll entangle the regulators, who will mount an investigation. It’s entirely your choice, but if you speak to my little sister that way ever again, you’ll be separated from your pulse. Am I clear?”

With a quiet fury, he signed it.

“Barbarians,” he spat.

“Wealthy ones,” Sloan added, then stood and motioned to her security. “Reed, will you escort Mr. Hayworth from the premises? He seems to be having some big feelings.”

“This isn’t over.”

I offered a conciliatory smile. “Stiff upper lip.”



Sloan made her way back to her desk. “Well, that was simple enough.”

“Too simple?”

“I know what you’re thinking.” She picked up a few folders. “It’s all too coincidental. Heritage, mom’s trust, Hayworth?”

I nodded. The motive lined up; Hayworth knew enough about my family to wait until my grandfather wasn’t in charge. It was strategic, but something felt off. It had for months and I was sure it had something to do with Hayworth. But he was dealt with, and the feeling remained.

“Take the win.” She advised. “And we’ll keep all of that in the back of our minds, Xander never forgets a name. If it comes up again, we’ll handle it then.”

When I didn’t say anything, she went on. “We can’t control everything, Henry.”

“Yeah...” I knew she was right, but I couldn’t shake the feeling. I glanced up and noticed Sloan’s security returned

from escorting Hayworth out. “Finally bent and agreed to security?”

“Marcus is worried.” She let out a heavy sigh. “The press has been terrible lately. They follow me for anything to do with the wedding. Agreeing to a guard was the only way Marcus would ever get a decent night’s sleep again.”

“Sorry,” I apologized, even though there wasn’t much I could do.

“Don’t be.” She smiled. “I’m fine and I can handle myself.”

“Clearly.” I chuckled. I never got to see my little sister in her element. She was a force to be reckoned with. Her refusal to take a seat in company leadership was a loss for Amari Global. “You sure you don’t want to be COO?”

“Marcus would *hate* me having an office next to Preston Scott.” She looked at me for an extended pause. “Speaking of Preston, any plans on dealing with him?”

“Your fiancé wanted me to fire him a year ago,” I told her. Marcus had disliked Preston ever since finding out Preston attempted to pursue Sloan a while ago. “I can’t tell if it was stupidity or laziness to not figure out Charles’s motives.”

Or worse, true deception from someone I trusted.

Were my instincts about him that far off?

She laughed. “Well either way, I’m guessing Amari Global is in need of a CFO?”

“Yeah. He missed a pretty big red flag.” I sighed. He was fired, and I felt like an idiot for keeping him around. “I don’t think he realized Charles was influencing him though.”

“Henry Amari giving someone the benefit of the doubt?” Sloan asked brightly, slapping a hand over her heart. “You’re different lately.”

I chuckled. “How so?”

She shrugged. “Old Henry would’ve never asked before doing all of that. He wouldn’t have asked for me to be involved either.”

“I’m sorry for that,” I admitted. “How I used to fight with you over nothing. Push you away for no real reason except competitive animosity.”

“It’s okay. We both did it. The bright side is,” she began as her attention turned to a gloved delivery person entering her office. She stood and looked incredulously at the large arrangement that now sat on her desk. “All that extra energy can be funneled into keeping Selena here. I like her.”

“Me too.” I loved Selena. She felt like hope.

I stood and peered down at the ridiculous arrangement Marcus must have sent her.

“No!” Sloan swatted my hand when I went to look at them closer. “Marcus would never send me something like this. Not the type of surprise he goes for, too obvious.”

I put my hands up. “Then who the hell is sending you flowers?”

As Marcus’s best friend, I was pretty sure that meant helping him cover up a murder.

She crossed her arms.

“That’s poison ivy.” Her eyes narrowed on the greenery between the stems. “Xander already used this a few years ago. Somethings going on, he’s never been this sloppy.”

“You’re a senior partner and you’re still engaging in prank wars?”

“Careful, or I’ll loop Selena in.”

I chuckled again. “Don’t.”

Honestly, it sounded like something Selena would probably love to get wrapped up in.

I headed for the door.

“Hen,” she called as I left. I turned to see her using a couple of napkins to hold the vase and dump it in her trashcan. “You seem happy.”

“I am.”

She smiled. “You finally found someone good enough for you.”

CHAPTER 47

Selena



A few days ago, I got a confirmation email from the leasing and management office for my building. They received my termination confirmation email, even though I never sent one.

I knew it must've been Lauren. Who else could have done it or had a reason to?

Something wasn't sitting right with me after I got the email. So that morning, after I received it, I told Lauren about the building Henry inherited. I told her it was a real estate investment, not a donation to the foundation. I made it sound as greedy and underhanded as I could.

A fog hung over the rest of the week.

Today, the headline in the *Daily Review* read:

Amari Begins Foray Into Real Estate

The leak served two purposes. It was the perfect way to get the news of what he *actually* did into the press. He looked like the benevolent billionaire who was treated unfairly in the press when we put out a statement for the building's actual plan to be a donation. And I could finally silence the voice in my head that screamed about something being awry.

I was right.

"How long?" Lauren sat on the couch as I paced the room. I left work early so I could catch her before she went to the restaurant.

There was a leak, there had to be. It was something that had poked at me for a while now. Since I started this contract, Lauren had had access to little snippets of information. I just never thought she'd use them. At first, it'd felt like coincidence, but too many of the random details about the family had become public knowledge for it to be.

CeCe's visits to the building were documented before they even agreed to engage in the farce of a date they went on. The number of times photographers happened to be in places nobody should have known, where Henry or his family would be. She even knew little parts about the Verge acquisition.

"What?" Lauren's face scrunched.

My pacing stopped. Was she going to actually try to deny it? I held my hands together to keep them from shaking. "How long and how much did you leak to the press?"

She knew where and how to expose our relationship. She knew details about our dates—the ones the press happened to be at—despite Henry's careful planning. The only ones they weren't at were those that took place after the rift between Lauren and I started to widen. When I stopped telling her things.

She stood. "Selena, I can explain."

"Explain what?" I asked, my voice beginning to rise. I'd rehearsed what I was going to say and what I needed to know. I told myself I'd stay calm, but the fangs of her betrayal sank into me, a slow poison spreading in my veins. "Explain how you've been feeding stories about my boyfriend to the press?"

"It's not like that!"

"What's it like then?" I shouted.

"I was trying to help you see—"

"How is *this* helping?" I seethed. "You were doing everything you could to make my job harder. Why? So, they'd fire me?"

“It was just supposed to be a few anonymous tips from things you told me. Then just minor inconsequential things, like wedding details,” she pleaded. “A strike against the type of people who hurt you.”

At least I didn’t need to interrogate her for an admission.

“I signed an NDA. Doesn’t that concern you at all? The jeopardy you put me in?” I marched around the apartment and started gathering her things. A blind fury overcame my senses.

I felt like every muscle in my body was being twisted.

My oldest friend. She was supposed to have my back. Support me. Not tear me down.

“If they aren’t like the Waldorfs, why are you so concerned?” Lauren crossed her arms, and her tone lifted, like she’d done something with that backward logic.

I stopped, but I didn’t turn around. I couldn’t look at her.

“Don’t you dare try to turn this around,” I warned.

“Selena.” Lauren sighed softly and tried to turn me around to face her. I kept moving circuitously around the small space, grabbing things and throwing them in a pile. “I thought you needed a reminder of what they’re capable of.”

I stopped and snapped around to face her, the anger raging through me. “*They?*”

As far as I could see, the only person doing anything to hurt me was the person who was supposed to help me, protect me.

Another pause.

“What happens when this ends, or if something bad happens? They’ll close ranks. You think you’ll be in or out of their circle when they stop being so friendly?”

“He’s different.” My voice cracked, and the tears that welled in my eyes finally began to fall.

He *was* different. He loved me, I knew it. I could feel it.

“Even you don’t believe yourself. If you did, you would’ve made a decision on this place months ago.” Lauren swung her hands in the air, then crossed the room to me.

“So this was some sick way to teach me a lesson?”

“No,” she faltered. “I thought it was harmless. I stopped after the building thing, I swear.”

“That was a week ago, you can’t claim to have stopped when it’s still going.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” she pleaded. “After a while, I don’t know. I got lost in it. I thought it would snap you out of it. It was like what you did to the Wald—”

“No!” I whipped around. Every drop of blood in my body found its way to my face. “I am *nothing* like those people. They did terrible things and deserved what they got. What the hell did I do to deserve this?”

I couldn’t hear anymore. I needed to get out of here and figure this out. Most of my overnight essentials were already at Henry’s by now. Lauren tried to stop me as I gathered a few more things. “I want you out by the end of the weekend.”



I sat on Henry’s couch with a cup of tea in my hand.

After I told Lauren to leave this morning, I didn’t know where to go. Isa was on call and probably in a long surgery because she hadn’t answered my texts.

I went to the only other place that felt *right*. Henry’s.

He wasn’t home yet, but he usually left work at a decent hour on Fridays. Mallory greeted me when I came in, and when I couldn’t complete a single sentence, she got me settled on the couch with a cup of tea.

“Are you all right?” she cooed motherly.

She said something else, but a mixture of anger and guilt smothered every other feeling in my body, both physically and mentally. My mind kept replaying the argument.

I told my oldest friend in my life to leave. She didn't deserve a place in my life after that kind of betrayal, but losing her still hurt. Then there was the overwhelming guilt for the damage she'd caused. If I wasn't dating Henry, none of the harassment would have happened.

“What happens when this ends, or if something bad happens? They'll close ranks. You think you'll be in or out of their circle when they stop being so friendly?”

I had to tell Henry, but a part of me wondered if she was right, if he'd blame me, if he'd think I had something to do with it. If he'd see me differently after.

“Selena?” Henry's deep voice wrapped gently around me and pulled me out of my head. He sat down next to me, moved the cup of tea that was now cold, and held my hand. “Mallory called me.”

I looked up at the clock above fireplace and realized I'd been sitting here for an hour, running through the same loop of thoughts.

Mallory stood up and smiled at me. “I apologize for overstepping, dear, but I had a feeling you might need someone to talk to.”

She patted Henry on the shoulder and left.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“It's still early,” I stammered, feeling like I'd just woken up from a long nap. Everything felt chaotic, but his thumb gently stroking the back of my hand steadied me. “Why aren't you at work?”

“There are more important things,” he said softly. His brow furrowed. “What's going on?”

I hesitated, but he had to know. The press was getting aggressive. Holding on to this would be poison. So I told him

everything.

I braced for a reaction. For anger or betrayal. Tension lined his body, but he didn't say anything. When I finished, he was silent for a few minutes.

"Lauren?" he finally asked.

"Yeah. She said it was things like our dates, wedding details, events." I twined my fingers between the fabric of my dress. "I swear, Henry, I had no idea. When I got suspicious, I confronted her, and she admitted it this morning. I told her to leave."

He let out a deep exhale, and the muscles in his jaw flexed.

"Come here," he whispered, then wrapped his arms around me. He dropped a kiss on my head, and we stayed like that for a few minutes. "You've been through a lot. Your friend hurt you. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I took a deep breath. At least now he knew and could address it. "I will be."

"I have to tell Sloan and get her security on this. Will you be okay for a while alone?"

"Yeah." I nodded and pulled away. His eyes were a hurricane of emotions that he kept neatly beneath his exterior. "Are you upset with me?"

"It's not your fault."

He didn't answer my question.

But I did just unload *a lot* on him.

He was particularly sensitive to having his life documented by the press, for good reason. But the growing interest in Sloan's life seemed to bother him more now. He was protective—of me, of his little sister, of his friends.

I nuzzled into the crook of his neck, wanting nothing more than to stay enveloped in his arms for a little bit longer. "I'm going to take care of all this. It'll be a few hours, so why don't you relax for now? I'll have Oliver make you something."

I nodded again, and just as he was about to get up, I heard his phone vibrate in his pocket.

“Not a great time—” he began as he picked up the call, but he stopped short. His muscles tensed around me. I looked up and saw his jaw flex, his eyes stormy. “Is she okay?”

I couldn’t hear much, just the sound of Marcus’s voice on the other end of the line assuring him that she was. I assumed the “she” in question was Sloan.

“I’ll be there soon.” Henry ended the call and immediately got up. He paced a step forward then back, running a hand through his hair. “I have to go.”

“What’s wrong?” My heart sank at look on his face. It was etched in worry, his eyes lost in thought.

“Sloan was in an incident with the press. She’s fine, but she’s at the hospital now.” Henry sounded like he’d switched into autopilot. He turned and made his way out of the room.

“What?” My stomach ached. The press? The hospital? Lauren admitted to leaking details about all of them. Anxiety took over, and I followed him down the hallway. “I’ll come with you.”

I needed to see that she was okay, not just for her, but to settle my guilt. It was a little selfish, but I felt responsible for whatever was going on.

“No, you’ve already—” His sharp tone immediately softened as he turned in the foyer and looked at me. He took a few steps back and held my face in his hands. His shoulders relaxed, and his thumbs stroked my cheeks. “You’ve already been through enough. She’s okay, it was an unfortunate tumble. She’s at the hospital getting looked at now. If Marcus isn’t concerned, neither am I.”

He turned and walked back to the door.

“Henry.” I called for him just as he opened it. My hands twisted together.

After a brief moment of hesitation, he looked at me and smiled. “It’s just a bump on the head. I’ll be back soon.”

I nodded, and the sound of the door shutting echoed in my ears.

CHAPTER 48

Henry



I called Xander from the car on the way to the hospital. He was with Sloan when it happened, and he told me everything.

Sloan was leaving a potential wedding venue where she'd had a meeting with her wedding planner and the venue's coordinator. She stepped out of the building for a few minutes to take a call, without her security, and a couple of overly aggressive paparazzi were waiting for her.

A photographer swung a camera around and hit her, knocking her back against a railing. She fell over it, falling about five feet to the ground, and the back of her head smacked pretty hard against the concrete, knocking her unconscious for a few seconds. Luckily, Xander was close by.

The walk to the secure wing in the hospital where she was being treated was a blur. Before I knew it, I was at her door.

"Are you okay?" I tried to keep my voice steady as I walked into her room. She was sitting on the edge of the exam bed, Marcus beside her, holding her hand. Xander sat in the chair across from them. Nausea rolled through me. Her dress was stained with her blood, her hair matted with it too. Her eyes were red like she'd been crying, and in typical Sloan fashion, she put up a brave front.

"You didn't have to come down here," Sloan insisted before I could say anything. "I'm fine."

An hour after finding out who was responsible for the hell the press had been raining down on us the last few months, I was staring at my little sister, who suffered the consequences. Ones I could have prevented, had I been more careful.

“You don’t look fine,” I barked, angry at myself and funneling it into all the wrong places.

“Well, I am,” she spat, sitting up straighter. “It’s a little blood.”

It was more than *a little* blood. Her yellow dress was blotchy and discolored with it. I looked at Marcus, whose serious facade had dropped. It was the only thing that gave me some assurance that she was fine.

“It’s a few stitches, but she’s okay. She’ll be here overnight for observation,” Marcus told me. “That’s all.”

“He says calmly, like he didn’t come storming in here demanding to see his *wife*.” Xander chuckled as he narrated the reaction I’d expected Marcus to have. Xander threw a look at Sloan, who grinned and laughed quietly.

“It was cute.” Sloan scrunched her nose and leaned into Marcus. He cracked a smile.

My unsettled anger with the situation didn’t let me see the bright side, that Sloan was fine. My mind was consumed with a foggy haze, and the only thing I could think of was how annoyed I was that I seemed to be the only one taking this seriously. I knew it could’ve been so much worse because I knew the press basically had a map to everywhere my sister would be.

“This isn’t funny,” I snapped at all three of them but looked squarely at Sloan. Irritation worked its way around my chest. I could hear myself getting louder, but I didn’t care. “You could have been seriously hurt.”

Marcus’s eyes flashed in warning. “Henry.”

“Look.” Sloan’s tone became more formal. “We know it’s serious, okay? Until all this press stuff calms down, I’ll be

more careful and stick closer to my security. For now, there's no point in getting upset over something that's already happened and we had no real control over."

Except maybe we did have control over it. Maybe I did and missed my chance to prevent *this* before it happened.

"Yeah..." I resumed my pacing.

"I'm okay," Sloan reiterated.

I had to tell them so they could handle it. At the very least, Sloan would need to make changes to appointments for the wedding.

"This would be an excellent time to tell us what's wrong," Xander suggested. He glanced back over to Sloan and Marcus. "Aside from Sloan losing a fight with the steps, then the sidewalk."

I sat in the empty chair next to him. "Selena's friend, Lauren. She's been leaking information to the press about us. Selena told me right before you called."

They sat in silence while I told them everything she told me.

Sloan spoke up first. "We'll address it with our security. This type of thing has happened before, and it'll happen again."

"Yeah," Xander agreed. "Is Selena okay?"

I nodded, even though I knew she wasn't. I shouldn't have left her the way I did, but I could feel myself readying to say something I'd regret.

"Go home. I'm fine." Sloan looked to me, and then Xander. "Marcus is here with me."



The remnants of a saturated sunset spilled pink and orange hues through the floor-to-ceiling windows spanning the entire wall of the Augustus Club bar. The colors energized the tranquil room as it began to fill with socialites and the men chasing them.

I almost never came here around this time. Friday nights at the Augustus were a vice I had long given up.

I turned a glass of whiskey against the polished wooden bar. I wasn't really in the mood to drink, and I definitely wasn't in the mood to mingle, but I felt *off* and needed something.

I should have gone home to Selena.

“She can tear your entire world down by virtue of being the person you're in love with.”

When Marcus told me that, it was meant to be encouraging. But the truth of the statement weighed me down.

“Is Selena the jealous type?” The sound of Xander's voice broke through my thoughts. He leaned against the bar and scanned the room, brows raised. “Because half the women in this room still see you as fair game.”

“What a lovely sentiment.” One I didn't need to be reminded of; it was why I avoided the social sections of the Augustus lately. “And Selena has no reason to be jealous.”

We could go back to the bliss we were in before today. The Verge acquisition was complete, and I was trying to figure out how to tell her I was in love with her.

Irrespective of all those facts, my entire world felt blurry, out of focus.

We finally had an answer to the question that had been bothering me for months. Yet, there was a tightness in my chest I couldn't shake. Even though I knew she was fine, I thought maybe it was worry over Sloan's accident.

“Are you okay?” Xander motioned to the bartender to get him the same thing I was having.

I didn't know what I was feeling. All I knew was I wanted the constriction in my chest to loosen. I wanted to stop feeling the pinch in my side telling me to do what I was taught to do when I was unsure.

Get answers, maintain control.

I turned my glass again. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

I was angry, but mostly at myself. Lauren, a woman I'd only met a couple of times, was granted free range to my entire world, complete access to everything, and it never struck me to question it.

"You're here instead of at home."

"So are you."

"I don't have a girlfriend waiting for me." He sat down next to me and crossed his arms along the bar. "And before you start sounding like a therapist, that setup is perfect for me."

His eyes kept hovering to the entrance that led to the arts section of the club. I wanted to take Selena there. She'd love it. There were galleries and open studios. I'd mentioned it once before, but Selena seemed averse to the idea of coming here.

"Waiting for someone?" I asked.

"What?" His eyes glanced to the same entryway then back to me so quickly I wondered if he knew he was doing it. "Yeah... business."

"Uh huh..." I didn't believe him since nobody in our circle really used that part of the club. Penelope Astor was the only person we knew well that I'd seen there before.

"Everyone is fine," he reminded me, taking a sip from his glass. "Marcus and Sloan's security will handle the photographers who ambushed Sloan. Go home."

I glanced at my watch. It was early in the night, but I should have been back home hours ago. Selena was waiting

for me, and I knew that.

“You’re right,” I conceded. “You sure you’re not waiting for anyone?”

“Like I said.” He turned his head and spotted Rohan and Jax across the room. “Business.”

I finished my drink and made my way out to the garage. There was a missed call from Selena, but before I could call her back, a voice stopped me.

“If it isn’t Selena Montez’s next mark.” I looked up from my phone and saw an unpleasant face. He was walking from a town car through the parking structure. “Tell her I say hello.”

Julian. Fucking. Waldorf. Sloan’s ex-boyfriend, who was lucky to be breathing, given what I now knew about him.

“Say her name again, and I’ll rip out your tongue,” I warned. The fact that he knew her made my blood run cold.

“Violence? How common,” he cooed, putting his hands up. “This is why the club needs to stop letting new money in.”

“As opposed to what? None?” I was surprised to see them here, the family avoided the club after all the bad press.

Mentioning Selena, for whatever fucking reason he did, was a mistake. If he did it again, or if my little sister’s name exited his mouth, he’d be swallowing all of his fucking teeth.

“See? You can’t buy class, or have you learned nothing from Sloa—”

A flash of rage overcame me. Today was not the fucking day to test the little patience I had.

In two strides, I had my fists curled around Julian’s collar, throwing him up against the concrete wall. “Say her name again and see what happens.”

The bravado drained from Julian’s face as he hung there, a few feet off the ground. He put his hands up in the air as if he were innocent. “Just kidding around. Relax, Amari.”

I dropped him to his feet and turned to walk away when Julian decided today was the day his pathetic life would end. “I guess I’d be a little on edge too if I was just one stop on my girlfriend’s way through the Upper East—”

I whipped around and punched him squarely in the face. His body hit the wall behind him with a ghastly thud before it crumpled into a heap on the ground.

I wanted to pick him up by the collar just to punch him again, but the feel of my phone ringing in my pocket stopped me.

By the time I got to it, it went to voicemail. It was Selena, and a text message followed.

SELENA

Is everything okay?

SELENA

I think I’ll head to bed early.

The cloud of anger dissipated, and guilt replaced it.

I pushed whatever bitter feeling filled my chest down and regained some composure. The last thing I needed was this getting out. Not that it would; the Augustus Club wasn’t stupid, and it also wasn’t cheap. They wouldn’t risk upsetting my family.

I squatted down and admired my handiwork, ignoring the urge to finish the job. At least I broke the little shit’s nose.

“I’m going to explain this so simply that even you will understand it. Consider Sloan and Selena landmines. Go near either and you’ll be blown to itty bitty bits.” I tilted my head. “Do we understand each other?”

He nodded and turned to pick himself up off the concrete.

“Good. Now, clean yourself up. All that blood is unseemly,” I taunted as I walked away.

My mind raced as I headed to my town car. How the hell did Selena fit in here? Frustration boiled up inside me, hot and intense. I teetered on the edge of furious and terrified.

“I’d be a little on edge if I was just one stop on my girlfriend’s way through the Upper East...”

She worked at the biggest PR firm in the country. She’d probably worked for them. That perfectly reasonable explanation only made my stomach churn more.

All the logic in the world couldn’t stop the dread that clouded my mind. I’d never questioned Selena. She always felt *right*.

I was wrong about Preston, and that almost put my company in jeopardy. What if I missed something with Selena too?

I steeled myself for whatever the truth was as the whispers in my mind that lay dormant woke with a renewed resolve.



When I got home, the delirium had worn. I walked into my home office and stared blankly at the neat mahogany desk.

Clarity sank in. I could finally put a word to what followed me like a shadow.

Fear.

A fear that I wasn’t seeing clearly. That I was missing something. That on my watch, the company, the family, something would suffer because I was blind. I was unprepared.

After some hesitation, I dialed Balakin’s number.

“I need you to get me everything you can find on Selena Montez’s background with the Waldorfs as soon as humanly possible.”

“Understood.”

CHAPTER 49

Selena



I woke the next morning to the feeling of Henry shifting in bed. He rolled over, let out a quiet groan, and looped his arm around my waist. With a slow pull, my back was flush against his muscular chest.

Yesterday was so stressful, my body had all but put itself to sleep. I'd gone to bed early and didn't hear him get back.

"Is she..."

"She's fine," he whispered in my ear. His breath skated along the nape of my neck. "Everything is taken care of."

"When did you get in last night?"

"Not too long after you called. I'm sorry I missed it."

"It's okay."

I never felt mistrustful with Henry, even though his past would make it a sensible feeling to have. Last night was the first time I felt like he was pushing me away.

"Why don't you spend the weekend with Isa? It might take your mind off things."

My chest felt heavy even though it was probably what I needed. I wasn't ready to face all the people whom Lauren's leaks had affected, and I knew Henry would probably spend his weekend with his friends and sister.

I nodded. It was a good idea.

I turned around to face him, and he pulled me closer.

“You’re sure she’s okay?” My eyes searched his for the look that I knew would anchor me. The one where it felt like I was the only thing he could see. My heart fluttered when I saw it.

“Yes.” His fingers ran up and down the column of my spine. The graveled sound of his voice, still heavy with sleep, sent a warm tingle through my navel. “Now... can we stop talking about my family while we’re in bed?”

I pressed a kiss on his lips, and he smiled against it.



Henry was right, spending the weekend with Isa was just what I needed.

We stayed up late with rom-coms and wine and galivanted around the city in search of whatever we happened to be craving in that moment. It was reminiscent of when the two of us were carefree college girls.

I fell in love with New York in those years and stayed hopelessly enamored ever since.

“I will never understand how you can eat so much ice cream without getting sick.” Isa picked a chunk of cookie dough from her scoop of ice cream and tossed it in her mouth.

While she was working on her first cone, I was finishing up my second.

“Let me eat my feelings in peace,” I snapped playfully. We settled on a park bench in Central Park, the late May air warm and breezy as it passed around us.

Before I left Henry’s place yesterday, I called Sloan. She insisted a thousand times that I didn’t need to apologize, but the fact that she was hurt as a direct result of Lauren’s actions made me feel responsible. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Henry felt the same.

“Why haven’t you told him you love him yet?” Isa asked. “Don’t tell me that ‘maybe, I dunno, kinda sorta’ bullshit again. I know you love him.”

I let a short smile linger. “I do.”

“But...”

“Isa, look at what just happened.”

We spent yesterday rehashing how I figured out it was Lauren, then planning what to do. I needed to pack up my apartment because she terminated my lease. I didn’t have to be at Pearson L.A. until September, and that was something that still hung in the air.

“Lauren is a shitty friend, but that’s not an excuse not to tell him how you feel,” she insisted.

“Maybe I should give him some time. He’s still processing everything that happened,” I suggested.

Henry didn’t seem upset, but he seemed off. I expected him to be. Honestly, I was expecting more of a reaction than the one I got, which was almost none at all.

Henry didn’t trust many people, and I knew this hurt him.

I just hoped it didn’t hurt *us*.

“Okay.” She put her hand on mine. “At least put me out of my misery. Are you staying?”

I didn’t want to stay *for* Henry, but it was because of him that I realized I did want to stay. New York City was my home, and while running felt easier, staying would make me happier.

The Waldorfs made me feel small and helpless, like I needed to run. Staying was how I asserted my own power.

“I think so.” I smiled, the reality of staying pouring into me. “I need to tell Rita...”

My mind started making a checklist of all the things I needed to do.

“She’ll be thrilled.”

“I have to tell my mom.” I sighed. My mom wasn’t happy about me dating Henry, but she never brought it up. She only snuck in the occasional, awkward reminder about safe sex. Now that I was planning to stay, they were going to have to meet.

The thought didn’t make me as nervous as I thought it would.

“Your mom loves me. I’ll be there to help smooth things over,” Isabelle answered confidently.

“I need a place to stay till I find a new one.”

“You always have my couch,” Isa reminded me. “But I thought you were shacking up with lover-boy in the Hamptons this summer.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I need to figure that out.”

June was a week away, and that would be my final month at Amari Global. And the premiere was this upcoming weekend.

There was a lot happening, and I needed to talk to Henry, but I felt hesitant now. We’d already made our plans for the premiere, but the summer was still a little up in the air.

I glanced around the park. Anxiety about the fallout from everything with Lauren was still heavy on my chest, but there was a little lightness too.

I wasn’t leaving.



Despite the hell that hung over the weekend, I walked into Amari Global on Monday excited. I’d spent the weekend at Isa’s, which meant I hadn’t woken up next to Henry in a few days. That hardly ever happened.

I missed it. I missed him.

“Hi,” I squeaked from his doorframe. He was fully immersed in whatever he was reading.

Henry had been in meetings all morning. Now that the Verge acquisition was complete, they were working on the launch of the acquired tech. There was also something about finding a new CFO. Something happened with Preston, and he was gone now.

He looked up, and a smile pulled at the side of his cheek. He stopped what he was doing and rolled his chair back a few inches.

“Come here,” he beckoned in a low, smoky tone.

The sound floated around me, setting off an ember deep in my stomach. Going a few days without his touch was also—I swallowed against a suddenly dry throat—difficult.

I closed the door behind me, and my pulse skittered as I made my way to him.

“Sit,” he commanded. His hands gently held my hips, and I lowered to his lap. He wrapped his arms around me and took a deep inhale. Moments later, his body relaxed around me. “I missed you this weekend.”

“I missed you too.” I leaned into him.

“Feeling better?”

“Mmmm,” I affirmed with a soft moan, closing my eyes. In his arms, my nerves finally settled. The courage that hid every time I needed it reappeared. “Henry... this summer, are we—”

“Spending it at Amari Manor?” he finished for me. His thumbs swept back and forth along my hips. “You haven’t technically agreed yet.”

“It sounds perfect.” I inhaled the faint scent of cedar and bergamot from his cologne.

“It’s all I can think about sometimes,” he confessed.

We sat like that for a few minutes in silence. Falling into him felt good. I felt safe. Loved.

“You can tell me anything,” he told me softly, his words brushing against my spine. “You know that right?”

I knew he felt my body flinch in his arms. Even though he kept saying he was fine, something was bothering him.

“Yeah, I know.” I turned in his lap. His eyes took a few seconds to meet mine, like he was avoiding them. “Is everything okay?”

He nodded his head, and his arms pulled around me tighter. His gaze finally met mine and held it. “I know it wasn’t easy for you to tell me about Lauren. But you can tell me anything.”

I nodded.

He searched my eyes and the muscles in his jaw flexed, but he was silent.

The reality that it might be some time before things felt level again chased away the brief euphoria I felt in his arms.

“I should get back to work,” he whispered.

“Me too.” I got up and gave him a quick kiss.

I was handing off a few press packets to the company’s media team, anything that was used in Henry’s personal brand management that involved the company’s ongoing initiatives or projects.

I walked back to my office and ignored the dull ache in my chest.

CHAPTER 50

Henry & Selena

HENRY



Most nights, Selena and I would leave work together, unless I had to work late. Usually, we'd have dinner and relax together until one of us initiated something that landed us in bed.

Tonight followed that familiar track.

When we got back to my place, she settled on the couch and became fully engrossed with editing some of the photos she'd taken with Isabelle over the weekend. Unable to quiet the discordant noise in my mind, I went to my home office.

When I got there, I saw large, sealed envelopes on the desk.

My heart thundered in my chest. It was the sealed NDA Balakin found.

Balakin called early that morning at work before Selena got in. He told me Selena *had* worked for the family. And that there was an NDA signed at the start of her contract, perfectly standard, and another signed at the end.

That wasn't perfectly standard. Something happened.

The second NDA was heavily sealed and had taken him all weekend to get.

I walked behind my desk and stared at it.

I wanted this feeling, the ever-tightening knot in my stomach, to go away. I thought holding her today, breathing in

the intoxicating lavender scent of hair and feeling her pressed against me, would abate the caustic burn.

It didn't.

Nothing worked to quiet the alarm. Instead, it blared at all hours.

I never had a single reason to question her. She never done anything to warrant my suspicion.

Neither did Preston. But he almost sank the entire acquisition.

Acid churned in my stomach.

I should have been asking her or waiting for her to tell me, I knew that. But the noise was becoming deafening. Only one thing would turn it off.

I ripped into an envelope and began reading.

My eyes read the same lines over a few times, and my heart sank into my stomach.

Selena leaked stories to the press about the family, the information that helped Sloan and Xander get investigations open on them.

The situation, at least Selena's part in it, was eerily similar to what happened to us over the last few months.

"If it isn't Selena Montez's next mark."

My hand shook as I read on. The rustle of paper echoed like thunderclaps in the otherwise silent room.

"Henry?" I could faintly hear the sound of Selena's voice, but my attention remained transfixed on the words. Her voice called louder this time. "Henry?"

"Did you leak stories to the press about..." I looked up and saw her staring in disbelief at the pages strewn across my desk. The camera in her hands fell onto the desk.

Numerous affairs were revealed, along with the press finding out about the Waldorfs' more illegal activities. It was

all anyone could talk about. That and the payment to the publicly unnamed but assumed mistress made society news for weeks.

She took a few pages into her trembling hands. Silently, she took a few steps back from the desk. Her face paled.

“You already have the answer, why bother asking me?”

I needed her to tell me it wasn't the same thing, that whatever happened was different. I'd believe her, I just needed to hear the words. “What happened with the Waldorfs?”

The intractable pain scrawled across her face silenced every alarm in my head.

She looked completely leveled.

“*You* have a dossier on me.” She took several more steps back, her eyes lost in thought as she flipped through the papers. Defensiveness lined her entire body. “What do you think is in it?”

Guilt splintered down my chest. “Selena...”

“You had a reason to dig it up. I know for a fact they went to great lengths to seal it.” Her voice shook. The disbelief faded, and an enraged tenor seeped into her words. “So what do you think is in it?”

“Selena, after the leaks, I wanted—”

“Answer the question. What do you think is in there?”

“I don't know.”

Honestly, before reading it, I thought it was an affair. And the irony was that I didn't care. It was in her past. Mine was a fucking trainwreck, and she didn't care. All I hoped was to find anything I could move past and forget.

Which I realized in that moment was just about anything.

It didn't matter what was written in that file. She'd own my heart either way.

I fucked up.

“Yes, you do.” She fought back what sounded like a broken sob. “You think I leaked stories about them for what? Revenge for some tawdry affair, right?”

“Selena...”

“I never lied to you. Did it ever occur to you that I didn’t tell you because I—” Her voice caught, and she stopped herself.

The next realization sliced into my chest.

They hurt her.

A roar to protect her overcame my senses. I rounded my desk and crossed the room, cupping her face in my hands as tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

“What happened?”

SELENA

I knew what Henry assumed happened with the Waldorfs, but if I ever needed proof, it was how quickly his face changed when my voice caught.

When he realized how wrong he was.

Every feature on his face softened to concern. I wasn't innocent, but it wasn't close to whatever he'd cooked up in his head.

"Stop it." I pushed his hands off my face and took a step back from him. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to go behind my back, pull up everything from my past, and then get protective when you realize you were wrong."

After everything, his first reflex was to go behind my back and look into me like I was nothing more than a business deal. Something else he could control.

Seeing him paging through the details of my life as if I were some story and not an *actual* person brought me right back to that day in Allister's office when they handed me a pen and told me to sign the NDA.

When they talked to me like I was a complication, a typo that would disappear once the ink was dry.

"You can't do that. You can't just have me under your thumb." I had to be yelling, my throat hurt. All the hurt swelled and became something else. The rage I held in for a year finally started coming loose. "You know where I am at all hours. You have your henchmen go after my ex and do whatever the hell it is you did to him."

Henry visibly flinched at the mention of Miles. I wasn't actually upset about any of that, but it was all connected. He was never in a position of vulnerability. He was always in control, and it wasn't fair to me.

“You mean the man who stalked you?” Henry snapped. “What the hell does he have to do with this?”

“You always have leverage. That’s not fair. You can’t stack the deck against your girlfriend,” I shouted. I felt powerless and trapped all over again. “You can’t control everything. You can’t know everything.”

Henry stood there, silent. I took another step back.

“Would you have done this if I were some society girl? Would you have violated my privacy and gone behind my back?”

He didn’t put the knife in my heart, but his actions twisted it.

I swept passed him, got my camera, and started down the hall. I didn’t want to hang around to hear his excuse.

“Selena,” he called after me as I walked to the living room and grabbed my purse. He followed a few steps behind.

I kept moving toward the door but stopped and turned to him. My heart hammered in my chest. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to think about it anymore, I wanted to move on. Because I spent long enough letting everything in *those papers* control me.”

My voice cracked, but I held the tears back. For the second time in the span of a few days, I felt like I was in free fall.

“Selena.” Henry gently took hold of my hand, his voice shaking. “Please... don’t leave.”

I pulled my hand back. I was too upset to stay, too hurt to be having this conversation.

I stopped at the door.

“Read the rest because I don’t regret what I did.” I told him, my voice back to its normal pitch. I didn’t want to have to tell that story. I was sick of hearing about it, sick of thinking about it, sick of letting it have power over me. “And please, leave me alone for a while.”

CHAPTER 51

Selena



I hadn't been back to my place since Friday when I confronted Lauren, and I wasn't sure if she was gone yet. Now wasn't the time to find out, and I wasn't in the mental space to go there.

I wanted to go Isa's, but she was on call. So I ended up in the surgical on-call room in her hospital.

On the ride over, I calmed down, and the anger faded pretty quickly. But the hurt stuck around. I'd wanted to avoid the Amari account for this exact reason. Not the falling in love with my boss part, but the feeling like I was out of place.

I'd never felt that way, not once, before I knew that Allister was my father. And now, that feeling lingered with me.

I was strong and independent, I *knew* that. I was my mother's daughter. I didn't want anyone to make me feel the way Allister had ever again.

But Henry did. And to make matters worse, he did exactly what they would have done. He manipulated the situation to have control over it. Control over me.

On the long, maze-like walk from the lobby to the on-call room, I filled Isa in on what happened. Trying, and mostly failing, to keep it together as I did.

"Has anyone had sex on this?" I asked before sitting down on the bed.

The small on-call room was where she spent most of her time when she wasn't in surgery. The tiny space had a desk, a computer, and a twin-sized bed.

"You watch too many medical dramas." She took a seat on the rolling chair and wheeled in front of me. "But yes."

I grimaced but had nowhere else to sit. The room was silent for a few minutes.

I emailed Bridget on my ride over here to let her know I was going to be out the rest of the week. Too much happened in the last few days, and I needed to catch my breath.

"Silver lining," Isabelle began. "That part of your past was like a weight holding you back."

"He thinks I'm some opportunist."

Isabelle gave me a hard look. "He fucked up, and I am more than happy to make him bleed for it. But I don't think that's true."

I never lied to Henry. And instead of asking, he went behind my back. I hated myself for making the comparison, but would he have done the same if I was a wealthy heiress? If I were CeCe, would he have had been so mistrustful?

"What happens the next time he's unsure?" I asked. "He can't do the whole 'trust, but verify' thing in a relationship. Sometimes he's going to have to trust me without any way of knowing if I'm being honest or not."

"Yeah," Isa agreed. "Probably something you should tell *him*."

Before I could respond, my phone rattled on the desk. Henry's name lit up the screen.

"Let me take care of this." Isa reached over to the phone and put it on speaker. "Dr. Isabelle Mercado, bone saw-wielding best friend."

Henry's voice, heavy with concern came through the line. "Can I please talk—"

“Did you know that depending on the paralytic agent, you can still feel the bone saw if you aren’t properly sedated? So you’d be paralyzed, unable to move, but fully aware of what’s happening. And feeling every single slice.”

“Isabelle—”

“Her security is here, and she is perfectly safe. Other than that, she doesn’t want to speak with you. She’ll call you when she’s ready.”

There was a long pause.

“Okay.” The low tenor in his voice reverberated through my chest. I wanted to just forget about all of it, but I couldn’t. Falling into him was so tempting, but the searing pain from what he did kept me from it.

Isa hung up the phone and took my hand in hers. “A lot has happened. Why not get your mind off it, reset. You’ll see everything clearer when it’s not all so fresh.”

I nodded. I felt absolutely wrecked, and I knew I needed sleep.

“And here—” She handed me her keys. “Stay at my place. We can go to yours tomorrow, together.”

CHAPTER 52

Henry



I glanced at the time on my phone. Again.

Selena told me to leave her alone for a while, and after the Miles situation, I wasn't going to be someone who sought her out when she wanted to be left alone.

I spent the last forty-two hours, the amount of time since we last spoke, trying to figure out what "a while" was. I was hoping to, at least, catch a glimpse of her here at work, but Bridget told me she wasn't coming in.

Today was odd. I felt numb. It was a welcomed change from the pain I'd felt all of yesterday and the day before, after I read the NDA.

I wasn't going to, but the sound in Selena's voice was different when she told me to read it. It wasn't spiteful or angry. It was almost conciliatory, like she was giving me a chance.

And I was going to take it.

The leaks against the Waldorfs were mostly their financial crimes. They went after Selena, full tilt. She signed the NDA in exchange for her general well-being. They took the extra measure in sealing it because Selena was Allister's daughter. He would've destroyed her if she ever spoke a word of it.

Selena's reason for leaving the city was to protect herself from that pain. It made sense now. A sharp ache cracked down my chest thinking about that night at the Statue of Liberty. The

Waldorfs made her feel powerless. And by going behind her back, I did too.

“This is what you needed to see.” Balakin’s gruff voice pulled me out of my shame spiral. He walked into my office, shut the door, and took a seat.

He called me yesterday to tell me there was more, but I didn’t want to see it. He assured me that I did, that it was something that might be of value to Selena. So I heard him out.

“What is this?” I looked at the document he handed me. It was a Last Will and Testament.

I silently paged through the document for a few minutes before he answered me.

“Conrad Waldorf’s will. Allister’s father. They were particularly vicious to Selena because of something I found in his will. Something they needed to hide from her.” He leaned forward and turned the pages to the one he’d flagged. “Conrad was explicit that his assets be split among *all* of his natural born heirs. Selena is Allister’s daughter. She counts. She’s an heir.”

The sludge that’d slowed my mind all day cleared, and every thought moved at once. The Waldorfs, all of them, were in hot water for a variety of things. Lying under oath, embezzlement, money laundering. Lots of things uncovered by Selena’s leaks. Marcus seemed to be positive they’d all be in prison soon.

“What happens to all the assets that aren’t seized?”

Selena couldn’t have known about Conrad’s will. They did everything they could to keep it from her, to keep her from her birthright. Just like Benedict Sheffield did to my mother.

And, instead of helping Selena, my actions crushed her.

Disgust constricted my chest.

“I would assume it would go to the next non-incarcerated heir. Selena is the heir.” He got up from his seat. “I’ll be

waiting on next steps.”

After he left, the silence that fell upon the room taunted me.

I kept hoping to hear the sound of her heels clacking along the hardwood floors in rapid succession. Selena walked fast and a little haphazardly. I never minded. I liked it when she lost her balance. It gave me an excuse to steady her.

I turned my phone in my hand again. Forty-two hours and thirty-seven minutes.

The board met next week to decide my fate. I hadn't broken the morality clause, and I'd landed one of the most lucrative acquisitions in the history of the company. I wasn't worried about my seat as CEO.

I wasn't concerned, and that *should* have concerned me.

But the only thing I could think about was how to earn Selena's forgiveness, how to explain to her that my actions weren't out of mistrust but out of fear. And I wasn't scared anymore, not when the alternative was the possibility of a life without her.

The sound of someone entering my office jarred me from my thoughts. I looked at the time.

Forty-three hours and forty-five minutes.

Marcus crossed the room and sat in front of my desk. Before I could ask what he was doing here in the middle of the day, he answered. “Bridget called me. She seems to be concerned that you've fucked it up.”

I dumped my head in my hands.

I did, in fact, fuck it up.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“Bad.”

“Is it...” He hesitated. “Over?”

My entire body went cold, and my head snapped up.

“No,” I growled. “It was an argument.”

It couldn't be more than that.

She was staying in the city. We were spending the summer in the Hamptons. This was a fight, that was all. I fucked up, but I'd fix it.

Each breath became more difficult when I thought of the other possibility.

“I dug up her past accounts. The Waldorfs were one of them,” I told him, and then explained what happened.

If there was one thing Marcus was good at, it was keeping a secret. I wouldn't have told him the details of Selena's relation to Allister if I wasn't sure I'd need help in making all of this right.

Marcus was silent after I told him. “Tell Sloan, she can handle the inheritance.”

“Yeah.” I was already thinking that when I read Conrad's will.

“And call her friend, Isabelle,” he suggested. “When I fucked it up with Sloan last year, Xander was... well, Xander. But he helped. Selena may be too upset to see you, but her best friend will have her best interest in mind.”

I nodded.

He went quiet again and glanced around the room. “Did I ever tell you what advice your grandfather gave me when I told him I was starting Sutton Industries?”

“Something Machiavellian, I'm sure.”

Marcus smiled. “He told me to trust fear because it's instructive. I listened to him, and it *was* an effective strategy. I never made a bad deal. In five years, Sutton Industries became what it is today. But trusting fear nearly sank my relationship with Sloan. Now is not the time to unpack all the ways Rishi Amari fucked you up. But I'm going to repeat the advice *you* gave me last year. Don't turn into him.”

“Yeah.” I saw that now. Hopefully it wasn’t too late.

Without another word, Marcus stood and left the office.



“You’re lucky I don’t have my bone saw.” Isabelle stood in my entryway, arms crossed, scrub cap still on. She refused to enter the house, insisting she’d hear what I needed to say at the door.

I told her I needed to show Selena that I could repair the damage the argument did. I also told her my plans to make it right, to at least show Selena how much she meant to me, how much I wanted us to work.

I prayed she wanted it to work too, that she wasn’t considering ending it. “Does she want to end —”

Isabelle immediately put up her hand. “You *really* should know by now that if you’d like to learn something about Selena, you need to ask her.”

I carded a hand through my hair. “I know.”

Her features softened. “I’ll play along. I’ll have her ready for the premiere tonight.”

“Thank you.”

She nodded and turned to walk down the steps, but halfway down, she looked back at me. “I am one of the best surgeons in the country, and I’m still in training. Harvard Med, top of my class. I’m not wrong very often. I thought you might be it, the real deal for her. Someone she deserves. Don’t make me wrong about that—we clear?”

I nodded, hoping Selena would forgive me. If she did, I knew I’d have her best friend’s approval at least.

CHAPTER 53

Selena



“Please eat something.” Isa pushed a plate in front of me. We sat on my couch in stunning designer dresses, all dolled up among a sea of boxes in my living room.

Isa and I came to my apartment the day after the fight with Henry. With Lauren gone, we’d packed the whole place up, but I still had to figure out where exactly these boxes were going.

“I’m not hungry,” I told her as I stared at the umbrella in my hands. It’d been sitting in the corner of the foyer while we packed, just waiting for me to notice it.

There was nothing special about the umbrella. Plain, black, steel handle. But holding it felt nice. It was the one I stood under my first day at Amari Global. The one I kept forgetting in the foyer every time it rained.

Not that I needed to remember. Henry always had one for me.

“You can’t go to an event on an empty stomach.”

“I’m *really* not hungry,” I repeated. I was anxious.

I texted Henry earlier today because amid everything, tonight was the premiere. I told him we needed to talk and figure it all out. The premiere probably wasn’t the best setting for it, so I suggested tomorrow morning.

He respected my request to not reach out until I was ready.

The perfect gentleman.

“Well, I plan on drinking, so you’re going to need all your strength.” She handed me a spring roll. I put it back in the container.

I wasn’t planning on going tonight, but Isa got the night off, and she insisted we go together to get my mind off things before talking to Henry tomorrow. Usually, these types of events were a lot of fun, a perk of the job. I used to look forward to them. Today, all I wanted was to curl up on the couch.

“Is this a bad idea?” I asked.

I spent the past day running the last few months over in my head. They felt like a dream, but dreams ended. Since we started dating, I’d been waiting for the fairytale to fall apart. Maybe this was a sign that it had.

Isa sighed. “The premiere?”

“All of it. Trying to fix everything with Henry. What’s the point?”

I saw a future with him, and even if he could now, how long before he started doubting that?

“Happiness?”

“Isa,” I said pointedly. She knew what I meant. Fairytales didn’t happen in real life. I didn’t know if I wanted to experience the pain of losing him later on. It hurt enough just thinking about it now. “I’m dressing up in designer gowns, taking private planes to castles and vineyards, practically living in a house that’s worth the GDP of most small countries.”

“And...”

“And I’m scared,” I finally admitted.

“Of...?”

Henry making me feel the way Allister had, again.

Isa sighed when I didn’t say anything.

“If you want to end things now, that’s your decision, and I’ll support it. But that’s not going to change the way Allister made you feel. Only you have power over that. The only thing breaking up with Henry is going to change is his ability to be there for you now that he knows. If you think he’ll make it worse, end it. If you think he’d love you and help you heal, give him a shot.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and I took a deep inhale. “Why are you so smart?”

“I’m a doctor.” A knock at the door drew our attention to the foyer. She stood and shrugged. “I fix people.”

There was another knock, and she grinned widely and looked at her phone. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. I didn’t want to see Henry, but god, I wanted to see Henry.

“What’s going on?”

“A good surprise.” Isa’s smile now stretched from ear to ear. “I promise.”

My legs shook beneath me as I hurried over to the door. I opened it, expecting Henry, but it was Drake.

“Henry has asked that I escort you to an undisclosed location before the premiere,” he informed me.

I looked back at Isa, who nodded excitedly.

“Okay,” I agreed, grabbing my purse.

“I’ll see you there,” she called as I shut the door and followed Drake to the car.

CHAPTER 54

Selena



Thirty minutes later, I was in Queens.

Henry was dressed in a tux, standing in front of the building he owned, the one he showed me months ago, holding a rolled-up tube of paper.

My fingers pressed nervously into my clutch as I took a few steps toward him, my floor-length dress tangling in my legs. Henry immediately closed the space between us and took my hand to help me to the sidewalk.

“What is this?” I pulled my hand back. The summer breeze flit through his hair. His eyes were a storm of emotion, and his entire body was tense.

“A few things.” His hands trembled as he handed me a folder. “First, is this.”

I opened it and looked over the documents. It was a copy of what looked like Conrad Waldorf’s Last Will and Testament. He knew the truth. I figured he’d read the rest of the papers he dug up, but—

“What is this?” I repeated, still skeptical of everything going on.

“What you’re owed,” he began. “You’re the last eligible heir to take over what’s left of the fortune. It’s yours. Sloan took care of most of the paperwork today. There are just a few things to sign.”

After everything, he believed that was what I wanted? Some inheritance I didn't even know about? My stomach hollowed.

"You think I want this?" I croaked.

"No." He blanched and took a step forward to take my hands in his. "This isn't a gift, and I didn't do it because I hoped you'd give me another chance."

The final threads holding my poor heart together snapped. He didn't *want* to fix it? "Oh."

"You're safe, beholden to no one. *You* have all the power to determine that you want. Keep what's left of the fortune or toss it. I'm just the messenger."

The invisible force that had pushed and pulled me over the last year was gone. I didn't have to hide anything and if I chose to keep it all quiet, that choice was entirely *mine*. I swallowed the thorny lump in my throat.

I had control over what happened to me. It wasn't what I wanted. It was what I needed. And he knew that.

"What's the rest?" I asked, blinking back a few tears before they fell.

He unrolled the papers in his hands, and I tucked the folder beneath my arm to help hold them open. They were blueprints. The top read *Alma Montez Center for the Arts*.

Named after my abuela. My unsteady heart beat erratically.

"You always seemed happiest the days you worked directly with the foundation." Henry rubbed the back of his neck. "And you said you never pursued photography full time because you didn't like the idea of having to depend on it. Well... this way you can have both. It can be run by the foundation, but you can oversee the direction of it. I thought your abuela might like the chance for you to pursue something you loved."

My eyes scanned the intricate plans. Workspaces and studios. A few lecture halls. Open gardens. It was stunning.

“Originally, I thought maybe it would be something that would make you want to stay,” he explained. “I know now that I can’t influence that decision. And I won’t. But I wanted to show you what staying could look like.”

My entire heart swelled, then cracked when I realized what he said.

Originally. He didn’t want that anymore? “Originally?”

His breath faltered.

“Selena, when I first brought you here, you asked me why. I realized later it was because I couldn’t imagine having to come here with anyone else. It was because I was falling for you. And now I am completely, incontrovertibly, irretrievably in love with you.”

His voice rolled over me softly, enveloping me in a warmth I’d missed.

Henry took the blueprints and put them on the ground. Taking another step forward, he held my face in his hands.

“But there are no strings to any of this. I just want you to be happy. If you want me to leave you alone, I will.” He took a deep, unstable breath. “If that means I lose you, then so be it. You’ve already given me more than I ever thought I could have.”

“Henry,” I rasped, and my eyes filled with tears.

“But if you still want this, us.” His thumbs stroked my cheeks, and his head dropped to lean against mine. “If you want me to show you how much I love you, I will. Every day. If you want me to woo you, I’ll be Prince Charming. If you want me to wait, I’ll wait until the end of time.”

His words had a stranglehold on my heart. I could hardly move or breathe.

“The leaks. You don’t trust me.” I pulled his hands from my cheeks. All I wanted was to lean into the feeling of his embrace. But I couldn’t move forward with him hoping he wasn’t concerned about why I was there.

“That’s the thing, Selena. I do.” His eyes searched mine. “I should have come to you. I should have asked you. But it was never out of suspicion. It was out of fear at the realization of how much power you have over me. I thought it was a bad thing, that it made me blind, but it’s the opposite. Before you, my entire world was black and white. Now, it’s completely saturated in color. I can see *everything*. I’m sorry that I hurt you. That I acted out of fear. That I ever made you doubt how I feel for you. I love you Selena, and that will never change.”

Unable to find the words, my hands found his lapel and tugged it as I rose to my tiptoes.

“I love you too,” I whispered, and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. A shudder rolled down his body, and his arms wrapped around me. His lips met mine, and I let myself fall into the familiar tenderness of his kiss, deep and passionate. A passage to a life neither of us ever expected, but now, couldn’t possibly go without.

I could have stood there kissing him for hours. My body trembled as I pulled away, and my eyes met his. “So what now?”

A soft smile wisped across his mouth, our breaths still tangled together. “The premiere, if you’ll have me.”

I nodded. He took my hand and kissed it.

“Then, a summer in the Hamptons,” he reminded me, with his lips against the back of my hand. “Somehow, that giant house doesn’t feel empty when you’re in it.”

“That sounds perfect.” My arms slowly looped along his neck, and I kissed him again. “And then?”

“That’s easy,” he said quietly. “I’m going to spend the rest of eternity making your life just as vibrant as you’ve made mine.”

The tears that welled in my eyes finally streaked down my cheek. That was the Henry I knew, the one I fell in love with. The man with endless power and resources but wanting nothing more than for someone to love him as he was. The

man who'd forgo that one, deep desire if it meant my happiness.

“A lot can happen between now and eternity,” I warned. He swiped the tears from my cheeks.

“I hope so,” he mused, pulling me closer. “We need to give them *something* to write about.”

CHAPTER 55

Henry



The familiar tap of Selena's heels got incrementally louder as she quickly neared the doorway to my office.

I was going to miss that sound and the way my heart flipped every time I heard her coming down the hallway.

I smiled, leaned against the front of my desk, and watched as she walked in. She was dressed more casually today in a blue linen dress, but with her trademark heels. Her hair was swept up in a haphazard bun since she was packing her things from her office.

"How was the meeting?" Selena beamed as she walked over to me, carrying a small box filled with random items that'd sat on her desk the last year.

The board meeting went great. I was greeted like a conquering hero since I acquired Verge for next to nothing. In addition, the morality clause wasn't breached, so I was unanimously voted CEO in perpetuity.

A year ago, it was the only thing I could see, the only thing that mattered.

"If I say I fucked it up, will you stay another year?" I asked.

She put the box on my desk and laughed. In addition to the board meeting, today was Selena's final day at Amari Global. Over the last couple of weeks, after the premier, Selena and I spent most of our free time in bed, making up. The reality that today also meant I wouldn't be seeing her at all hours sank in.

With a soft sigh, she wrapped her arms around my waist and looked up at me. “I think seeing me at home and nonstop at the beach all summer is more than enough.”

“It’s not.”

“Well, too bad.” She pulled her arms back and rifled through the box for a second before pulling out a small picture, along with a framed one of the same size. “I got something for you.”

I grinned and took the frame she handed me. It was a small 4x6 picture of me, Sloan, Marcus, and Xander at Sloan’s law school graduation.

All four of us had a copy, and Sloan wrote something on the back of each. Mine said: *Be nicer to me, I have a feeling you’ll need a lawyer someday.*

“It was in your old desk,” she explained with a faraway look in her eye. Running her hand down the side of the frame. “I like this picture of you, and I thought you’d like a framed one for in here.”

“I like the one I have now.” I nodded in the direction of the newspaper picture I framed and put on my desk. I’d cut off the headline, but I loved the picture. It was the one in the tabloid printed on New Year’s Day, the shot of us kissing before we got inside the front door.

Selena looked like a goddess in that sequin dress. And like a goddess, she was too bright to hide, too powerful to contain. Too vital to ever go without. Keeping her a secret, for even those few weeks, felt like blasphemy.

“When did this get here?” She leaned over the desk and picked up the frame. She smiled, not her usual reaction to whenever she saw us in the press.

“I put it there a few days ago.”

After our fight, I found myself going through the small stack of newspapers that had piled up in my office. A couple of days without seeing her and not knowing what would

happen between us made me sure I never wanted to be without her.

I had Bridget get me a frame, and I put it on my desk so I'd never have to be.

“We can always take a real picture,” she offered.

“Oh, I plan to.” I pulled her back into my arms. “But I'm keeping that one.”

“Isa likes that one too.” Selena looped her arms around my neck, glanced at the clipping I framed, then back to me. “The picture.”

“Speaking of Isa...” I ran my hands up her sides. “Why don't we bring her along to L.A. with us?”

Selena was going to meet my parents next week, and right after that we planned to fly to California. The idea of meeting Valentina Montez, Selena's mother, was intimidating. Now that I understood everything about what she went through before Selena was born, I had a feeling I could use a buffer. Isa was perfect for that.

“Isa is not going to say no to a private jet.” Selena laughed. “But you don't need to worry. My mom will like you.”

I had a hard time believing that.

“Didn't you and Sloan accidentally spill ice cream on the French president once?” Selena went on when I didn't respond, and the elevation in her pitch made me sure she was trying to make me feel better. “That had to be scarier than meeting my mom.”

I chuckled.

I was four when I met my first world leader, William Grant Alders, the newly elected President of the United States at the time. I didn't remember it, but apparently, I held my own. I went on to meet dignitaries, royalty, and world leaders, and still did.

My position in the world meant meeting important people was mandatory, and it never scared me. Not until now. There was no person more important to make a good impression on than Valentina Montez.

“Oh, it wasn’t an accident,” I told her offhandedly, ignoring the nerves. Sloan was six, and I was ten. She goaded me into what could have been an international incident. “Sloan was annoyed when he patted her on the head but shook my hand. We couldn’t let that stand.”

“See?” Selena grinned. “Compared to that, this is nothing. Besides, I’m meeting your parents first.”

She’d met them informally over the past few months, and my mother would occasionally call and hint at meeting Selena in a more official capacity. But I refused every time. I didn’t want to broach the subject until I knew she was here to stay.

“They’ll love you,” I assured her.

My mother would take one look at Selena and see the one thing she thought she’d never get from me: grandchildren. I wasn’t worried at all. If anything, I was nervous Selena might run at the sight of the well-hidden high society circus that was my family. I planned to have Sloan, Xander, and Marcus around to help ease her nerves. I knew my parents would be welcoming—they were with everyone who wasn’t their actual child.

A flicker of uneasiness passed through Selena’s eyes. Instead of saying anything, I lifted her chin, and I pulled her in for a soft kiss.

She pressed forward, and I wrapped my arms around her tighter. A slow groan rumbled up my throat, and I deepened the kiss, making a mental note to go close the door.

With a quiet moan, Selena’s body relaxed into mine.

“Since it seems like we’re going to celebrate *every* time you don’t get knocked off the throne, let’s go.” Xander’s loud voice barreled into the room. A sly grin crept along his face

when Selena and I reluctantly parted. “Sorry, am I interrupting?”

“Yes,” I grumbled.

“No,” Selena squeaked, pushing herself out of my arms. A blush ran across her face, and she smoothed over her dress. “Hi, Xander.”

“Hi, Selena.” His smile grew to a grin that stretched ear to ear. “This is *adorable*. But we’re all heading to the Hamptons early. Sloan and Marcus are waiting outside.”

As a bizarre consequence of last year’s board meeting, Xander had a seat on the Amari Global board. He and Sloan voted in the meeting earlier, and I assumed they planned to take the rest of the day off.

“It’s the middle of the day,” I told him. “How the hell did you get Marcus to leave work early?”

“Well, Sloan—”

I put my hand up and grimaced. “I don’t want to know.”

Xander glanced at his watch.

“Henry, you can stay, but we’re taking Selena.” He winked at her. I knew he didn’t mean anything by it, but it didn’t settle the urge to punch him. “Wheels up in an hour, let’s go.”

He turned and walked back down the hallway.

“It’ll be fun.” Selena beamed, and her voice dropped to a whisper when she added, “Besides, we have a few things we need to do in the Hamptons house.”

Before I could pull her back into my arms, she walked toward the door.

I picked up the box of her things and followed behind her, taking Bridget’s advice and not letting this building own me like it did my grandfather.

For a long time, I thought all I needed was to be as masterful and well-respected as he was. That was all that I

could see. It was a muffled state of gray.

Then Selena walked into my life and filled it with delightful sound and brilliant color. *She* was what I needed.

Of all the many privileges I was given in life, her love was the greatest. And I would spend the rest of time making sure I was worthy of it.

Epilogue

SELENA



3 months later

Amari Paramore the Newest Resident of the Hamptons' Most Exclusive Zip Code

“Another good picture,” Henry said as he leaned down and gave me a kiss while I lounged by the pool. He tipped his phone screen down so I could see it, but I was more focused on the ocean breeze rustling his hair.

“Should be.” I glanced over to the chair beside me as he took a seat. Now that the summer was ending, I was going to miss seeing him in swim trunks all the time. The Amari Summer Close party was this weekend. The party also marked the last event of my summer off. “We knew the press would be there.”

I was finding it much easier to deal with the press now that the sheen of our relationship had worn. Henry wasn't the billionaire playboy anymore, and our relationship had lost its scandalous luster. His buyout and closure of the three tabloids that seemed to hound Sloan during wedding planning ended a lot of the issues with the press too. None of the other tabloids dared pursue us after that.

“I was thinking...” Henry leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. The sun brightened the dark caramel of his eyes. “Since your things are mostly at my place...”

“Yeah.” I sat up, knowing where this was going.

Spending the summer at his place in the Hamptons was everything I needed after the last few years. The boxes from my old apartment were moved to Henry's house temporarily. The plan was to move them into my new place.

"And since the Pearson offices are much closer to my place than yours," he continued.

I was starting back at Pearson as Senior Vice President of Media Affairs, Rita's old job, once Labor Day weekend was over and the mass exodus from the Hamptons began. Over the summer, Rita's newfound power, thanks to the Amari account, allowed her to mount a small coup and become Pearson's Global Media Affairs Executive Director.

"Why don't you stay at my place a while once we get back to the city?"

"Why, don't you like my new place?" I asked.

I took whatever was left from the Waldorf family trust that was rightfully mine and bought a condo in the city. It was stunning and on the lower west side, overlooking the water. The rest of the inheritance was donated to the Alma Montez Center for the Arts.

The condo was stunning. Isa was in love with it. Henry, not so much, but he had an ulterior motive.

"It's not safe."

I harrumphed a laugh. He was running out of good reasons. "It's a five-million-dollar condo. It's more than safe. Besides, I have Drake."

"It's too far."

"It's the lower west side."

"May as well be Siberia."

I rolled my eyes. "It takes Sloan, like, fifteen minutes to walk to my place."

"Well, how nice for Sloan," he groaned. "Turn it into a studio or workspace for your photography," he suggested.

He'd also mentioned that it would be a great place for a million other things, none of them a place for me to live. "Or keep it as an investment."

"I *am* getting used to waking up next to you," I confessed. Henry had been going back and forth from the city as needed for work. Usually, he was able to work from the Hamptons house. We'd spent the last three months in what felt like domestic bliss. "But I don't think that's going to change, regardless of my mailing address."

The truth was I wanted to move in with him. It was easy and felt right, but I wanted to wait a while longer. Our first few months together, we were working in the same building, then we spent the entire summer together. Even though being away from him felt terrible, I knew it was probably better we didn't rush things. We'd only really known each other a year. I didn't want anything to mess this up. He felt like forever.

"Promise?" A flicker of uncertainty passed over his features.

"Mm-hmm." I nodded and leaned forward to kiss him on his cheek. "Besides, Oliver is finally letting me back in the kitchen after that unfortunate pancake incident. I'm not letting him have time to rethink that."

His chuckle turned my insides into jelly.

"Okay. I'll stop asking," he agreed, then stood and walked over to the pool. "But remember, everything is mine to acquire." He shot a look over his shoulder. "And I know what I want," he threatened playfully before diving in.

Extended Epilogue

SELENA & HENRY



A year and a half later

SELENA

“I did warn you.” Henry pointed out. He stood from the kitchen table and kissed my head. “Getting involved in their little wars would end badly. You look cute though.”

He chuckled at my expense.

“I’m still mad at you for telling him about the birding thing,” I pouted.

Henry walked behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. His chin dropped to my shoulder, and he whispered, “I promise I’ll make it up to you later.”

“You better,” I grumbled. Dressed head to toe in what I could only describe as high society camo, I got myself ready for a full day of bird-watching at a bird sanctuary near Greenwich.

“All of this because Sloan refuses to concede?” I turned and asked Xander, who sat calmly at the kitchen table.

“*You’re* welcome to concede, and Sloan will go alone,” Xander offered.

After I moved into Henry’s place permanently and it became ours, we began hosting brunch on occasion with the entire group. Plus Isa. Today’s ended a while ago, and everyone had mostly filtered out by now.

“Please don’t,” Sloan begged, walking into the kitchen dressed in the same outfit. Her baby bump was just beginning to show. “If I have to listen to Morgan talk about birds for an entire afternoon alone, I will throw up, and it’ll have nothing to do with the baby.”

“*You* could always concede,” Marcus reminded to her, leaning down to press a kiss on her head and running his hand over her bump gently.

Watching the two get married and now start a family made my heart ache for it with Henry. I was so nervous with every step forward that the longing shocked me a little. I could tell he wanted it too, a future littered with society galas, summers lazily enjoying each other's company in the Hamptons, and whatever mischief Sloan and Xander cooked up.

“Have we met?” Sloan's eyes narrowed on her husband. She glanced over to Xander. “I'm not losing, I finally stopped his winning streak last year.”

“I was distracted,” Xander answered immediately. “Won't happen again.”

HENRY

When Selena and Sloan left, Xander did too. Which was perfect because I asked Marcus to bring something over today.

“This belongs to you.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small velvet box, and slid it across the table to me. “Well, technically, Selena.”

“Thanks.” I opened it and looked at the Amari family ring. My grandfather left it to both Sloan and myself for whoever got engaged first.

When Marcus proposed, he gave Sloan a few options, the Amari family ring included. She ended up choosing to wear the ring Marcus bought for her, leaving this ring for me. Until Selena, I never imagined I’d need it.

“When are you going to ask her?”

“Soon,” I said as I pulled the ring out and looked at it closely. “You think she’ll like it?”

“Selena doesn’t seem to care much about jewelry. You can do what I did and give her three options.”

“Thanks for the permission to steal your idea, but no thanks. I think she’ll love this one.” I grinned as I took in the stunning diamond and the sapphires that created a halo around it. “I am taking her to a castle, though, so there’s that.”

Marcus proposed at Versailles, although that had more to do with Sloan’s obsession with military coups than anything else.

I had my proposal to Selena all planned. I was going to take her back to the castle where we had our first real date. In the middle of the summer, it would be during the growing season, so she’d be excited to take pictures.

I'd take her out to the vineyard and tell her that I bought it for her, for us. For our eventual family. I named it after her grandfather and had every intention of bringing our children there with her so they could run through the vineyards' vines like she had as a child.

I had plans to make sure every day of her entire life felt like a fairytale. In big ways and little ones. I'd be her happily ever after, and she'd be mine.

Thank you!

If you enjoyed *The Heir*, please consider leaving a review on the platform of your choice! Your support makes my long-deferred dream of authorship a reality!

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About the Author

Ava Rani is a contemporary romance writer who writes stories with equal parts spice and swoon. Expect big cities, diverse backgrounds, strong female leads, and plot twists.

She fell in love with reading and writing again after a decade of working in another field. In a burst of creative energy, she wrote this series.

When she's not writing, she loves to travel (52 countries so far), perfect her pecan pie recipe, and introduce her toddler to every ice cream flavor imaginable (for purely academic reasons, of course).

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To the only person who will understand this - marshmallows are good, but...