

A
Golden
CHRISTMAS



MAYA ALDEN

A Golden Christmas

An Age Gap Holiday Romantic Suspense

Maya Alden

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Contents

Playlist

Epigraph

1. Chapter 1

2. Chapter 2

3. Chapter 3

4. Chapter 4

5. Chapter 5

6. Chapter 6

7. Chapter 7

8. Chapter 8

9. Chapter 9

10. Chapter 10

11. Chapter 11

12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13
14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15
16. Chapter 16
17. Chapter 17
18. Chapter 18
19. Chapter 19
20. Chapter 20
21. Chapter 21
22. Chapter 22
23. Chapter 23
24. Chapter 24
25. Chapter 25
26. Chapter 26
27. Chapter 27
28. Chapter 28
29. Chapter 29
30. Chapter 30
31. Chapter 31
32. Chapter 32

33. Chapter 33
34. Chapter 34
35. Chapter 35
36. Chapter 36
37. Chapter 37
38. Chapter 38
39. Chapter 39
40. Chapter 40
41. Chapter 41
42. Chapter 42
43. Chapter 43
44. Chapter 44
45. Chapter 45
46. Chapter 46
47. Chapter 47
48. Chapter 48
49. Chapter 49
50. Chapter 50
51. Chapter 51
52. Chapter 52
53. Chapter 53

Author's Request

Also By Maya Alden

About the Author



- *All I Want for Christmas Is You* by Mariah Carey
- *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* by Frank Sinatra
- *Silver Nights* by Sabrina Carpenter
- *You Make It Feel Like Christmas* by Gwen Stefani ft. Blake Shelton
- *Age Ain't Nothing But a Number* by Aaliyah
- *December* by Ariana Grande
- *Golden* by Harry Styles
- *Santa Baby* by Eartha Kitt
- *Warm on a Cold Night* by HONNE
- *Something's Gotta Give* by Camila Cabello
- *End of the Day* by One Direction
- *Shut Up and Dance* by WALK THE MOON

- *Baby, It's Cold Outside* by Idina Menzel & Michael Bublé
- *Electric* by Alina Baraz ft. Khalid
- *I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm* by Billie Holiday

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“Love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.”

Kahlil Gibran

“Age does not protect you from love, but love, to some extent, protects you from age.”

Jeanne Moreau

“Christmas waves a magic wand over the world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.”

Norman Vincent Peale



Chapter 1

★ ISADORA

He looked like a thug in a suit. An expensive suit because I knew my fashion—probably tailormade, because off-the-rack wouldn't work for his size. *He* wore the suit—*the suit* didn't wear him. He'd taken his tie off, and it was hanging on the back of his chair. His shirt was open as if the tie and the buttons suffocated him.

He held a glass of...I'd guess he had scotch in his hands, and he was talking to my surrogate sister, Raya.

I walked up to them, curious about the man.

“Hey.” Raya gave me a warm hug. “Where's Silvano?” She looked around for my nephew.

“He's with Mateo, checking out his hydroponics,” I informed her, but I was looking at the man who stood next to her.

He was probably in his late thirties. He got a lot of sun because this was not a pretty boy who sat behind a desk. But the suit said that he probably *was* someone who, when he sat behind a desk, owned the desk.

Close up...he wasn't *precisely* a thug but there was something *rough* about him. He wore the expensive tailored ensemble with a careless disdain that spoke of years of comfort in the role of high-powered executive. And *ay dios*, he was handsome as sin!

Raya looked at my line of sight and cleared her throat. "Isa, this is my boss, Gordon Mackenzie. Gordon, this is Isadora Santos."

I held out my hand for him. He took it and shook it. All business, no pleasure.

"You're the C.E.O. of SynthoSoft." I put two and two together.

"Yes. And you're Alejandro's baby sister."

A Scottish accent, *sí, por favor*. I was ready to faint like a Victorian lady and ask for smelling salts.

Oh wait...did he just call me Alejandro's baby sister?

Gordon had sharp green eyes that looked around as if he was searching for a person he wanted to talk to so he could excuse himself.

"*Sénior*, I'm nobody's *bebé*," I all but *purred*, interrupting his perusal with a smile.

He stopped turning and stared at me, his eyes crinkling into a frown. "Excuse me?"

Raya slid her arm into mine. "Let's go see Daisy. She's outside. And Maria is in a mood."

"I'll see you around, Gordon." I was amused that Raya was shuffling me away because it was apparent I was flirting with her boss.

"Are you flirting with my boss, Isa?" Raya hissed.

"He's cute."

"Isa, he's a lot of things but cute isn't one of them."

I turned to look at Raya's flustered boss and grinned. "You're right. *Dios*

mío, this man looks dangerous...not cute.

“And he’s old.”

“How old?” I wanted to know.

“Around early forties. So...way older than you.” Raya turned to glare at her boss, as if saying, *down boy* this is my *baby* sister.

“And *bueno*.”

Raya sighed. “Shut up, Isadora.”

“Yes, *mama*.”



Chapter 2

★ GORDON

I noticed her as soon as she walked into Raya's apartment. How the hell wasn't I supposed to? She was like a fucking delicious piece of candy that you wanted to suck on.

Her rich, cascading dark hair framed a face with features so finely sculpted they could've been chiseled by an artist. Her big brown eyes were deep and expressive and hinted at mischief, making it difficult to pull away. Every time she spoke, her lips moved with an inherent grace, and her warm complexion glowed, accentuating high cheekbones and a prominent, regal jawline.

I was used to dating models and actresses; I lived in LA. This woman was not stick thin. She was both curvaceous and toned like she lived actively and passionately. When she moved, it was with a confident grace, each step an expression of her fiery spirit and zest for life.

She'd be fire and heat in bed. She'd be the kind who'd play every game I could come up with.

Down, boy, I told my burgeoning erection. She looked like an ice cream cone on a warm California day...but also very young. I hope she's legal, so

I'm not a pervert lusting after a child.

Being in her presence was an exercise in restraint. She was a beacon of youth and vivacity, a vivid reminder of a world brimming with hope and possibility. The juxtaposition of her youthful allure and my own seasoned experiences made our interactions an intricate dance between admiration and caution. Especially when she flirted with me.

She'd all but purred, *Sénior, I'm nobody's bébé*, and it went straight to my cock.

Fuck! I wanted a girl who was probably half my age. *Mateo and Alejandro's fucking baby sister*. They'd string me by the balls if they knew what I was thinking, and I'd have to let them.

The elegant ambiance of the dinner party enveloped us in a warm glow, the clinking of crystal and boisterous conversations forming a delicate symphony.

During dinner, because the universe wanted to torture me, I sat between Isadora and Silvano. But considering Raya's glare, it seemed Isadora had maneuvered a seat next to me. I was part frustrated, and part flattered.

I was highly aware of her, and because I was, I tried to listen to the conversation Silvano was having with Maria about particle physics. This kid was fucking brilliant.

"How old is he?" I asked Isadora despite myself when Silvano talked to someone else.

"Eleven...nearly twelve." Her eyes fucking sparkled. "He's a MENSA kid. But he's pretty normal except for the smarts. We do horror movie night at least once a month, and then we're both too scared to sleep alone."

She was a disarming ball of energy. Her honey-colored eyes and dark brown hair complimented her light brown skin. As good-looking as she was,

it was her personality, I was sure, that drew people to her. She was wide open, her heart big and strong, ready to accept everyone.

“Where do you live?” she asked me.

“Downtown.” I didn’t want to think about where I lived because I wondered how she’d look in my apartment and bed. I’d like to lay her down and spread her wide open. *Stop it, asshole.*

This was disconcerting because I’d never found young women interesting. They were too vapid for my liking. I enjoyed women who were in their thirties or forties. I wasn’t the man looking for young pussy. I liked to know the women I had sex with. I liked to like the women I had sex with.

You like her just fine, Gordon.

“You run the Golden Valley Inn?” I asked twice when she told me what she did. I thought she’d have some cute job as young heiresses did. Maybe she didn’t run it all by herself.

“I do. The Inn and the Resort.” She took a sip of wine. “Alejandro was determined to not let me have it. But I proved him wrong. I grew the business in the past three years. Made us a wedding destination. We were on the cover of Bridal Guide magazine last year.”

Lots of pride and defiance here.

“How old are you again?” I asked. “And are you a member of MENSA as well?”

She laughed. “*Cielos*, no. I’m the least smart person in my family. Alejandro is the big business brain...well, excluding Silvano, who’s so out there on the IQ chart no one compares. Aurelio is sharp. Give him a concept that is abstract as hell, and he’ll pull it apart piece by piece. I’m...the goofball of the family.”

“And you run the Inn?” I couldn’t believe it. Sure, I’d met young people

who were good at business. Hell, I'd been one of them, but this flirtatious young woman looked like she'd rather spend time in a salon than work.

She put a hand on my forearm, and I was glad I was wearing my suit jacket still because I didn't need this incendiary woman to touch my skin. If she did, I worried I'd fucking combust.

"I'm twenty-four years old, Gordon. I graduated with a degree in business from Stanford. But then, my family owns Golden Valley, so getting into Stanford wasn't exactly a big deal. I have privilege, and I'm aware of it. I also work damn hard." She pulled her hand away, and there was something frosty in her eyes. "I'm not some rich little poor girl with a family business job. I am the Golden Valley Inn, and if it's making the top ten lists for wedding destinations in California, that's because of me. The Golden Valley Resort, ski-in, ski-out lodge near Shaver Lake will become the top destination for thrill seekers, vacationers, and people who want to get married on a mountain because of me. And I acquired it just a few months ago."

I had insulted her. Of course, I had. Someone who looked like her and had her last name was used to being underestimated and considered an ornament.

"I'm sorry, *m'eudail*." The Gaelic endearment slipped out. "I'm very impressed with what you have achieved."

"But I look too pretty to have achieved anything." She was disappointed in me, and that stung.

Usually, I didn't give a fuck what anyone thought about me. I was Gordon Mackenzie, a ruthless business leader who won no matter the stakes. People did not say nice things about me, not behind my back or in the media. I didn't give a shit. And, yet, the reality that her honey-colored eyes weren't flirting with me any longer but looking at me with an almost resigned disdain was intolerable.

“You’re beautiful, not *just* pretty. And you turned my head,” I confessed. “But you’re right. I committed the sin of generalization. How did you make Golden Valley Inn the it destination for weddings?”

She considered me for a long moment, and then the frostiness left her eyes. “You’re forgiven.” She spoke like a queen to peasant and, *aye*, that aroused and intrigued me more than I could afford.

“I believe in partnerships. My friend, Nova Cárdenas...she’s—“

“Valerie Cárdenas’ daughter,” I finished for her. A woman I’d actually had sex with. I’d had sex with Isadora’s friend’s mother. I was *that* old.

“Yes,” she smiled. “Nova is struggling to escape her mother’s shadow, but you can imagine it isn’t easy. She has a small fashion line, and so we worked together. I give the bride the wedding of their dreams, and she gives them the wedding dress of their fantasies. We use social media...I mean, we’re all over TikTok...hashtag weddings! The young brides really connected with our message. So, spoilt girls with daddies with a large disposable income come to us. They are social media savvy, so they promote us, and...that’s how we made it.”

“Nice elevator speech,” I marveled.

She laughed then, and I had to discreetly adjust my pants. When was the last time a woman had gotten to me so quickly? And that too at my age.

She’s a baby. She’s twenty-four. *Son of a bitch, Gordon.*

“Since you plan weddings, is that what you want when you get married, a big wedding?” I asked before I could stop myself.

What she wants for her wedding is none of your fucking business, asshole.

“*Dios mío*, no! My dream wedding is someone else plans the whole thing, and all I need to do is show up and get married. It’s not the wedding, you know...it’s the marriage. My mother always says that.”

There was a freshness to her, and I was fucking smitten. I held the red wine bottle for her, but she shook her head. “No thanks. I’m driving.”

“Back to Golden Valley?”

She shook her head. “Tonight, I’m staying at the Intercontinental, but my car is in Raya’s parking lot. I leave for Golden Valley tomorrow.”

“I can...I have a car. I can give you a ride.”

She smiled. “It’s a workday tomorrow for me. I have several calls to take on my drive home.”

“It’s Saturday tomorrow.”

She nodded. “Big wedding days. That’s why I’m rushing. I have a wedding in the afternoon. My team is good, but the bride’s mother is a bit of a...well, *momzilla*, so I don’t want to leave them on their own.”

I set the bottle down, disappointed. I’d have liked to drive her to her hotel.
And then what, Gordon?

I shook my head. No, I wouldn’t be taking this young woman to bed.

But she’s of age and flirts like a champion, the little devil on the wrong side of my brain countered.

Despite being intrigued, I listened to the voice in the right side of my head that cautioned me. Isadora was vibrant and youthful, and I, at forty-two, with a failed marriage, my past and scars...well, we were worlds apart.



Chapter 3

★ ISADORA

As I got closer to Raya's office, I wondered if I'd have the opportunity to bump into the very delicious Gordon Mackenzie. The CEO of the company and Raya's boss. I'd met him once several months ago, and there had been... *potent* chemistry. I had a *bona fide* crush on him. He looked at me like I was a cross between spoilt child and forbidden fruit.

I was going to see Raya to plan a surprise engagement party for Alejandro and Maria with her at their place. Alejandro would not be surprised, but Maria would be.

My brother had truly screwed up his relationship with Maria, and the Santos family had come together, along with Raya and Mateo, to save Alejandro's sorry ass and help him win his girl back.

I was staying at the Intercontinental again. I could stay with Raya and Mateo, but I liked my privacy. Even though I lived with my parents, I had an entire wing to myself. I stayed with them because I knew they wanted me to, and they were cool parents who minded their own business. They trusted us to make the right decisions and only interfered when there was a need like

right now when my dear brother, so stubborn and proud, had made a mess of things.

How could he push away the one woman who had brought light into his life, all because she had tried to heal old wounds? Silvano had every right to know about his biological mother, and Maria's heart had been in the right place. He'd gone off on her and now would have to grovel to win her back.

Downtown LA held a certain charm, a unique blend of history and modernity. Exiting the luxurious Intercontinental Hotel, I took a moment to breathe in the city vibes. Skyscrapers touched the heavens, yet the city's heartbeat lay in its streets, humming with life and stories. This was so different from the rural life we lived in Golden Valley—and even though I could never live in a city, it was excellent respite when I wanted crowds and energy.

Walking toward Hill Street, the warm sun kissed my skin. My shoes clicked against the pavement, creating a rhythmic soundtrack to my thoughts. Downtown had an artistic soul: murals painted on brick walls, street performers every few corners, and the cacophony of vendors trying to make a living.

The bright orange station of Angel's Flight came into view, a nostalgic beacon amid the city's urban sprawl. I've always adored the short yet iconic railway connecting the heart of downtown with the elevated Bunker Hill. I stepped onto the historic funicular, the wooden benches and vintage charm transporting me back in time. The slow ascent gave me a panoramic view of the bustling city below as the car glided upwards.

The ride was always too short.

As I made my way to the SynthoSoft building, there was a skip in my step. Alejandro's plan was ambitious, but laced with genuine remorse and love. He

wanted not just to apologize, but promise her a lifetime of togetherness, and I couldn't help but feel giddy at the prospect. After all, love deserved a second chance, and I was going to make sure this story had its fairytale ending.

The SynthoSoft office tower in Bunker Hill was an architectural marvel, shimmering glass, and steel stretching toward the sky. Its entrance was grand, with a vast atrium that showcased a cascade of waterfalls over dark marble and an art installation of floating metallic orbs symbolizing connectivity. The company's success and stature were evident in every intricate detail.

I had worn my favorite summer dress, a flattering lavender piece with a wrap-around style that hugged me in all the right places. Paired with my beige ballerina shoes and minimalist gold jewelry, I felt confident, just in case I...met someone interesting.

Upon entering the plush elevator, my eyes immediately found Gordon...*cielos*, someone interesting!

He looked dashing, more so than I remembered. He was in a crisp charcoal suit, the jacket unbuttoned to reveal a deep blue shirt that brought out his eyes. His tie was carelessly draped around his neck as if he was going to eventually tie it. His hair was a tad longer than when I'd last seen him, giving him a rebellious look, which his neatly trimmed beard complemented.

He glanced up from his phone, his eyes momentarily widening in recognition. "Isadora," he said in his subtle Scottish accent with a nod.

I walked up to him and gave him a perfunctory hug on purpose. We were family friends, and I was a hugger. He brushed his lips against my cheek, and we both gasped at the connection.

“Señor Gordon,” I responded with a playful smirk to ignore the fire in my belly. I looked pointedly at my watch. “Keeping banker’s hours.”

He chuckled. “I had a meeting in the city.” His tone was light, but his gaze held intensity. “Are you here to see Raya?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “But I was hoping to bump into you.”

Dios mío, Isa. Stop flirting so recklessly. He looks like he’s gonna bolt.

“Why?”

Our reflections bounced around the mirrored interior of the elevator. I tilted my head. I didn’t know how to feign anything and play coy, so I spoke the truth. “I enjoyed our conversation when we met last time.”

He raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a restrained smile. “And, here I am.”

“But running to a meeting?” I offered. I moved a step closer, the subtle scent of his cologne enveloping me.

His green eyes went dark. “*Little girl, you’re playing the wrong game with the wrong man.*”

Laughter burst out of me. “You did not just say that.”

“I certainly did,” he growled.

“*Little girl, you’re playing the wrong game with the wrong man,*” I repeated in a big bad wolf voice, and he broke into a smile.

“Mocking me, are you, *m’eudail?*”

“What does that mean?” I mangled the pronunciation of the word.

The elevator dinged, signaling Raya’s floor.

“It’s...*ah...*Gaelic,” he said absently as if surprised himself.

I gave him way to leave the elevator first, but he shook his head. “I’m going upstairs to the boardroom.”

I stepped out, throwing him a teasing glance over my shoulder. “Try not to

work too hard, Gordon.”

His eyes followed me, and for a moment, I saw a hint of vulnerability, of longing. But then the elevator doors closed, and the spell was broken.



Chapter 4

★ GORDON

It wasn't like me to get distracted before an important meeting or any meeting. But I could smell Isadora in the elevator as it headed up to the SynthoSoft corporate boardroom. Her scent was alluring, all innocent vanilla, and something spicy, potent, devastatingly sexy that I couldn't pinpoint.

Getting a hardon early on the morning at work...well that had hadn't happened in a...well, ever. *But it's happened now.* I saw her and I was like a dog in heat. Kissing her on her cheek was a mistake but it was that or pushing her against the elevator walls, unwrapping her dress and fucking her until we both couldn't breathe.

Now, I was left with her scent and the knowledge that she was in *my* building, looking like a fucking wet dream in that lavender sundress that hugged her curves like a lover. *Aye*, the woman was getting to me whether I liked it or not; and I didn't like it one damn bit.

I'd slipped again and called her *m'eudail*, my darling. I do not know where the fuck the Scottish Gaelic was coming from because my childhood was far away from my present, yet, *fuck me*, I was saying it to her without thinking

about it. It was like my dick was talking instead of my brain. Hell, that was true for so many men, but I'd never thought I'd succumb to infatuation.

I took a deep breath, sucking in that vanilla before I stepped out of the elevator, and I walked into the SynthoSoft boardroom.

I'd designed the room to intimidate and show who the company and I were. Upon entering, one's attention was immediately captured by the vastness of the space. The ceilings stretched high, detailed with minimalist, sleek lines that subtly directed the gaze toward the head of the room. It was a deliberate choice, ensuring that attendees felt the room's magnitude and, in comparison, their own smallness.

The centerpiece was an imposing mahogany table. Imported from an exclusive European supplier, its dark, polished surface gleamed under the custom, dimmable overhead lights. It was long enough to seat twenty but was often occupied by fewer, creating a sense of emptiness and distance. When negotiations intensified, that physical gap felt even more profound.

On the far end of the room, behind the head seat, was a vast, floor-to-ceiling window that showcased downtown Los Angeles' skyline. The view was breathtaking, day or night. But it also served a purpose. While seated, I would have the city at my back, an unspoken testament to my power and reach.

The chairs upholstered in the finest leather were meticulously chosen. Those on my side were cushioned perfectly, giving just the right amount of comfort. In contrast, the guest chairs were slightly less forgiving, ensuring they were subtly, yet constantly, aware of their physical discomfort.

The walls were adorned with award plaques, and a few select pieces of abstract art, each chosen for its stark, contrasting colors and slightly unsettling designs. There was no warmth in their tones, no comforting

familiarity. They were there to evoke thought, to unsettle, to demand creative thinking.

Even the temperature was controlled to be a touch cooler than most would find comfortable. A slight chill in the air kept guests alert and, occasionally, made them feel exposed.

Every element in the boardroom, from the lighting to the art to the furniture, was chosen to give me homecourt advantage. After all, in the business world, every edge mattered, and I made sure that every detail benefited me in the SynthoSoft boardroom.

The meeting we were having today was unusual and not something I wanted to advertise. The deal on the table was audacious. SynthoSoft would gain Adel Kovács' company, Kovác Tech's flagship software solution, integrating it into our ecosystem in exchange for a revenue-sharing model, which I wanted. She wanted an outright buy. Isaac D'Mello, our longstanding competitor, would come on board for the transition, ensuring smooth integration with the patented technology that his company, DM Solutions, possessed.

I sat at the head of the table with my lawyer, Cyrus Allen, to the left. With sharp blue eyes and a tailored suit that cost more than most people's monthly rent, his reputation was one of a shark, relentless and intimidating. To my right was my assistant, Mila Kent, one of the sharpest minds I knew. In her early thirties, with a sleek bob, impeccable taste in corporate attire, and a deceptively calm demeanor, she managed my life and me with deceptive ease; and had been with me for nearly eight years now.

Her phone beeped and she looked up at me. "Adel is coming up with Isaac," she whispered and rose to stand by the door.

"So, Cyrus, how's it going?" I asked casually.

He nodded and stroked his bald head. "I'm thinking of getting hair plugs. What do you think?"

I grinned. "I hear that surgery can be painful."

"No pain, no gain, they say."

"Anything else going on?" I asked, as I watched the door of the boardroom.

"My prostate is giving me trouble. I have trouble getting an erection."

Cyrus and I'd been working together for many years, and he was a man with a dry and raunchy sense of humor that I sometimes worried would land us in trouble with HR.

"I didn't know you still had sex at your age, Cyrus," I chuckled.

He sighed. "I'm not. I just told you I'm having trouble with my fucking prostate."

I laughed, and he joined me.

"You're laughing now; wait until your balls start to sag to your knees. You'll remember your *fuck everything that moves* days longingly."

"Speaking of fucking...you think Adel is here to fuck us over?" I asked as I heard the unmistakable sound of heels clicking against the marble floor.

"I've heard she gives good head."

"And who the fuck did you hear that from?" I asked.

"This kind of information is in the ether, Gordon." He rose, pulling his six four two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle frame. No one who looked at Cyrus saw a lawyer. He looked like a biker, what with the tattoos and the scar on his cheek that he always told a different story about.

Adel walked in, radiating confidence. She was tall, her blonde hair cascading down her back, starkly contrasting her ice-blue power suit. Isaac trailed behind her, appearing somewhat out of place with his casual attire and scruffy beard, but his eyes held intelligence and cunning.

“Adel, Isaac,” I nodded, my voice calm. We shook hands and did the whole coffee-tea nonsense.

“Let’s get started,” Cyrus suggested after everyone had a beverage and Isaac had a drink *and* a cookie.

Adel shot me a challenging look. “Gordon, I hope you’ve reviewed the terms and understand the value we bring.” Even after living in the United States for nearly two decades, she still had a distinct Eastern European accent, a testament to her growing up in Budapest.

Isaac added, “And recognize the doors this collaboration can open.”

I nodded and looked at Cyrus. When my lawyer was around, I’d been advised by said lawyer to shut up until he gave me permission.

Cyrus was a lawyer’s lawyer. If you asked him, hey, do you know the time, he’d answer simply, *yes*. If you wanted to know the time, you’d have to ask him clearly, *hey, what is the time right now*, and then he’d tell you.

Cyrus spoke with a lazy firmness that only he could achieve. “We’ve reviewed the proposal in detail. The acquisition could be mutually beneficial. However, we want a revenue-sharing model. We think your proposal of us buying you outright is too aggressive.”

Mila slid over a folder, “Here is our counter-proposal.”

Isaac quickly scanned through the document, his eyebrows furrowing. “This seems... far less than what we were expecting.”

Adel flashed angry eyes at me. “Ten years, Gordon? It’ll take us ten years to recover the full cost of what we’re selling.”

Cyrus looked at me and nodded.

I leaned forward, locking eyes with Adel. “Your software, while impressive, needs our infrastructure to scale. You need SynthoSoft more than we need you. As for bringing Isaac into the mix,” I shifted my gaze to him,

“while your technology is valuable, let’s not kid ourselves. You’re here because this is a lifeline for your company. A revenue-sharing model means that you’re in it with us.”

“With you pocketing seventy percent of the profits,” Adel bit out.

I shrugged. “Fine. Then Adel can find another *partner*. We are not interested in buying. We want a long-term revenue sharing agreement. It keeps all of us...honest in our commitment to this partnership.”

That shut both Adel and Isaac up, as I knew it would. I had a reputation for walking away from lucrative deals if they didn’t conform to how we liked to do business in SynthoSoft.

Adel smirked, “Always straight to the point, aren’t you, Gordon? But it’s not always about power plays. Sometimes, it’s about vision.”

Cyrus cleared his throat, drawing attention back to the terms. “We offer a fair deal, considering the market analysis and future projections.”

Isaac sighed, “We might need some time to review this.”

Cyrus smiled. “And, I also...ah, Mila?”

Mila slid another file toward Adel. “Review the addendum as well. We have exclusivity and first right of refusal for all upgrades and future software development.”

Adel’s cat eyes flashed with anger. “Gordon? This was not the deal.”

I rose then and walked up to the coffee machine. I turned it on, and we all remained silent while it made the noise to grind the beans and deliver an espresso.

“Anyone wants coffee or tea?” I asked.

“Double espresso, boss.” Mila waved.

I brought her a double espresso and took my time, making myself a cup.

“Gordon?” Adel cried out, losing patience. “Are we doing this or not?”

I came back and sat down. “I don’t know, Adel, it depends upon how you want to play this. If we’re integrating the software and using Isaac’s technology, we will need exclusivity.”

Isaac shook his head. “Then buy the damn software.”

“No. Revenue sharing and exclusivity. That’s the deal.” I leaned back and drank my espresso.

“You’re an asshole, Gordon,” Adel muttered. She picked up both the folders that Mila had given to them.

“Noted,” I said without emotion.

Isaac stood up as well. “We’ll go through this with our lawyers.” He walked to the door and turned around, “I expected something underhanded, but this? You’re sabotaging a deal in the works for three months.”

“You know how we do business, Isaac.” Cyrus stood up and stroked a hand over his bald head. “We can’t, and won’t, just use software to which we don’t have full rights. What the fuck do you think we’ll do if you go sell parts of it to someone else? We’ll be royally fucked.”

“A business relationship requires trust,” Adel snapped, her eyes shining angrily. She looked at me, her eyes spitting hate. “Do you even know what that word means, Gordon?”

“Trust?” I asked and nodded. “Sure. I like to see it in writing, approved, signed, and sealed by Cyrus.”

“Fuck you.” She slammed the door shut behind her.

Isaac shrugged ineffectually and opened the door. “I’ll talk to her and...ah, we’ll get back to you by the end of the week.”

Cyrus sat down after Isaac left. Mila walked up to the door, opened it, and nodded at whoever was sitting outside. She’d have someone go down with them, listen to their conversation, and report back to us.

“She doesn’t like you, G.” Mila grinned. “Like *really* doesn’t like you. I thought your breakup was amicable.”

“No such thing as an amicable breakup,” Cyrus piped in. “I have three ex-wives, and I tell you not one of those divorces was fucking amicable.”

“Maybe if you stopped marrying every woman who smiles at you,” Mila suggested.

Cyrus sighed. “You’re right. But at my age, I’m vulnerable.”

We burst out laughing. The words Cyrus and vulnerable had no place next to each other.

I headed back down to my office, wondering if I’d bump into Isadora again so I could identify her scent, vanilla, and....?



Chapter 5

★ ISADORA

Gordon stepped out as I was getting back onto the elevator to go down. “We have to stop meeting like this,” I said.

He smiled, holding the elevator door open.

“Are you busy?” I asked boldly.

He quirked an eyebrow.

“Take me to lunch,” I let courage guide me. “I’m starving.”

I thought he’d turn me down, but he smiled and returned to the elevator. I joined him, suddenly nervous. Flirting was good, but now, *dios mío*, I was like the dog who caught the car.

“What do you like to eat?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I was thinking we could go down Angel’s Flight to Grand Central Market and find something.”

He looked at his watch and then pulled out his phone. He typed something and then slid the phone back into his pocket. The elevator opened a few times, letting people in and out before we were down on the ground floor.

I couldn't believe I'd been audacious enough to ask Gordon to take me to lunch. But something about him drew out a bolder side of me.

Angel's Flight was a short, but scenic, ride. The iconic orange railway cars took us from the top of Bunker Hill down to the heart of Downtown. As we descended, the city stretched below us, a beautiful cacophony of sights and sounds. The brief journey on that historic railway felt charming and surreal, like stepping back in time.

"First time on Angel's Flight?" Gordon asked a hint of amusement in his eyes.

I laughed. "Hardly. I used it to come up. It's one of my favorite things in LA."

He looked out at the sprawling cityscape. "It offers a different perspective."

The bustling atmosphere immediately enveloped us as we walked into Grand Central Market, which was a lively blend of aromas and colors, with vendors selling everything from exotic spices to fresh produce. We made our way to a taco stall that made the best tacos in Los Angeles.

While we waited, I asked him, "So, *Señor* Mackenzie, you let a young girl like me convince you to buy her tacos?"

He smirked, "*Aye, Señorita* Santos, age aside, I've never been one to refuse a woman. And as for the tacos, I never pass up an opportunity to eat good food."

My heart fluttered at his words. But it wasn't just his charm, but the mystery behind those green eyes. "How does a man from Glasgow find himself running a billion-dollar tech company in LA?"

He was taken aback by my question. "How do you know where I'm from?"

Sometimes, you had to go all in. "Usually, when someone is interested in someone, they research."

Gordon took a deep breath. Two people left their place at the taco counter, so we sat down on stools next to one another, close, because there wasn't much space.

"I'm older than you," he whispered, not looking at me.

Válgame dios, he was back at the age thing. "And I'm younger than you."

He turned to look at me, and my breath shortened. His eyes were saying something he didn't want me to hear, but he couldn't hide it. I lifted a hand to touch his cheek, but he moved his face before it could happen.

"Little girl—"

"You call me *little girl* again, and I promise I'll hurt you," I warned him.

"But you are a—"

"Gordon," I used my mother's, *por favor, I'll kick your ass tone.*

He nodded. "I grew up in a tough neighborhood in Glasgow. Opportunities were few, but my parents believed in the value of hard work and education. I started with odd jobs, saved up, got scholarships, and slowly paved my way through school and the tech world. It wasn't easy, but every challenge and hurdle made me who I am."

His accent deepened as he spoke of his childhood.

"Are you still close to your parents?"

"Yes. Very. My parents live in Lanark, that's where I grew up. It's a small village south of Glasgow in South Lanarkshire. They have a house by the River Clyde." He spoke with affection.

"You see them often?"

"At least a couple of times a year or more if I can manage it. They used to come here, but they prefer to stay as they're getting older. My sister lives close to them....my younger sister. She has kids, boys, teenagers, and the

holidays are...well, cacophonous. She and her husband are teachers. It's a quiet life."

"Different from yours."

He laughed. "Very."

I was genuinely moved. "I'm impressed. I didn't expect you to be a family man."

"Why?"

I grinned. "Maybe Raya may have said something about how you sleep with a lot of women and have casual relationships. Words to the effect of, *Isa, Gordon likes someone who looks good on his arm, is good in bed and knows how to throw a party.*"

He looked into my eyes, searching for something. "So, Raya has warned you."

I tilted my chin, fire in my eyes. "I make my own choices."

"Life has taught me many lessons, Isadora. The most important one is that I don't want drama in my life."

On that happy note, our tacos arrived and as we ate, we talked about everything and nothing. I told him about my family, the Santos clan, and how we all stuck together. The more we talked, the more I felt drawn to him. He listened intently, his eyes never leaving mine, making me feel seen like I hadn't before.

"How are you getting to your hotel?" he asked once we were back by Angel's Flight.

"I'm going to walk. It's not far."

He nodded, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I don't know why I took you to lunch."

"Because I asked?"

“I only do things I want to do, Isadora.”

“Whew,” I fanned myself, “At least you’re not calling me little girl anymore.”

I went on tiptoe and brushed my lips against his. I thought he’d step back, but he didn’t. He stood rooted and looked at me with his unfathomable green eyes.

“You are playing with fire.”

“Ah, what are a few burns,” I quipped.

Before I could think, he had his hands on my hips and pulled me against him. He lifted me literally off my feet and bent his lips to mine.

I’d been kissed before. Enough. I haven’t gone *all the way* with anyone, but I kissed. I was not a prude. I just wanted to find someone who I wanted, *really, really* wanted before I’d have sex with them and I had met no one like that...until now, it seemed.

The kiss was heated. His hands moved over my ass and back as he molded me to him. His mouth on mine was voracious, hard. He licked, sucked, and bit.

I linked my hands around his neck and hung on for dear life. His smell was...*intoxicating*. His taste, tacos, and...something else was impossibly delicious. I felt languid heat course through me. I moaned, wanting more, my hips thrumming against his, wanting, wanting, wanting....

And then suddenly, heaven was over.

He set me down and took a step back.

“Wow.” I touched my lips, feeling forlorn that I couldn’t feel him anymore. “I mean...wow. I’ve...never...wow! I’ve never...never been kissed like this.”

His lips thinned. “See, that’s the difference between a little girl and a grown woman. A grown woman would not say she’s never been kissed like this.”

I flinched. “I—“

“I have to go. Look...I should never have touched you. And...this will never happen again.”

He all but ran from me then.

I watched him take the stairs instead of waiting for the red Angel’s Flight tram. I bit my lips as he took two steps at a time.

First things first, he was fit. I worked out, but on those stairs, I’d have to stop midway to catch my breath. Second, *dios mío*, that was some kiss. Third, this wasn’t ever happening again. Well, we’d see about that, wouldn’t we!

I was inexperienced, but I knew that chemistry like this was rare. I think it was a once in a lifetime thing. I feared it was a soulmate thing. And if that was the case, I was going to break my heart over this man.



Chapter 6

★ GORDON

A grown woman would not say *she's never been kissed like this*. I was an asshole. Especially since my reaction to the kiss was the same. *Fucking wow!* I'd never ever felt...fuck, that was some kiss.

Raya came into my office, and I immediately felt guilty. “Hey, you disappeared.”

I wasn't sure if I should tell her I went for lunch with the baby of the Santos family and all but defiled her outside Grand Central Market. I decided that discretion would be the better part of valor, especially since Raya worked out like a fiend and could kick my ass.

“Lunch,” I replied, keeping it vague. “You need something.”

“No. Just wanted to invite you to Mateo and my wedding anniversary party...and hopefully Alejandro and Maria's engagement party as well.”

“Hopefully?”

Raya grinned. “He may have fucked up a little...a lot, and we're hoping Maria will forgive him.”

“Ah. Is that what Isadora was here for?”

“Yes. It’s day after tomorrow, Saturday evening. I know it’s short notice, but we weren’t planning on a party...it’s impromptu as an excuse to get Maria to our place,” she smiled. “And we love to throw a party. Will you come?”

I wanted to say no, I was busy. I could and she’d be fine with it. As she said it was short notice. If I didn’t go, I could avoid seeing Isadora again.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” *Fucking hell!*

“Excellent. Put your dancing shoes on, Gordon, because you know the Santos’ love to dance!”

I rarely got into such entanglements with women. I spent time with women. I had sex with them. I enjoyed their company. I didn’t lust after them. I didn’t think about them after. And they were all usually grownups.

I left the office early, feeling restless.

The taste of Isadora’s lips lingered, a ghostly reminder of the fire I hadn’t felt in years. I changed into my workout gear and went down to the private gym of my building, desperate for some relief, which I hoped pummeling my body would give me. Or, at least it would make me too tired to think about her.

The place was empty, just the hum of overhead lights and the soft thud of my shoes on the polished floor. I made a beeline for the weights section. Picking up a pair of heavy dumbbells, I began with bicep curls. Each lift was a battle, my muscles straining against the weight. It wasn’t just metal I was lifting; it was the weight of my past, the weight of my mistrust.

After four sets of ten reps, my biceps screamed in protest. I moved on to the bench press. The cold steel of the bar pressed against my palms, and I took a moment to gather myself before lifting it. As I pressed the weight up and

down, I felt the burn in my chest and triceps, each rep pushing away the thoughts, the doubts, the memories of the tabloid headlines about my divorce.

Gordon Mackenzie and Pilar Mackenzie divorce.

Is Pilar Mackenzie sleeping with her yoga instructor?

Gordon Mackenzie abused Pilar. Read the exclusive interview.

Gordon Mackenzie had orgies in his penthouse. Details inside.

Pilar had fucked me up but good. Once I paid her off, she'd shut up, and the tabloids had lost interest. I was a private man, I didn't enjoy seeing my name and face splattered all over the supermarket aisles. Usually, a tech bro didn't get that kind of attention, but Pilar was a French model slash socialite and our wedding had been covered in *Vogue* magazine. After that, the media attention had been relentless. I'd told Pilar she could do what she wanted, but I was not interested in having my photograph taken. So, she went alone on the red carpets and to parties...soon, she had company for such events. And then she fucked the company.

The sweat started dripping, my shirt clinging to my back. Next, I headed to the pull-up bar. Pull-ups were always a test of pure strength and will. I gripped the bar, palms facing out, and hoisted myself up, forcing myself to pull my weight against gravity.

I didn't cheat. And I would not put up with a wife who cheated. I asked for a divorce. She went crying to the media. We had a prenup. Cyrus had made it air *fucking* tight. He'd been livid when I asked him to give her what she wanted and get her out of my life. As long as she knew that the minute she took my name in public or anywhere else again and I found out, the money would be gone and I'd sue her for slander, destroy what was left of her life.

A good twenty minutes on the treadmill had my heart racing, echoing the rapid beat I felt when Isadora was close. I tried to shake off the thoughts,

focusing on my pace, increasing the speed bit by bit, trying to outrun my feelings, my history.

Pilar and I divorced more than a decade ago. I'd been a young man then in so many ways. Just twenty-nine and so full of certainty that I was in love, and I'd married someone who loved me, and we'd be together forever, like my parents. Forever lasted three miserable years.

I ended with the punching bag. It swayed slightly as I approached, as if taunting me. I imagined it was every headline, every whisper, every doubt. My fists found their rhythm, pounding against the leather. Each thud was an exorcism of demons, of the past, of the loss of trust.

With each punch, Isadora's face flashed in my mind, her bright eyes, her fearless demeanor, her infectious spirit. For the first time since Pilar, I was infatuated with a woman. Nothing good had come of it then and nothing good would come of it now.

But Pilar and Isadora could not be more different. Pilar had been a sophisticated model. Isadora was a...fucking breath of fresh air, not unsophisticated, but open and engaging, with laughter in her eyes. She made me feel...joy.

Pilar had been seductive and sensuous, Isadora was passionate and full of life. She differed from any other woman who I'd been attracted to. I always knew it was fun and games. This time it neither felt like fun nor games. If I had her there would be no going back.

Drained, I sat down, taking deep breaths. The physical exhaustion was a balm, dulling the edge of my emotional turmoil. But as the adrenaline subsided, her image was all that remained, bright and unwavering amidst the shadows of my past.

I had built walls, stone by stone, to protect myself. But Isadora, with her

vibrant spirit, had effortlessly scaled them. The question now was, *would I let her in, or would the walls have to go up even higher?*

I took a shower and, feeling restless, walked to my next appointment, taking the long way, via the Intercontinental on Figueroa. A part of me wanted to find her in that infernal hotel and fuck her, get her out of my system. But I wasn't that stupid. You didn't fuck someone like Isadora and get her out of your system, that's when she got into your blood. I was certain of it.



Chapter 7

★ ISADORA

Between my mother and I, we got Maria dressed up and into a car, driving to Raya's place where the purported Raya and Mateo anniversary party was being held. Maria, of course, didn't know that Alejandro was going to propose. I was so excited that I was ready jump out of my beige confection of tulle I'd chosen to wear because it made me feel like a fairy princess.

"Gordon Mackenzie will be there," I murmured as I looked at myself in a handheld mirror in the sedan that drove us.

"Don't you think he's a little old for you?" Maria wondered.

"He's as old as Alejandro. And does it really matter?" I countered.

Paloma frowned. "Is this Raya's boss?"

"Hmm." I shut the mirror and slipped it into my bag. "He's gorgeous. I have a thing for him."

"The poor man," Paloma lamented, "Does he know you're interested in him?"

"Yep...but he's doing the whole, you're a young girl thing."

“You *are* a young girl,” Maria interjected. “Paloma, he’s *really* old.”

My mother shrugged. “Isa is a smart girl. It’s none of my business who she’s doing what with as long as she’s safe. Will you be safe?”

“With a man who won’t touch me with a ten-foot pole? Yeah, I think so,” I muttered.

My mother was one of my closest friends. She never judged, and she was always on my side. She’d not bat an eyelash that I was interested in a man eighteen years older than me. She’d trust me to know my heart and my mind.

We reached Raya and Mateo’s building and put our plan into action.

As nonchalantly as I could, I suggest to Maria, “Why don’t you go up and we’ll join you. I need to look through my suitcase in the back.”

She didn’t think anything of it, thank god. We dropped her off at the front of Matteo and Raya’s building and driver took us into the parking garage.

I called Alejandro. “She’s on her way up. Don’t screw this up.”

“I’m going to try my best,” he promised.

My mother grinned. “He’s nervous.”

I laughed. “I know! I’ve never seen him nervous.” I paused then, “I feel like I’m chasing Gordon. He...kissed me the other day.”

My mother raised her eyebrows. “And?”

“And it was amazing. I *said* to him it was amazing and...he sort of came back with a you’re so young and inexperienced that’s why you’re feeling that way. Then he sort of *ran* from me.” I leaned back on my car seat. “Mama, am I going to die a virgin?”

My mother put an arm around me. “It’ll happen when it happens. You can’t rush it. If you could, you probably would have by now. Something is holding you back, Isa and that’s okay. And this Gordon person will be here tonight?”

I nodded.

“I’ll check him out,” my mother said slyly.

“Poor guy. First, he has to deal with me and then you.”

“We could sic Arsenio on him too,” my mother suggested.

My father wouldn’t interfere, but he’d give Gordon a hard time if he could just for the sake of amusement. “We kissed, mama. There’s nothing going on.”

“We’ll see.” Mama opened the car door. “Should we head up and see how Alejandro is doing?”

“I really hope she’s going to say yes.”

My mother took my hand in her. “Oh, she is. Maria is gone for my son.”



The twinkling fairy lights draped over Raya and Mateo’s pool patio painted an ethereal glow that made the entire setting feel like it was straight out of a dream. The soft, melodic hum of bluesy jazz permeated the air, and I watched couples swaying gently to its rhythm. Now and then, a soft laugh or the chink of a toast punctuated the night.

From my secluded corner, wrapped in the warmth of the shadows, I watched Alejandro and Maria dance. My heart swelled with joy for my brother. I was a sucker for a happy ending. As a wedding planner, I loved planning weddings for *others*. And I couldn’t wait to plan Alejandro and Maria’s wedding at the Golden Valley Inn.

My eyes wandered and found Gordon. He looked handsome in his tailored suit, his silver flecked hair catching the fairy light’s glow.

We’d said hello, nothing more. I had wanted to talk to him but decided against it. I didn’t want to chase a man who wasn’t interested. I didn’t have

to. *And* his rejection still stung.

I watched as he engaged in conversation with Daisy, the influential Hollywood producer, and her husband, the formidable Judge Forest Knight. Their laughter echoed, reaching even my distant corner. Gordon then moved on to congratulate Maria and Alejandro, a genuine smile lighting up his face. He exchanged words with Declan Knight and his lovely wife, Esme, their heads tilting in shared amusement.

The evening *was* magical, I thought, the kind where you half-expected a fairy to flutter by or a star to fall right into the palm of your hand. Yet, amidst this enchantment, my heart felt heavy. The lingering taste of my kiss with Gordon haunted me. Did he think I was callow child? *Why was age such a barrier? Why did numbers have the power to dictate feelings?*

I toyed with the stem of my champagne glass, wondering about the notion of love at first sight. *Was it real or just the stuff of fairy tales?* I was smitten for the first time in my life, entranced by a man who was tangled in his own web of doubts. Life was so unfair.

The whimsy of the night, the shimmering lights reflecting in the pool, the soft music, everything seemed perfect. And yet, my fairy tale felt incomplete.

I turned my back to the party and looked out at the bright lights of Los Angeles.

“Isadora?” I would recognize that Scottish accent anywhere.

I turned so quickly that I spilled some champagne. “Hi.” I set the glass down on a table next to me because my hands shook slightly.

Shadows of reticence softened around his eyes when they met mine, revealing a vulnerability I hadn’t expected to see. “How are you?”

I nodded and then shrugged.

“I owe you an apology.” The timbre of his voice settled like velvet over the

crisp night air. “I was...an asshole, and I’ve regretted it since the moment I walked away. Our kiss—“ he paused, as if searching for the right words ”—it was *amazing*, and I fucked up.”

“Amazing?” I asked without humor.

“Definitely.” His lips turned into a boyish smile and my silly little heart did a little somersault.

His gaze bore into mine, warm and soft, echoing the undercurrent of the music that played. *Unchained Melody* by The Righteous Brothers wove through the evening, its haunting melody casting a spell over the night.

“May I have this dance?” Gordon extended his hand, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly.

Taking his offered hand felt like stepping into a story that was both new and achingly familiar. As we moved towards the dance floor, the world seemed to still, the soft glow of the fairy lights framing us in a halo of warmth and promise.

Gordon held me close, his hand settling on my waist, the other holding mine aloft. We moved together, gliding across the makeshift dance floor with ease and grace, our bodies finding a rhythm that was as natural as breathing.

His eyes never left mine, and in their depths, I saw the reflection of my surprise and recognition. There was a zing, an unmistakable spark that swayed and flickered between us, igniting something deep within. With each step, each turn, the invisible thread binding us seemed to tighten, drawing us closer in its gentle snare.

Gordon led with confidence, and I followed. Our dance was a conversation without words. We spun, twirled, lost ourselves in the ebb and flow of the music. When he lifted me slightly, I floated, buoyed by his strength and an effervescent joy bubbling within.

As the song wound down, Gordon pulled me closer, our eyes locked, breaths mingling. For a heartbeat, we were suspended in time, caught in the crossfire of burgeoning affection and undeniable attraction. Then, as the last notes of the song faded into the night, he whispered, “There’s something here, Isadora. Something special.”

And as I looked into his eyes, seeing the dawn of realization and hope reflected at me, I couldn’t help but agree. “Something very special.”

“But...I can’t explore it with you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” I challenged.

He shook his head and then dropped a kiss on my forehead. “You’re so full of life, seeing you hide in the shadows...knowing that it probably was because I was a jerk, *m’eudail*, it didn’t sit well with me.”

I heard Daisy call out my name, but I ignored her, focusing on Gordon.

“I’m responsible for my own feelings. You can neither make me happy nor sad, Gordon.”

“I’m damaged goods, baby.”

I traced a hand over his cheek. “Just old,” I teased, “Not damaged.”

I went on tiptoe to kiss him, but he moved away. “Your parents are here,” he hissed.

“And?” I gave him a puzzled look.

“I’d much rather not be caught kissing Baby Santos.”

Temper flashed through me. “Cut it out.”

“What?”

“The whole baby, little girl, you’re a child...cut it out. You don’t want me. Fine. Don’t make me smaller with your words,” I charged at him. “Goodnight, Gordon. And you’re right, this is not something we should explore.”

I walked away from him and then turned, “And, I wasn’t sad, I was happy...am happy. My brother just got engaged. A man who can’t handle a kiss isn’t worth being *sad* over.”

That last part was petty but the hell with it, he annoyed me. He reminded me of my brothers in some ways. They were also so wound tight about relationships. Look at Alejandro: all but lost the love of his life because he had his head way up his ass.

I went up to my father. He was tall like Alejandro and despite being in his seventies, carried himself well. He’d be what you’d call a Silver Fox.

He put his arm around me when I sidled next to him. “What’s wrong, *mija*?“ “Men are morons.”

“True. Did that *pendejo* hurt you?“ He inclined his chin toward Gordon who was still standing where I left him by the makeshift dance floor by the swimming pool. “I can beat him up for you.”

I grinned. “You’re nearly twenty years older than mama.”

“Yeah. Gave me some bad moments. She was just twenty-five, and I was an old fucking man with two sons, one a teenager.”

“But it didn’t stop you, did it?“ I demanded.

“It almost did.“ My father grinned. “That *pendejo* thinks he’s too old for you?“

“Stop calling him that. And I don’t know who you’re talking about,“ I sulked and snuggled into him. “Papa, why are men so complicated?“

Arsenio looked down at me, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Ah, *mija*, love has its own ways. But remember, happiness is a choice.”

Before I could retort, the lively strumming of a guitar played, and the infectious rhythm of *Bailando* by Enrique Iglesias filled the air. The vibrant beats were an open invitation, urging everyone to embrace the moment.

With a mischievous grin, Papa extended his hand. “Care to dance, *querida?*”

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled me onto the dance floor. As the music pulsated through the speakers, we lost ourselves in the rhythm. My father’s steps were a delightful mix of tradition and flair, and I matched him, step for step, with twirls and quick footwork.

Soon, Silvano and Maria jumped in. Silvano’s youthful energy adding a whole new dimension to our dance. What started as a casual dance turned into a playful dance-off. Silvano showcased a series of spins, his feet moving with surprising agility. In response, I executed a series of quick, sharp steps, drawing on the flamenco lessons of my youth. Arsenio, not to be outdone by his grandson, showed off some classic salsa moves, his charisma lighting up the dance floor.

“I taught him everything he knows,” he told Maria.

We laughed and danced with wild abandon, each trying to outdo the other, our movements narrating tales of joy, spirit, and undying zest for life. The surrounding guests cheered and clapped, their laughter and whistles adding to the merriment.

As the song neared its end, we struck a dramatic pose, earning a rapturous round of applause from the onlookers.

Breathless and elated, I hugged my father, gratitude flooding me. “Thanks, Papa, for always reminding me to choose happiness.”

Arsenio kissed my forehead. “Life’s too short, *mija*. Embrace every moment with laughter.”



Chapter 8

★ GORDON

I didn't think about her all the time. Just once in a while. Okay, sometimes. Often. A lot of the time. *Fuck!*

I saw her here and there at Raya's place, once at a party at Maria's place... we moved in the same circles, so it was inevitable. I kept my distance because she was slowly becoming an obsession. For a man who'd lived forty-two years of his life without ever being enamored by a woman, fate was fucking me hard.

"We're having problems with the charity auction site," Mila informed the leadership team during our weekly meeting.

Every year, SynthoSoft organized an event for our top customers with a holiday party before Christmas. We booked a hotel and went skiing with our top customers, served Michelin-star food, and generally thanked them for giving us tons of money.

"Problems?" SynthoSoft's Chief Marketing Officer, Manuel Garcia, wanted to know.

“The resort we booked in Park City has massive water damage and is shut down through next Spring.” Mila looked through her notes.

“And we need something in four weeks?” Manuel shook his head. “God damn it!”

Raya leaned back on her chair, her booted feet on another chair in front of her, which was the usual style.

“Golden Valley has a ski-in ski-out resort,” she said thoughtfully. “I could ask Isadora.”

“I thought they had an Inn?” Mila said.

“They do, but Isadora is expanding. The resort has been part of the Golden Valley portfolio for just a few months.” Raya picked up her phone and typed furiously.

Mila looked at me. “Gordon?”

I nodded. “I’m assuming you’ve tried to find an alternative.”

“But it’s so close to the holidays that everything is booked.”

Raya’s phone pinged, and she smiled. “Apparently, that week is free because a wedding got canceled. The bride found the groom sleeping with her mother.”

“Yuck,” Mila protested.

Manuel laughed, raising his cup of coffee. “To cheating grooms.”

Raya lifted her cup as well. “And mothers of the bride who can’t keep it in their pants.”

Isadora’s resort? Fuck me sideways! The universe was screwing with me, wasn’t it? She’d be there. Of course, she’d be there. Or maybe she won’t. She’ll let someone else handle it. She was a Santos. How hands on could she be?

“Mila, extend the bookings by a day for the leadership team here, except for

Manuel, who's going to be sipping colorful drinks with umbrellas in the Maldives," I paused, and Manuel grinned, "plus Cyrus and Adel's team. Let's wrap this up before Christmas."

Raya nodded. "I'm spending Christmas in Golden Valley, so no problem."

After the meeting, as I walked to my office, Mila waved me down. "You have lunch with Isaac today at Manuela in the Arts District."

"Ah, fuck," I sighed. "Can we cancel?"

She shook her head. "Cyrus and the DM Solutions attorney will be there."

"I hate that asshole." I wasn't talking about Isaac, who wasn't on the top five worst people list, but he wasn't on my top fifty best people list either. I was talking about his lawyer, the fucking smarmy Jeff Hephner. He once worked for Adel's company, Kovács Software, but moved to Isaac's organization a couple of years ago. The rumor was that Adel and Jeff had an affair that turned sour, and to avoid a lawsuit for wrongful termination, she'd convinced her buddy Isaac to hire him.

"Fine, are you joining?" I asked absently as I looked through my phone.

"Afraid not. I need to contact Isadora Santos."

There was her name again. It was like she was haunting me, day in and day out. It was getting to a point where I was wondering if I needed to see a therapist because the most significant problem this had caused was my inability to fuck other women. I liked sex, and I wasn't having any right now. The last time I'd tried to pick up a model type, I'd found that I was not interested. I wanted Isadora. Baby Fucking Santos. The little girl who would kick my ass if she knew I was calling her that. But I had to think of her as a baby because every time I thought of her, I remembered that kiss, how she felt under my hands.

This was an infatuation. Teenagers indulged in this shit. Grown men didn't

get enamored like this unless they were on drugs. I was not on drugs. And maybe I wasn't as grown up as I thought I was.



I frequented Manuela in the Arts District, but today's visit was far from casual. The contemporary space, with its industrial aesthetics, exposed brick walls, and high ceilings adorned with intricate light fixtures, stood in contrast to the vibrant art pieces it housed. A rustic elegance was evident in the wooden tables, handcrafted art pieces, and the bustling kitchen with chefs. The aroma of their farm-to-table menu wafted tantalizingly through the room.

Isaac, looking every bit the average man: he was in his predictable suit, had already arrived, occupying a table at the corner. Beside him sat Jeff Hephner, his lawyer, who had that smarmy air enhanced by his slicked-back hair, sharp suit, and an overly confident demeanor. The asshole looked like a used-car salesman; he was such a cliché.

As I approached, I could tell Jeff was taking in Cyrus, who, despite being my lawyer, looked more like he should provide muscle for a mob boss than advising on intellectual property rights. The towering figure, bald with tattoos snaking down both arms, had an intimidating presence that often gave me an upper hand in negotiations.

Isaac stood to greet me, his handshake firm. "Gordon," he said with a nod.

Jeff, however, remained seated, a smirk playing on his lips. "Mackenzie."

"Cyrus," I gestured towards my lawyer, who grunted in response.

As we settled in, the server approached, suggesting a few wines. Everyone ordered except for me.

“Sparkling water, please,” I said. No matter how premium the wine, I wanted a mind as sharp as a razor when it came to business.

With pleasantries out of the way, Jeff jumped right in. “Adel’s in Europe, entertaining a few potential partners,” he began, emphasizing the word *potential*. “It seems other companies see the promise in her software. If we don’t complete this deal soon, SynthoSoft might miss out.”

It was a transparent ploy to unsettle me, but I wasn’t one to be easily rattled. “Jeff, my interest is in the software, not in the fleeting flirtations of its creator. If Adel wishes to pursue other avenues, so be it. I’m here to discuss the integration, not to engage in boardroom theatrics.”

Cyrus’s deep voice rumbled, “Let’s talk IP rights post-integration. Until clarity on that, this deal isn’t moving an inch.”

Food arrived with plates of fresh greens, grilled vegetables, artisanal bread, and meticulously plated mains. But the table was thick with tension, the conversation punctuated by moments where one could only hear the clinking of cutlery.

Isaac, who had been quiet, finally chimed in. “Gordon, we need assurances. This software integration is game-changing, and we won’t be sidelined.”

Cyrus locked eyes with him. “Isaac, SynthoSoft recognizes the value of what DM Solutions brings. But our collaboration should be rooted in mutual respect and understanding, not threats. We will own the IP for the full solution. There is no wiggle room there.”

We negotiated for what felt like hours, but no middle ground was reached by the end. We’d need Adel in the room to make that happen.

Once a disgruntled Jeff and self-satisfied Isaac left, a palpable tension vacated the room. Manuela’s charm was back in its full glory. The hum of light chatter and the clinking of glassware set a relaxing tone.

Cyrus, reclining in his seat, took a long sip of his wine, his tattooed hand wrapping around the glass stem. “What’s our next move, boss?”

I sighed, rolling my shoulders to dispel the tightness. “I’ve scheduled some final negotiations at the Golden Valley Resort. It’s after the SynthoSoft customer event. I want this deal wrapped up neatly with a bow by Christmas. No loose ends going into the New Year.”

Cyrus grinned, revealing a silver tooth. “You want to mix business with leisure at Golden Valley?”

I smirked. “A change of scenery might just be the pressure point we need. Plus, I have some... personal distractions there.”

His eyebrow quirked up, “Isadora?”

“How the fuck do you know anything about...” I trailed off and nodded. “The leadership team is like a gossipy sewing circle.”

Cyrus grinned. “I may have heard something while having dinner with Vega.”

Carolina Vega was the Knight Technologies general counsel in an on-again, off-again with Isadora’s brother, Aurelio.

“Fucking lawyers,” I muttered.

Cyrus laughed out loud and patted my shoulder. “Stop being so uptight, Gordon.”

I shot him a warning look, which he heartily ignored. “Let’s focus on the task at hand. We need to come out of this on top. DM Solutions and their tactics can’t get in our way.”

Cyrus leaned forward, his demeanor switching from casual to deadly serious. “They’re playing hardball. But we’ve played against tougher opponents and come out swinging. Jeff’s trying to intimidate, and Isaac’s

playing the wounded card. We've got our strategies in place. They might have a decent hand, but we have the trump card."

"We do?"

Cyrus nodded. "See, gossiping lawyers have their benefits. Adel Kovács is getting out of the game. She's liquidating all her assets."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why?"

"She's done, she says. She wants to live on some island and sip colorful drinks with umbrellas. Can you blame her?"

I knew Adel Kovács, and she was a through and through businesswoman. She loved to win above all else.

"Something doesn't fit."

"Okay. I'll ask Daisuke to look at it."

Daisuke Ito was our head of security. He'd taken over after Raya had been promoted, and my previous CTO had ended up in jail. There was never a dull moment in our business!

He thumped my back then. "Stop looking so grim. We've weathered many storms. This is just a drizzle. Let's close this deal, and maybe you can find a little holiday cheer with Miss Santos at the resort."

"Fuck off, Cyrus."

Chuckling, he raised his glass of wine. "Here's to business, pleasure, and the blurred lines in between."

I gave him the finger.



Chapter 9

★ ISADORA

The November sun was gentler in Golden Valley, casting a warm, amber hue over the vast stretches of the organic farm. The air was crisp as if there was snow in the air

As was tradition we'd thrown the Santos Thanksgiving Party the Saturday after Thanksgiving, and I was exhausted. I was managing both the Golden Valley Inn and the newly acquired Golden Valley Resort near Shaker Lake, which was already gearing up to have full occupancy for the upcoming ski season. In addition, the wedding planner business was booming, because everybody wanted to have a destination wedding these days. I even had a wedding planned on Christmas Day at the resort. I hated to miss Christmas with my family, but I'd worked hard to build the hospitality arm of Golden Valley almost single-handedly. Not that my family wouldn't help. If I asked, everyone would drop what they were doing and be at my beck and call. But I wanted to do this on my own.

As the youngest in my family. I was the *baby*...Gordon was right. I'd had the pressure to prove myself, show my brothers and parents that I was good at

what I did and could contribute. Had I ever thought of doing something else? Absolutely not! I'd always known that I'd live and work at Golden Valley. It was my family's legacy. Alejandro was an amazing CEO, and I loved working for *and* with him. Aurelio knew farming inside out. I knew that I wanted to be, in the simplest terms, an inn keeper. I loved people, and I wanted to make them happy, give them the best experience whether they were at a corporate retreat, a family vacation, a wedding, or anything else.

The horses' hooves clip-clopped down the dirt path as my friend Nova and I took in the beautiful autumn scenery of Golden Valley on horseback.

"You're very quiet. What's up, babe?" Nova asked.

"Just thinking about what an interesting year this has been with us buying the resort...and the wedding business...all that."

"Tis the season to reflect." Nova pulled the reins on her horse to gently move her to go right on the path. "I'm thinking of quitting Cárdenas Atelier."

I quirked an eyebrow. "How does your mother feel about it?"

Cárdenas was one of the most exclusive names in bridal fashion. Only the best of the best (who got on the waiting list) had the privilege of wearing one of Nova's mother, Valerie Cárdenas' creations on their big day.

"I haven't told her yet. *But* I feel it's time to move away from her shadow. I'm so tired of being Valerie Cárdenas' daughter."

I nodded as I looked at the Sierra mountains standing tall in front of us. "I know the feeling."

"But you carved a whole other identity within the Santos family. You're not following anyone's footsteps. You created your own path," Nova pointed out.

Nova and I were the same age and were similar in our ambitions, though we looked like night and day. I was brown skinned with dark hair and eyes, while Nova was platinum blonde with blue eyes and pearly white skin. Her

body type was more supermodel than my pinup girl—but I'd never been envious. I liked my body. I liked my Latina curves. Having a friend like Nova meant that there was no room for body, brain, or privilege shaming because we were both each other's staunchest supporters.

"You're a very different designer than your mother." I stopped my horse at a vista point. Nova rode and settled next to me. I leaned down to stroke my chestnut mare's flank. "Gorgeous day for a ride, isn't it, Stormy?" I whispered to my horse.

Nova smiled at me. "It is a gorgeous day," she agreed. "I've been cooped up inside for weeks, working on my latest collection. It's nice to get out."

"How does Ash feel about you working all the time?"

Ashley was Nova's girlfriend, and they'd been together for nearly a year now. Of all Nova's partners, Ash had been the one who I clicked best with. She worked in a PR firm and was the antithesis of the introverted Nova. She pushed Nova to get out, because if Nova had it her way, she'd sit in her studio forever. Ash had also helped Nova and me with branding our partnership and getting us on the social media map.

"Frustrated," Nova admitted. "Speaking of frustrations. How are things with you on the *losing my virginity* front?"

I turned my horse around and we trotted back toward the main house.

"You know it didn't work out with Gordon and since then...I just have met no one who makes my lady parts sing. And now because the universe hates me I have to arrange this charity auction slash corporate retreat thing for his company. I so want to hand it over to someone else. But I'm also dying to see him again, so I won't. Am I a moron?"

"Yes, but you're so good at it and look cute doing it."

"Ha. With friends like you," I snorted.

Nova laughed and then bit her bottom lip. “Ah...speaking of Gordon Mackenzie, I found something out.”

I glanced over with raised eyebrows. “What?”

“He apparently had an affair with my mother, Valerie, a while back...long while back,” she confessed, rushing through the words.

“What? No way!” I said on a laugh.

Nova joined in. “I know, it’s like something out of a...”

“Telenovela?” I suggested.

“No kidding! You and my mother lusting after the same man.”

“Seriously! Our social circle is so small, the overlaps are comical,” I grinned. “But I did some research and got a few things out of Raya as well.”

“Share,” Nova urged.

“Apparently, Gordon and his ex-wife, a European model slash actor slash socialite called Pilar, had a *very* nasty public divorce. She cheated on him... you’ll love this, with her yoga instructor.”

Nova burst out laughing. “How totally LA is that?”

I kept the reins loose on Stormy though I knew she’d have liked a gallop. *Another time, Stormy Girl.* Nova was not an experienced rider, and I didn’t want to pressure her as she became comfortable with a horse. Also, her horse, Amber Joy, would not gallop no matter how much you kicked her. She did what she felt like.

“The tabloids had plastered their pages with grainy photos of Gordon’s wife *flagrante delicto* with this yoga instructor. Gordon filed for divorce. She publicly apologized and made her case to Gordon to take her back, which he didn’t respond to. Then she said he used beat her. Then she said he had kinky sexual habits.”

“No shit.” Nova rolled her eyes. “This is so fucking Los Angeles. Everyone

has kinky sexual habits. Any clue what they were?”

“She may have mentioned a *ménage à trois*,” I said *sottevoce*.

“Wow,” Nova was now impressed. “I mean, he looks hot, I guess he’d not have a problem getting a third to join in the festivities. Would you like to have a threesome?”

“Let me first have a twosome,” I replied dryly, “and then we can work up to extra dicks or chicks.”

“Knowing his reputation, he probably shut her down.”

Gordon’s reputation, I’d learnt from cyberstalking the hell out of him, was that he was ruthless, cold and a complete womanizer.

“The rumor is that money changed hands, NDAs were signed, and no one heard from Pilar again. She lives in *Paris*.” I said Paris the French way.

“Of course, she’d live in *Paris*.”

We both burst out laughing.



Chapter 10

★ GORDON

Even before I walked into the Golden Valley Resort’s grand lobby I knew I was fucked. How was I going to keep my hands off of Isadora if she was here?

The resort lived up to its reputation. The high ceilings were garlanded with ornate wooden beams, while large windows offered a generous view of the snow-laden Sierra mountains. Everywhere I looked, the delicate balance between luxury and nature was evident. Christmas was not vulgar here...but subtle and not bleeding pine cones and mistletoes. Undeniably Isadora. How did I know that, I wondered since I’d met her a few times only. But I did. This was *her* place.

I approached the reception, my eyes briefly darting to the intricate stone fireplace that was roaring with a welcoming warmth. The soft glow reflected off the elegant glass fixtures, creating an ambiance of quiet opulence. I was lost in these details when a familiar voice reached my ears.

“Gordon! Welcome.”

Turning, I saw Isadora, her radiant smile slightly muted, but her presence just as captivating as I remembered. There was an unmistakable energy that always seemed to surround her, but today, there was a difference—a certain reservation that I hadn't seen before.

“Isadora,” I greeted, attempting to keep my tone casual, but the underlying tension was palpable. I debated whether to lean down to kiss her cheek but decided against it. The vanilla and spice scent of hers had already made its way to my cock, and I didn't need to encourage it. “The resort is incredible.”

She offered a small smile, her eyes searching mine momentarily. “Wait till you see the rooms! But thank you. The team and I have put in a lot of effort. I hope your customers will love it here.”

As she spoke, I couldn't help but notice the subtle changes in her demeanor. Gone was the playful flirtation that always laced our interactions. In its place was a professional and somewhat distant air. My mind replayed our last conversation, and a pang of regret hit me. I'd told her it could never be, that our worlds were too different. But now, seeing her so distant, it wasn't relief I felt. Instead, disappointment clouded my thoughts.

“You're here a day early,” she remarked, bringing me back to the moment.

“Yes, I wanted to get a feel of the place,” I explained, my voice betraying a hint of the unease I felt. *I'm here early because I couldn't stay away. Because I wanted to see you.*

She nodded, her gaze briefly dropping to the polished wooden floor before meeting mine again. “Of course. Mila is in the ballroom and I'm meeting with her after lunch. Have you eaten?”

I shook my head. She wasn't looking at me as she spoke. She was looking everywhere but at me.

She waved a hand. “Rizwan, I need a favor.”

A young man in a suit came up to her. “What can I do for your highness?”

She smirked and the Isadora I knew was back. The playful one who lit up a room. So, it was I who had dimmed her sparkle.

“Can you take Mr. Mackenzie here to the ballroom? Mila is there. *And...*” she looked at me, “Would you like lunch at the restaurant? I think you’ll like it.”

“I’ll leave that up to Mila,” I said absently, not liking how remote she’d become. No, I didn’t like it at all. *Son of a bitch, I was a crazy mother fucker who was panting after the forbidden fruit.*

“Excellent. Thanks, Rizwan. Gordon, I’ll see you in a little while.”

For a split second, our eyes locked, and the air seemed to grow heavy with unsaid words and lingering emotions. The undeniable chemistry between us was still there, still as potent, but now weighed down because of me.

“Thank you.” My throat feeling inexplicably tight.

With a last nod, she turned, leaving me at the reception to check in. Maybe I should just give in to this craving for Isadora. But maybe she didn’t want me anymore. The way she’d talked to me was not the way she used to. Maybe she’d gotten over me. Moved on. As someone as young as her would.

“Mr. Mackenzie, we’ll get your bags to your room.” Rizwan’s voice pulled me from my musings. I turned to see him giving me a polite smile, his professional demeanor evident.

“Thanks.” I left my suitcase and suit bag at reception but picked up my backpack.

“If you’re ready, I can escort you to the ballroom.”

“Of course.” I made an effort to shift my thoughts to the event at hand and away from the perplexing emotions that Isadora stirred in me.

We made our way through the intricately decorated hallways of the resort

where the holiday season was subtle but evident. It wasn't until we reached the grand doors of the ballroom that I fully appreciated the resort. The room was vast, with tall ceilings draped in twinkling fairy lights, lending a soft glow to the elegant space. Large windows framed the breathtaking snowy mountains outside, adding to the room's ethereal charm.

"This is something else," I murmured.

"Yeah," Rizwan agreed. "I love it here."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Here just for four months but I was with Isadora at the Golden Valley Inn. When she asked if I'd like to head up events here, I couldn't say no." I looked at him then, "Yeah?"

Rizwan chuckled. "Yeah. Isa is amazing to work with. She has an eye for detail that's unparalleled—and I love working at Golden Valley. I've worked in other hotels and chains but...here I feel like my boss actually cares about me and not just occupancy and F&B numbers."

I noted the genuine admiration in his eyes. Isadora wasn't just good at what she did; she inspired respect and loyalty in those she worked with. I'd mistakenly perceived her as a young ingenue, but she was a leader, running a thriving business.

Rizwan continued, "And that sets Isa apart, you know. Her genuine care for her team. Everyone loves working for her."

I had no doubt!

We reached Mila, who was deeply engrossed in looking through what looked like the table seating for the Christmas dinner that would close the customer event.

"Gordon." Mila looked up and smiled. "I'm so glad you're here. You're going to love everything. I have *never* and I mean never worked with a

meetings and events team that is so...*good*. Rizwan, you're a gem."

Rizwan blushed. "Thanks, Mila. Nice meeting you, Mr. Mackenzie. We'll make sure your customer event is successful."

As Mila continued to praise Golden Valley and Isadora's team, I realized that my initial assessment of her had been far from accurate. She was more than just a charming face and the Santos *baby*. And as Mila explained all the ins and outs of the customer event, I couldn't help but wonder about the many layers to Isadora that I had yet to discover.

And I wanted to discover those layers, desperately.

Mila and I had lunch at Château Ridge, the Golden Valley Resort's French-American restaurant. The ambiance was an exquisite blend of a French chateau's elegance with the rustic charm of an American ski lodge. Tall, timber beams crisscrossed above us, while plush seating, fine crystal, and ornate chandeliers added a touch of European finesse.

The wine list was extensive, boasting selections from old world vineyards and new world gems. However, what caught my attention were the warm alcoholic cocktails designed specifically to invigorate chilled skiers.

As we settled into our seats, Isadora joined us, opting only for a cup of coffee. Her demeanor was all business, a sharp contrast to the playful Isadora I was used to.

"For those who don't ski, how do we intend to keep them engaged?" I asked, glancing over the menu.

Isa responded promptly, her tone professional, "There's a variety of spa programs and treatments available. Also, for those interested, we've organized tours around the resort and some winter activities like snowshoeing and sleigh rides."

Mila, always observant, chimed in, "And we'll need to make sure those

activities don't clash with the evening programs."

Isadora nodded. "Absolutely. The Christmas celebration will be hosted at our events space, Everest Viewpoint, which offers a panoramic view of the Sierra peaks. It's an experience."

As we talked, I felt an undeniable attraction growing between us. Isadora was clearly skilled and capable, handling complex tasks with ease. But beneath her professional exterior, I caught glimpses of the captivating woman who had first caught my eye. Her quick wit and infectious laugh drew me in. I found myself longing to uncover more of the warm, vibrant spirit that lay just below the surface.

Noticing my distraction, Mila nudged me. "Gordon, any preferences for the warm cocktails? The Cinnamon Slope is supposed to be a skier's delight."

Shaking off my reverie, I replied, "I have no opinion, you decide." I didn't usually get involved such details and Mila knew it but, as always, kept wanting me to have an opinion. "And I also have no opinion on the fucking menu," I warned her.

Mila made a face. "I wish he'd get involved, you know."

"He's a CEO." Isadora murmured looking through her iPad, studiously avoiding me. "He has us to take care of the details. My brother is the same."

"Okay, fine, we'll have the fucking Cinnamon Slope," I interjected in good humor.

Mila laughed but Isadora didn't.

"For those who are skiing, we need a light but nourishing menu. Can't have them feeling too heavy on the slopes," Isadora continued as if I hadn't just cracked a lame joke. If I was the fucking CEO, didn't she know it was in her best interest to laugh at my jokes? Obviously not, so I poked her.

I raised an eyebrow, challenging her, "And if they prefer a hearty meal?"

Without missing a beat, she shot back, “Then we adjust. We have a variety in menu options.”

Mila smiled. “She’s good, isn’t she?”

“The *very* best,” I whispered, and finally, got a reaction. Isadora looked to me, and I finally saw what I had seen before, lust. I felt triumphant. She still wanted me.

Mila’s phone buzzed, drawing her attention. “I need to take this call. Excuse me.” She walked out to the open patio of the restaurant, leaving Isadora and me in a temporary silence.

Taking a sip of my wine, I let the flavors linger before addressing the palpable tension between us.

“You seem off today, Isadora. Not your usual fiery self.”

She hesitated, eyes fixed on her coffee. “Just focused on making your event perfect,” she replied evenly.

I leaned in slightly. “Wasn’t always this way between us. What’s changed?”

She met my gaze, those captivating eyes piercing me.

I put my hand on hers. She inhaled sharply. “Don’t do this. You made your stance clear before.”

Because I was a bloody idiot.

I smirked, trying to provoke her. “Is that all then? You lost that spark I admired so much?”

She paused, and for a moment, my Isadora broke through. “Let’s get one thing straight. I’m still plenty attracted to you. But you shut that door. And I’m not eager to face rejection again.”

I sat back, stunned. I pulled my hand back quickly.

“There we go again,” she said smugly.

I hadn't expected such candor. Regret clawed at me. The walls between us now seemed the very things keeping us apart. But her honesty, her vulnerability mixed with resilience, drew me in further.

"Didn't think you'd be so direct," I admitted.

She leaned back, smirking. "Sometimes it's best to lay the cards out. Keeps things interesting, and no one ends up being disappointed."

Before I could respond, Mila returned, oblivious to our tense exchange. "Sorry about that," she breezed in.

Isadora's guard snapped back up as we resumed talk of the event. But a new awareness hung between us, one I aimed to take advantage of.

To what end though, Gordon?

No bloody idea.

But to not see that light in her eyes when I was near, the light that told me she wanted me too, well that was unacceptable. Worse even, it stung somewhere deep.



Chapter 11

★ ISADORA

He was being an ass. *A big...well-muscled, toned, handsome ass.*

The tension in the restaurant had been too much. Gordon's presence, our conversation, the palpable emotions—it was overwhelming. To find a respite from the brewing storm inside me, I took a swim in the middle of the night. At the Golden Valley Resort, the heated outdoor pool was an oasis; and I knew would be empty. There weren't a lot of weirdos who went swimming outdoors at one in the morning in December in the Sierra Nevada's.

The contrast between the heat of the pool and the cold fresh air was stunning. Surrounded by snow-covered grounds, the pool emanated a gentle, inviting warmth. As I descended the steps into the water, a comforting heat enveloped me, shielding me from the crisp winter air. The pool's surface mirrored the overcast sky, occasionally disrupted by the soft fall of snowflakes. To one side, the snowy Sierra peaks stood majestic and unwavering, while on the other, the elegant façade of the resort, dotted with twinkling lights, watched over me.

Swimming had always been my solace. The rhythm of the strokes, the sensation of the water embracing me—it allowed me escape. I took a deep breath and pushed off the wall, letting the water engulf me.

It wasn't like me to be so affected. My life was typically devoid of such conflicts. Everything I wanted, I worked for and achieved; and I thrived in an environment of harmony and control. But, with Gordon, the rules changed. Our interactions were like a dance—one step forward, two steps back, a spin into uncertainty.

By the time I reached my twentieth lap, my limbs felt heavy, my lungs overworked. Yet, the turmoil in my mind hadn't ceased. Why did he have this hold over me?

Emerging from the pool, the cold air was a shock against my heated skin. I wrapped myself in a towel, gazing at the serene landscape around me. The juxtaposition was not lost on me—a peaceful, snow-laden paradise outside, but a storm raging within.

I wished, in that moment, for the clarity and tranquility that the Sierra peaks seemed to hold. My thoughts were in tumult, so much so that I almost missed the figure approaching the pool area.

It was Gordon. Of course, it was, because the universe was a total bitch.

He looked different in the dim light, more vulnerable, his features softened. His eyes locked onto mine, carrying a weight and intensity that sent a shiver down my spine—one that had nothing to do with the cold.

He was in a Golden Valley Resort robe, and he looked at me like a hungry wolf. I had worn a one piece, designed for swimming not seducing.

I looked at him and the cold was replaced by the heat his warmth generated. A part of me wanted to go back inside the pool, hide, instead I walked to the heated jacuzzi, ignoring Gordon.

Fuck him! He didn't want me, so be it. No, I corrected myself, I knew he wanted me, but he didn't *want* to want me. Why did men have to complicate things?

"I couldn't sleep," he admitted, his voice gravelly. His green eyes skimming over my body.

I wrapped the towel around me, acutely aware of my wet hair and the droplets of water sliding down my skin. "Seems we have that in common."

He paused a few feet from me, his gaze drifting to the steam rising from the pool, the snow around, and then back to me. "This place, at night, with the snow... it's enchanting."

"It is," I replied. But the moment wasn't about the beauty of the resort. It was about the tension between us, the questions unanswered, the feelings unexpressed. "Excuse me."

Every fiber of my being told me to leave, to retreat from this charged encounter. But I wasn't ready to walk away. Not yet. Not when there was so much unsaid, so much unresolved. Instead of leaving, I moved towards the bubbling jacuzzi next to the pool.

I glanced at Gordon, a challenge clear in my eyes. "Care to join me?" I asked, as I slowly slipped into the welcoming warmth of the water, the steam enveloping me in a soft mist.

He seemed taken aback by the invitation, his eyes darkening, lingering on the silhouette of my figure in the water. "Isadora..."

I cut him off, not wanting to hear any excuses or more confusion. "Just join me, Gordon. No talking, no analyzing. Just be here with me."

For a few moments, there was hesitation in his demeanor. But then, as if making an internal decision, he approached. He removed his robe and threw

it on the floor. I gasped. He wore black swim trunks. This was the first time I'd seen him...almost naked, and he was, well, potent.

He watched me as he carefully stepped into the jacuzzi. The water shifted around us, its gentle turbulence echoing the chaos of our emotions.

I stayed away from him, now unsure. Bold Isadora was afraid of rejection. I couldn't stand it if he pushed me away again. He moved closer to me, close enough to feel the warmth of his body contrasting with the heated water. My heart raced, and I could hear my heartbeat pulse in my chest, as our faces were mere inches apart.

"I want you to admit it," I whispered, my voice almost lost amidst the sounds of the bubbling water. "Admit that you want me. That this tension, this pull between us, isn't just in my head."

Gordon's eyes held a storm of emotions. Desire, fear, uncertainty. But it was the raw longing that made me hold my breath in anticipation.

"I've wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you. But wanting and having are two different things."

I moved even closer, my lips brushing against his. "Then maybe it's time you stop overthinking and start feeling."

Our surroundings blurred, the snowy peaks, the steam, the resort lights—all faded away. In that heated jacuzzi, amidst the cold of winter, two souls tried to find their way to each other, navigating the whirlpool of emotions that threatened to consume them.

He *trembled* as my lips grazed his. He *actually* trembled. The power I felt gave me courage. I put my hands on his shoulders and let my body float towards his.

Every instinct told he'd me give in, get lost in my embrace and leave the doubts behind. I wanted him to let desire overrule reason. He put his hands

on my wrists, and I thought he'd move them away, push me away.

“Isadora,” he murmured. “I want this. I want us. But if we do this—“

“Do what?” I couldn't look away from his mouth, the sensuous curve of it. I'd never and I mean never wanted a man so much. It rattled me, made me crazy. I blinked back tears, and something moved in his eyes.

His hands moved, and they were on my hips as he pulled me close, slammed his hips into mine. I moaned as I felt him hard against me.

“I want you,” he muttered, his mouth on my throat. “I want you so *fecking* much, and you don't make it easy, do you?”

His Scottish accent was stronger and his hands on my hips were like vices. I loved it.

“You want me to make it easy?” I challenged him.

He looked into my eyes and his mouth closed on mine. We both groaned as we tasted each other. It was a relief, breaking through the tension building for months.

I pressed against him, my hands on his back, sliding under his trunks to cup his firm ass. The steam from the jacuzzi continued to swirl around us as we stood on the precipice of a new beginning.

His hands moved to my shoulders, and he slipped the swimsuit off until it floated around me at my waist. He stared at my breasts like this was the first time he'd ever seen tits. Well, it was the first time he was seeing mine. I felt self-conscious. There had been a few boys but...this was the...*oh my god!*

He sucked a nipple into his mouth. My hands instinctively moved to tangle in his hair, bring him closer. No one had done this to me. My nipples were sensitive. I knew that. Stimulating them while I used a vibrator was how I orgasmed—but to have his wet mouth over my cold breasts was delicious.

His mouth moved to my other breast while he used a hand to squeeze the

one he'd just anointed.

"You taste like fucking vanilla," he growled.

Vanilla? Oh no, no, no. I wasn't vanilla. I was...*fuck*...I was devolving with this man.

"I want you naked," he muttered as if to himself and yanked my swim suit down, down, down.

He looked at me half submerged in the water and just stared at my pussy. I had to hold on to his shoulders for balance both because of the water and the intensity with which he was looking at me.

"You're beautiful, *mo leannan*." The Scottish was stronger in his voice, and I trembled. "Are you cold?"

I shook my head. "Do something." The words spilled out of me. I felt like I was on some edge and he, only he could...what?

He watched his hand cup me and my knees gave away. He held me with one hand. "Stay with me, *m'eudail*. And let me. God...you're soft."

One finger went inside me, and I felt the world float away. Nothing mattered but this inexorable feeling of fullness, pressure, and mind blowing pleasure.

"Gordon," my voice sounded faraway and not my own.

"Yes, baby. You want to come for me."

I didn't know. I couldn't think. I could only feel. His fingers found my clitoris and stroked, alternated between pumping in and out of me and stroking me. It was like a complicated dance and...then he put two fingers inside me, the pressure was too much, and I exploded.

I collapsed, and he held me, brought me closer, and let my head rest on his shoulder. My hips floated against his, brushed against him and he groaned whenever that happened, but he didn't let me go.

I raised my head to look at him. His eyes were dark, and I'd never seen him look this intense.

"If I say that was amazing will you call me inexperienced again?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I nearly came in my trunks watching you come. It was fucking amazing."

I smiled. My hands brushed against him, and he closed his eyes. "Pull me out," he ordered.

I liked how his voice became throaty when he was aroused, how...well dominating he was. I was twenty-four years old, and I'd wanted to have sex and I'd thought about how I'd have it and with whom. This was better than any fantasy I'd created.

I pulled him out and he leaned back against the jacuzzi wall, his eyes closed as if he was catching his breath. I'd watched porn, sure, but this was my first time touching a penis. It was both exhilarating and intimidating at the same time. I didn't want to disappoint him. I also didn't want to pretend I knew what I was doing when I had no fucking idea.

"Gordon." I stroked him gently.

He opened his eyes and smiled at me. "Yes, baby."

I licked my lips, and he stared at my mouth. "You have the most sexy fucking lips. I want to see them wrapped around my cock."

Right!

"I...I've done none of this before," I admitted while I continued to jerk him off the best I could figure out from what I'd seen a big-busted porn star to do a well-hung man. This was going to be a disaster. I just knew it.

His eyes narrowed, and he put his hand on mine to still it. "You've never given a hand job? A blow job. Or have you never had sex?"

I grinned sheepishly. "I love multiple choice. All the above."

He swallowed, and I was sure he was about to bolt. A man as sophisticated as Gordon would not want to have anything to do with a virgin, would he? Of course not. He wanted some woman called Pilar who probably knew how to suck him off. I...did not know.

He moved my hand on his cock. "You want to learn."

I nodded eagerly.



Chapter 12

★ GORDON

*F*uck mi gu ifrinn ! Fuck me to hell. I liked that she was a virgin. Yeah, me the worldly sophisticated old asshole wanted to have sex with the virginal Ms. Santos who came so beautifully that it was better than any sex I'd ever had.

“Harder, baby.” I didn't look away from her and didn't let her avert her eyes. I wanted to come while she watched me. I wanted to come on her hands. And then I wanted to make her kneel in front of me and come in her mouth.

“Like this?” She was breathing like she'd just run a mile without stopping and her lips were parted in arousal.

“Like that.” I groaned, feeling my orgasm build deep within me. I was shaking, my thighs trembling as she pumped harder and faster. “I'm going to come, baby.”

She looked down at my dick and I think it grew a couple inches because how could it not? She was watching me like I was a fucking Michael Angelo sculpture (better hung though).

“You want to see me come, Isadora?” I wanted her eyes back on me. I wanted to see her face when I erupted in her hands.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Then look at me,” I demanded, the words having trouble getting through me because her hand was now giving me an expert level hand job.

I came hard, and her eyes went down to see me release under the jacuzzi water. She stroked the tip of my penis as I continued to twitch because of the force of my orgasm.

I pulled her into me, holding her, wanting to smell her, feel her. “Fuck, baby.”

“Was it okay?”

I looked at her and kissed her mouth first a flutter and then because I couldn't help myself, I sank into her. “It was better than okay, *m'eudail*. It was...amazing!”

She blushed, and I sank further into her spell.

“It's getting cold, let's get you out of here.”

She looked at me like in a trance. She was about to say something when I kissed her again. “Come to my suite. We'll talk. I promise.”

“I need something warm.” Her teeth chattered once we stepped out of the jacuzzi. I wrapped her in my robe.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I'm Scottish, baby. We have thick blood. Go inside. I'll be with you. You know my suite?”

She nodded.

“The key is in the robe pocket. Now, go.”

I didn't want anyone in her staff to see me with her. Already I may have compromised her by making out with her, like a randy fucking teenager, in an

outdoor pool in a resort she owned and managed.

But I couldn't muster regret. Not really.

My suite door was unlocked when I walked in, wrapped in her scent, in her towel. The suite was empty, and my heart skipped a beat. Had she changed her mind?

Then I heard the shower and felt relief course through me. She was still here.

I tiptoed into the bathroom, the sound of running water filling the tiled space. Steam billowed up from behind the frosted glass shower door. I could make out her silhouette, curves and angles shifting as she washed.

I shed the towel and opened the door. She turned, eyes bright, lips curving into a smile.

"Couldn't stay away?" she asked, holding out a hand.

I took it, stepping under the hot spray with her. "No," I murmured, and brought her wet body against mine. We kissed deeply, hungrily, as if we'd been apart for years rather than minutes.

My hands slid over her slick skin, relearning every dip and swell. She sighed into my mouth, nipping at my lower lip, nails raking down my back. I groaned and lifted her, pressing her against the shower wall. Her legs wrapped around my waist.

We moved together, gasping and moaning, lost in sensation. Here, behind closed doors, we could be free. All that existed was passion and connection. A stolen moment in time, where consequences didn't touch us.

"Come inside," she whispered.

I rubbed myself against her slick heat. "Not tonight, baby."

"Why?" she whined.

And I had to smile. "Because it's your first time and I sure for hell will not

bang you against a bathroom wall. You deserve better.”

She pouted, and I kissed her lips. “I deserve this now.” She should sound like a spoilt child instead she sounded like a confident fucking queen.

“I know, baby. But we’re not going to rush this.”

“I knew it.” She slid her legs down and tried to push me.

“Knew what?” I didn’t let her move and instead, hoisted her so she was back where she’d been, rubbing her heat against my cock.

“Gordon.”

“Knew what?” I insisted and kissed her nose. “Tell me, *m’eudail*.”

“You’re pushing me away. You...are so...*argh!*“ She cried out, and I pushed against her cleft.

“Does this feel like I’m pushing you away?”

“I don’t know,” she sulked.

“Isadora, I want to fuck you very hard. I *am* going to fuck you very hard.”

“When?”

I laughed at her innocence, her freshness, her brightness. “Soon. I can’t wait much longer but not tonight, baby. I want to...savor. I want to give you an amazing first time. The state I’m in, I’m going to be a fucking bull.”

She wrapped herself around me. “Can I change your mind?”

“In a fucking heartbeat, baby but I’d rather you didn’t. I want to give you... let me give you...”

“Give me what?”

“Fireworks,” I whispered.

“Well, isn’t someone ambitious,” she mocked.

I carried her out of the bathroom and set her down, dripping onto the hardwood floor. I wrapped her in a towel and dried her.

“Get into bed. I’ll join you once I’m done with my shower.”

“And rubbing one off?” she enquired.

I was a sexually experienced forty-two-year-old man. *I did not blush.* I repeat, *I did not blush.*

“Go to bed.”

“Can I watch?” she asked, her eyes full of humor. She was back. The Isadora who flirted with me was back and the relief was so intense that I was nearly on my knees. Until I’d lost that look in her eyes, I didn’t realize how much I wanted it, how much I relied upon it to feel...to feel, period.

“You want to watch, baby?”

She nodded.

I walked back into the shower, and she followed me, wrapped in a towel. I looked at her as I turned the knob and stood under the cascading water. I watched her as I stroked myself, first gently and then harder. It was erotic to see her stand there, squirm because what I was doing to myself was arousing her.

I tugged and pumped, and this time I didn’t have to imagine her. She was right here.

She took a step toward the shower, dropping the towel so she was naked. I stopped masturbating and shook my head. “Stay out there where I can see you.”

She nodded and took a step back. She held both her breasts in her hands, and I groaned.

“Squeeze your nipples,” I ordered, my eyes focused on her hands and her gorgeous tits.

She did as I asked and my movements became harder, jerkier. I wanted to come, but I also didn’t. I wanted to prolong this.

“Are you wet?”

She nodded.

“Show me.”

She lowered her eyes, suddenly shy and that contradiction from the confident woman who was just teasing me was erotic has fuck.

“Show me, Isadora,” I said sternly.

She didn't look at me when she dipped a finger inside her. That's all it took. I came, sputtering in the shower, a scream leaving my throat, leaving me hoarse and spent.

She came up to me then and touched my twitching penis. She took some cum that was on the tip on her finger and brought it to her mouth. I groaned. Fuck she was uncomplicatedly sensuous.

“You like that?”

She shrugged. “I'm not sure.”

I grinned. She was a delight.

“But I'm sure I'll find out in due course. You said you wanted to see my lips around your cock.”

“Get out of here, Isadora. If we continue this, I'm going to have carpal tunnel and a sore dick.”

She laughed, the laugh of a siren as she picked up body lotion from the bathroom counter and walked out.

She smelled of lemon grass and vanilla. Her skin was soft and silky, she'd applied lotion all over her body and as I held her close in bed, her heart beating against my chest, I knew this couldn't last forever. But I would remember, the heat, the urgency, the pure, unfettered bliss. This woman, however briefly, was mine.



Chapter 13

★ ISADORA

The ballroom was abuzz with chatter and anticipation, elegantly dressed guests milling around with wine glasses in hand, eagerly awaiting the evening's highlight. Golden chandeliers hung gracefully from the ceiling, casting a warm, ambient glow on the fifty SynthoSoft customers and their plus ones, as well as several of the company's employees. Every face in the room reflected a sense of respect and admiration, all awaiting Gordon's address to start off the customer event.

Raya came up to me and gave me a hug. "This looks great."

"Thanks for sending business my way."

"Our pleasure." She slid her arm into mine and lowered her voice, "Before I forget, Maria wanted to check if you had a free room *and* physical therapy available until Christmas."

I froze. "Who's hurt?"

"Drago," she breathed.

I met the LAPD homicide detective at Raya's place. "What happened?"

“There was an incident with a suspect, and he twisted his ankle, badly. He’s being a miserable shit and Maria is traveling for work before the holidays and she wanted him taken care of. He’s at their place right now, ready to go back to LA and drown in whiskey alone.”

“Yes. Of course. Anything. I’ll take care of it and make sure we have some physical therapy for his ankle at our spa.” I texted Maria quickly on my phone saying as much.

“Thanks.” Raya gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Got to go, boss is going to speak soon.”

My eyes immediately drifted towards Gordon. He stood slightly off-center, deep in conversation with a striking blonde woman. Tall and elegant, her every gesture exuded confidence, and she seemed to command Gordon’s attention entirely. I felt a twinge of something—was it jealousy? Curiosity?

Turning to Mila, who has just slid next to me, I inquired subtly, “Who’s the blonde Gordon’s with?”

Mila followed my gaze and smirked, “Ah, that’s Adel Kovács. She’s here for some extended meetings post the Christmas party, that’s why we needed a meeting room for two extra days. She’s trying to close a significant deal with Gordon.”

I watched them a little more closely now, noticing how animated Adel was in her gestures, her eyes fixed intently on Gordon’s. She seemed persuasive, and yet Gordon looked... irritated? It was unlike him to show visible signs of annoyance, especially in a setting like this.

“Looks like the negotiations aren’t going too smoothly,” Mila commented, echoing my thoughts.

“Hmm,” I said noncommittally.

As the moments ticked by, Adel seemed to make some emphatic point, her

voice, though not discernible over the general hubbub, carried a tone of urgency. Gordon, however, looked increasingly unimpressed. He glanced towards the stage, probably eager to start his presentation and escape the conversation.

I couldn't help but wonder about their relationship. Was it purely professional, or was there a more personal undertone to their interaction?

"They used to be lovers," Mila whispered. "But then Gordon has probably slept with all of Los Angeles."

There was heat in her words that surprised me. She usually behaved like she adored her boss. She looked at me and sighed. "That came out wrong. But look at him. He's...my boss but I have eyes and he's handsome as sin."

No kidding! And you should see him without clothes.

I had positioned strategically to the side, and Mila and I shared a vantage point that offered a clear view of both the stage and the gathering. As Gordon stepped onto the platform, the room quieted instantly. He stood there for a heartbeat, allowing the room to settle, his deep-set eyes scanning the audience, taking every single person in. The air grew dense with an almost palpable respect and reverence for the man who had led SynthoSoft to such heights.

"He truly is a remarkable leader," Mila breathed, her eyes focused intently on her boss. "You know, this growth we've experienced? Much of it is his vision, his dedication. He has a way of rallying everyone around a shared dream."

I nodded. It was clear from Mila's tone that she held immense respect for Gordon, and perhaps even a closeness that extended beyond a mere professional relationship. That realization stirred an unexpected pang of jealousy within me. Here was a woman who had daily access to Gordon, who

understood his professional side intimately, who had perhaps shared more moments with him than I had.

“Seems like you two are close,” I commented, trying to keep my voice casual.

Mila looked at me, her smile enigmatic. “He’s been more than a boss to me. A mentor, a guide. But,” she paused, her gaze sharpening slightly, “it’s strictly professional. I respect the boundaries.”

I took a deep breath, chastising myself for letting jealousy rear its head. “Even though he’s handsome as sin,” I teased, keeping my emotions at bay. *Stop being silly, Isa!* The man walked the earth before he met me so I couldn’t get my panties in a twist every time we came across an ex-lover...or current. We weren’t exclusive. We shared a dalliance. *And we’d slept together.* It had been the first time I had fallen asleep and woken up to a man. My heart raced as I remembered the casual good morning kiss, the sharing of breakfast, the *have a nice day, baby.*

When he spoke, his voice, deep and resonant, filled the vast expanse of the ballroom effortlessly. “Evening, everyone. Today, as I stand here before all of you, our esteemed customers, dedicated employees, and invaluable partners, I’m reminded of the very essence of SynthoSoft.”

His presentation style was unique. Instead of inundating us with figures and charts, Gordon wove a narrative, taking us on a journey through the company’s challenges, innovations, and victories. He spoke of the late nights, the brainstorming sessions, the moments of doubt, and the subsequent breakthroughs.

A ripple of whispers moved through the crowd, a mix of awe and admiration. He had this remarkable ability to make everyone feel as though they were part of the story, part of the journey.

“At the start of this year,” he continued, “we set out with a vision, a dream, if you will. A dream of growth, of expanding our horizons and pushing the boundaries of what we believed was possible. Today, I’m elated to share that we’ve seen an unprecedented thirty percent growth.”

Mila chuckled softly, “Isn’t he something?”

“Something,” I murmured, feeling exposed.

Gordon’s demeanor exuded confidence, but it wasn’t the overbearing, intimidating kind. It was the confidence of a leader who knew his worth, who respected his team, and who acknowledged the collective effort behind every achievement. Every so often, his gaze would sweep the room and, once, our eyes met. A spark of recognition, a fleeting moment, and then he continued. My heart beat faster. One look and I was a simpering fool, ready to twirl my hair and say something stupid like, “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Mental head slap. Come back to reality, Isadora Santos. NOW!

“As we stand on the cusp of another year,” he said, wrapping up, “I want to express my profound gratitude. To our customers, for your unwavering trust. To our employees, for your relentless dedication. Together, we have crafted a legacy, and together, we will continue to scale greater heights. Happy Holidays, everyone.”

The ballroom erupted into applause. The genuine warmth and respect for Gordon was undeniable. And as I clapped along with everyone else, I felt a surge of pride, not just for what SynthoSoft had achieved, but for the man who stood at its helm, steering it toward a brighter future.

As Gordon stepped away from the podium, Mila gracefully took the stage.

“Hello, everyone!” Mila greeted with a brilliant smile, her voice confident and warm. “We have an exciting afternoon and night planned for all of you, a blend of adventure, relaxation, and, of course, celebration.”

She gestured to the screen behind her, where an elegant slideshow began. “For the adrenaline junkies among us,” Mila began with a playful wink, “we have skiing expeditions planned, split into three groups—beginners, intermediates, and advanced. The resort’s ski instructors will guide each group, ensuring both safety and thrill.”

A series of breathtaking images showcased skiers gracefully descending the powdery slopes of the Sierra peaks, eliciting murmurs of excitement from the audience. The anticipation in the room was palpable.

“For those looking for some pampering,” she continued, shifting gears seamlessly, “Golden Valley Resort boasts a world-class spa. We’ve arranged sessions that include hot stone massages, alpine herb-infused facials, and a unique snow sauna experience.”

A serene image of a beautifully designed spa room filled the screen, complete with candlelight, soft towels, and a peaceful ambiance. I could already hear murmurs of guests deciding which treatments they’d opt for.

“And that’s not all! For those interested in something different,” Mila added with an air of mystery, “we have ice sculpting classes, snowshoeing expeditions through the forest, and even a special winter photography workshop capturing the breathtaking landscapes around.”

The audience seemed thrilled with the options, a buzz of excitement filling the room. I silently debated between the photography workshop and the spa—both sounded equally enticing.

“And now, for the pièce de résistance,” Mila said with a dramatic flair that elicited chuckles. “Tonight, we’ve arranged our annual Christmas dinner at Everest Point.” A stunning image filled the screen—a beautifully set table against a backdrop of twinkling stars and snow-capped mountains. “It’s an

experience that promises not only gastronomic delight but also unparalleled views of the Sierra skyline.”

The murmurs grew louder, guests turning to their neighbors, already abuzz with excitement about the dining experience at such a unique location.

Wrapping up, Mila added, “The following day is a free day, giving everyone the chance to explore or relax at their own pace before you head home. Golden Valley has ensured a late checkout for everyone at one p.m.”

The ovation that followed was enthusiastic.

Mila came back and grinned. “Did I do okay?”

“Fabulous,” I assured her.

A man came up to us then. A big bald man in a well-fitted suit, which somehow looked inappropriate on him. “Mila, we need a conference room *now*. D’Mello, Adel, Gordon, Raya, Jeff Hephner, and I will be meeting.”

Mila looked at me and I nodded.

“I believe the Alpine Alcove is empty. Let me set that up for you. It’s also the same meeting room that I booked for your meeting tomorrow after the guests leave. Would you need lunch or coffee service?”

The man looked at me and narrowed his eyes. “Isadora Santos?”

“Yes.” I extended my hand.

“Cyrus Allen. I’m G’s lawyer.”

“SynthoSoft’s general counsel,” Mila corrected.

“Mostly Gordon’s lawyer.” He smiled. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Great job with the event. It’s going to be amazing. The customers are creaming their pants.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“A lawyer who hasn’t taken sexual harassment training yet,” Mila admonished.

“Cream their pants is sexual? If I was being sexual, I’d—“

“Why don’t we leave that for now,” Gordon interrupted his lawyer.
“Isadora, we need a meeting room.”

I nodded. “Alpine Alcove. It’s three doors down. I’ll make sure you have coffee and drinks there for now. And we’ll get lunch to you as well. Mila? Can you connect with Rizwan on the menu or anything else you need? He’s going to come and find you.”



Chapter 14

★ GORDON

I walked out with her and looked around to see if anyone was there and then thought, *fuck it*, and dragged her toward a door. I pulled her inside an empty meeting room.

“What?” she asked laughing.

I pushed her against a wall and kissed her. After I’d made sure there was absolutely no lipstick left on either of our lips, I raised my head. “You’ve been watching me as I present, making me so fucking hard.”

“Everyone was watching you.” She pushed her hips against mine and I groaned.

“I’ve got to get inside you and soon.”

“I’m not the one stopping you.” She was still holding her laptop against her chest and looked like a proper businesswoman in her fitted pant suit and boots with heels.

“Tonight?”

“Yes, please,” she said, licking her lips.

“I don’t have...fuck, Isadora, I’m unprepared. I have no condoms.”

She grinned. “This is a full-service hotel. I’ll take care of it.”

She made me happy I realized. Happy like a child. Happy like I hadn’t been in years. Even carefree.

“You’re the best Christmas present I’ve ever unwrapped.” I stepped away from her. If I stayed any longer, we’d be having sex on the conference table. It was a nice table and...I shook my head. This was her first time. I had to give her candles and flowers and champagne and...make it special. She’ll always remember her first time and I wanted her to remember me with love. Love? What the fuck is going on with you, Gordon? She’s eighteen fucking years younger than you? *Eighteen. Fucking. Years.*

“I’m going to go now and work.” She walked to the door and then turned back, “I’ll see you later?”

“You bet your sweet ass.” I lightly spanked her butt, and she burst out laughing before she left the meeting room.

It took me a minute to calm my raging erection before I walked out. I needed my head in the game. This would not be a pleasant meeting with Adel and Isaac. A part of me was ready to say fuck it and walk away. But the benefit to the company with this deal...aye, I couldn’t turn my back on that kind of money.

Adel was in the foyer and when she saw me, she purposefully walked up to me. “Gordon, I need a favor.”

I nodded and waited.

“Isaac is the one who’s resisting the deal. I’m all in. Whatever you want. I just want this done now.”

“We’re working on it, Adel.”

There was a desperation in her voice that I had not heard before. “For old times’ sake. Please.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, for old times’ sake. Because a long time ago we’d been lovers and friends.

“I just want this done.”

She walked away from me, confusing me more than ever.

I walked into the Alpine Alcove and found Cyrus and Raya there. I poured myself coffee and walked up to them in the conference room. “What the fuck is going on with Adel? She’s desperate to get this deal done. Have you found out why she’s liquidating her assets?”

Cyrus went palms up. “Sorry, G.”

“She’s got her apartment in New York on the market,” Raya informed me. “Daisuke said that she’s priced it to sell. She has no other assets.”

“Her place in Budapest?” Adel had a lovely home in Rózsadomb, in the Buda Hills. Her neighbor was former prime minister Bajnai. House prices in the 2nd district of Budapest were amongst the highest in Hungary.

“Sold six months ago. And we don’t know where the money went. She’s not just liquidating, she’s putting the money under her mattress or it’s in an untraceable account.”

“Adel’s done some shady shit,” Cyrus commented. “Maybe she’s being blackmailed.

Before I could reply the door opened and Isaac walked in with his lawyer Jeff. They were in a heated discussion about...it appeared Adel from the snippets we caught. Mila followed them, looking stressed.

I looked at her enquiringly and she shook her head. “Adel will be ten minutes late. She bumped into a server and...she needs to change.”

I felt uneasiness prickle through me. Something was not right with Adel, and it was something so wrong that she wouldn’t confide in me. Sure, we

were not close anymore, but she knew she could trust me. I wouldn't break her confidence or cheat her, she knew that. Didn't she?

"Let's get seated, gentlemen." Cyrus waved a hand at the chairs. "Sorry, you're missing out on skiing."

"I don't ski," Isaac murmured.

"I wanted to simply to get to know that delightful girl who was with Mila. Apparently, she's the one organizing this shindig. Who is she?"

Anger coursed through me. He was talking about *my* Isadora. My? I was losing my mind. *Aye, I was officially being ruled by my cock or as they'd say in highlands, the passions below my kilt.*

"Isadora?" Mila snorted. "Like you have a chance with her. She's a Santos, Jeff, in case you didn't know."

"Alejandro Santos's sister?" Jeff didn't seem to get the message as he sat down, considering. "She's hot."

"Can we please keep it professional?" Raya thundered and saved me from ripping him a new one. "You're talking about someone who's right now a member of the SynthoSoft team and my baby sister. Keep it civil."

Jeff made a face. "Christ, I was just—"

"Shut it," I spoke softly but sternly, and Jeff did exactly that.



Chapter 15

★ ISADORA

I was hurrying through the resort's grand foyer, usually a calm expanse of luxury, when I saw Gordon. He was talking to that blonde again, their hushed voices were rising in a crescendo of disagreement. She walked away from Gordon who she looked at for a long moment and then turned toward the meeting room the SynthoSoft team had booked.

My eyes followed Adel. Her face was flushed, her eyes alight with a mix of anger and frustration, when she turned abruptly and collided with an unsuspecting server.

Juice, a deep shade of ruby, splashed in an arc, staining Adel's crisp white blouse and the pristine marble floor. The server's face was a mask of horror, his apologies tumbling out quickly, echoing through the now silent foyer. But Adel seemed to crumble in that moment, her earlier composure shattered.

Mila had also witnessed the scene, and we rushed over, my heels clicking against the floor, keen to diffuse the situation. While Mila calmly reassured the flustered server, I tried to offer some solace to Adel. Her distress was

palpable, not merely from the spill, but from the weight of whatever had transpired between her and Gordon.

“Come with me,” I whispered gently, looping an arm around her to guide her away from the scene.

Mila, with her characteristic efficiency, spoke up, “I’ll inform the meeting about the delay. Don’t worry, Adel, it’s going to be fine.”

Navigating the corridors, I could feel Adel’s body trembling slightly, her breaths coming out in short, uneven bursts. When we reached her suite, Adel paused, taking a deep breath as if bracing herself. There seemed to be more to her distress than just a mere spill.

Once inside her suite, a fresh bouquet of scarlet roses caught our attention.

Adel reached for the accompanying card first, her fingers trembling slightly. With a sharp intake of breath, she abruptly tossed the card onto the desk and then disappeared into the bathroom.

I was thinking of leaving but curiosity got the better of me, and I picked up the discarded card. In a neat, chilling script, it read, “*Frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron.*” What the fuck was this? It meant nothing. And for some reason that I couldn’t pinpoint, it felt like a threat, but it said nothing. Also, it was cheesy, and a shiver ran up my spine.

When Adel emerged from the bathroom, donned in a plush robe, her eyes were red and swollen from tears. Gently, I guided her to the couch, pouring her a brandy from the minibar to help calm her nerves.

It was then, as she took the glass, that I noticed a burn mark on her wrist.

“Did you hurt yourself?” I tried to remember if the tray the server held also had any hot liquids. “Do we need to call a doctor?”

She shook her head and quickly pulled the sleeve of her robe over it.

“It’s old. Not new.”

I nodded, feeling helpless to make her feel better as she drank her brandy, looking miserable.

The suite was bathed in muted golden hues, a harmony of opulence and comfort. Lavish drapes framed the expansive windows, offering a breathtaking view of the snowy landscape outside. The warm wooden flooring was accentuated by plush rugs, and the furnishings whispered luxury. Despite the grandeur of the room, there was an air of palpable tension as Adel, wrapped in a plush white bathrobe, sat defeated, her distress evident in every line of her face.

“He’s screwing me over,” Adel finally burst out, tears streaming down her face, her voice raw with emotion. “I had everything in line, every detail meticulously planned, and he’s jeopardizing everything!”

She looked so vulnerable, her normally composed facade replaced by anguish and anger. “Can I do anything for you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Please go.”

I left Adel to her own devices because my phone beeped with the message that Maria was in the reception with Drago. I immediately warned the spa that I’d be bringing a twisted ankle and bad mood down to them to coddle and make feel better.

Drago hobbled into Golden Valley on crutches, brooding. Maria gave me a warning glance. It said, ‘Handle with care.’

“I hope you’re more comfortable here than at your place,” I started, trying to lighten the mood.

“His place has four stories and no working elevator, so yes,” Maria snapped.

Drago shot me a disgruntled look. “I don’t need a fancy spa or pampering, Isa. Just a place to rest. And I was resting *just fine* at home.”

Maria interjected, a note of exasperation in her voice. “Behave, Drago. I’ll be back for you before Christmas. And then you can have a very nice Golden Valley Christmas.”

“You’re ditching me in Barbie’s Playhouse?” he grumbled, referring to the pastel hues and warm glow of Golden Valley.

“I prefer to call it a therapeutic retreat,” I rolled my eyes. “Besides, we’re going to take care of that leg of yours. No more drowning in whiskey.”

I could tell he was still grumpy.

“Yeah, I imagine it sucks to be humbled by a sprained ankle,” I chuckled.

He snorted. “Not the way I’d planned to end the year.”

Leading him through the reception area, I introduced him to the lush greenery of our inner garden and the soft trickling of water from the fountains. The spa itself was an oasis—spacious, decorated with natural stone, aromatic with a blend of lavender and eucalyptus.

“This is Tanya, our clinician,” I said as a smiling woman approached us. “She’ll suggest some treatments to help with the pain and healing.”

Tanya carried herself with a distinct blend of grace and authority. Her early thirties had graced her with a maturity that came from years working in the high-pressure environment of an ER. Her skin was a rich caramel offset by the warm hazel hue of almond-shaped deep-set eyes.

Her hair, a cascade of coiled ebony curls, was usually pulled back into a neat bun, a nod to her nursing days. She had an athletic physique, toned from her regular yoga sessions. She was an excellent hire. I was lucky to have someone who worked at the world-famous Bliss in Los Angeles run our spa in the resort.

Tanya eyed Drago’s leg. “Some warm salt soaks might be beneficial, followed by gentle massage therapy around the injured area to improve

circulation.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re not planning on painting my nails or some nonsense like that, are you?”

Tanya laughed softly. There was a softness to her, an inviting aura that was essential in the calming environment of the spa and put people at ease, even Drago. “We’ll use plain nail polish, I promise. No one will notice.”

He glared at Tanya. “You’re joking right? Please don’t tease a man who’s been subsisting, happily I may add on *Doordash* takeout and whiskey.”

“Just treatments to help you feel better,” Tanya assured him and winked at me. *Yeah, yeah, Drago was a good-looking guy and all that.*

He gave a reluctant nod. “Fine, but if I end up smelling like a bouquet of roses, there’ll be trouble.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Only Drago would consider floral fragrances a threat.”

He smirked, leaning slightly into his crutches. “You’d be surprised how much scent can give away in my line of work.”

Maria gave him a final squeeze. “Be good.”

I watched her leave before turning back to Drago. “Welcome to Golden Valley, Detective. Let’s make the most of your stay. We’ll get your bags to your room and...even unpack for you.”

“Five star service?” he quipped.

“Absolutely. Anything for Maria’s best friend.”

His grumpy façade melted a bit. “Thanks, Isa. Tanya, let’s see if you can turn me into a believer.”

Tanya grinned. “Challenge accepted.”

As I walked back to my office, I texted Mila: *Hey, would you mind if I added a friend to the guest list?*

Mila responded immediately: *For tonight?*

Me: *Yes. He's a friend. Raya knows him well, and he's here to feel better. He sprained his ankle.*

Mila: *Sure. Send Rizwan his name and details so we can have a table setting for him.*

I was relieved that Drago would not be alone in the evening and who knew, he could even have some fun with the SynthoSoft crowd.

I was in my office when my mother called. I smiled as I answered my phone. I swung around on my chair so I could stare at the mountains from the floor to ceiling windows. "Hey, mama."

"*Mija*, Maria dropped Drago off?"

"Yep."

"She could have left him here, but he said he didn't want to impose. I think he's afraid of me."

I laughed. "Everyone is afraid of you."

"So, how's it going? How is your beau?"

I shook my head. My mother was convinced since I was attracted to Gordon, he'd have no choice but to be attracted to me. Which he was, but I wasn't discussing, no matter how close we were, getting fingered in the jacuzzi by my lover.

"I don't have a beau, mama," I chirped. "Speaking of beaus, how is Aurelio?"

It was always beneficial to move the topic to one of my brothers, especially the one who still had not introduced his on-again, off-again girlfriend to his family. Sure, we'd met Carolina Vega but as a friend and the general counsel of Knight Technologies, though we all knew she and my brother were doing the horizontal mambo for *months*. There had been an incident with Caro (we

called her Caro; the LA crowd called her Vega) where she'd thrown a drink in Aurelio's face, which had started the whole ball rolling from a gossip perspective.

"Aurelio is spending an inordinate amount of time in Los Angeles."

"It's winter, mama. You know he takes a break in December before things go crazy again at the farm."

"He's seeing *her*."

"I'm sure he is. Probably seeing a lot of her...naked."

My mother laughed. "Speaking of naked..."

"Mama, I'm at work. I have to go."

"You'd tell me won't you, Isa?"

"No. I love you though." I made kissing sounds before hanging up. I turned my chair and found Gordon leaning against the doors.

He was still in the charcoal suit, looking like the owner of the world. His dark hair flecked with silver was ruffled like he'd a run his hands through it a few times. Raya was right when she said he looked more ruthless villain than businessman hero. I loved the look.

"Do I have competition?" he asked as he straightened to come inside my office.

I raised my eyebrows.

"You were telling someone you love them followed with kisses."

I grinned. "Would you care?"

He closed my door, locked it, and came to me. He pushed my chair and leaned against my desk. He leaned down and brushed his lips on mine. "Yes, I would care."

"It was my mother, so you don't have to worry about it."

"How are you still a virgin?" he wondered as he picked a strand of hair and

rubbed it between his fingers.

“I...met no one who I wanted to go as the kids say, *all the way* with.”

“But...”

“But...then I met you and I wanted to...want to...go *all the way*.” My voice was a whisper because he was looking at me with an intensity that robbed me of speech.

He broke the moment by letting my hair go as if satisfied I was where he wanted me to be. “Drago is here?”

I nodded. “Sprained his ankle. Won’t say how. Maria is traveling, so she wanted him comfortable with room service and...an elevator.”

“Come as my date tonight,” he said calmly.

I looked at him surprised. “Excuse me?”

“Christmas gala tonight. Be my plus one.”

“I can’t,” I protested. “I’m working. I’ll be there but that’s my—” “Be my date tonight, Isadora,” he interrupted me. He leaned down again, lifted my chin, and smiled. “*Please.*”

My throat felt constricted. “Then everyone will know.”

“We do this, we do it in the open...proverbially. You will not be my dirty secret.”

I looked at him with shock.

His eyes darkened. “You thought I’d want that didn’t you?”

I nodded and felt bad that I had. He’d never lied to me and had been transparent about his feelings. I should’ve known that he’d be upfront with the world around him as well.

“For however long we have together, we’ll not hide. It’s not how I do things.”

Wanting to change the mood from serious, I chuckled, “And when they call

you a cradle robber?”

“I’ll tell them I’m one lucky son of a bitch and they can be jealous. I don’t care.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’ll be your date tonight.”

He straightened and looked at his watch. “*Fuck*, I have to go. Isadora, you’re very distracting. Usually, I won’t leave a meeting and now...I keep looking for you.”

My heart did a somersault. “Me too.”

“I’ll see you at...ah...”

“Everest Point,” I offered the location for the Christmas gala. “The concierge can direct you.”

“Thanks, baby.”

I took a deep breath after he was gone, feeling enormously relieved. I texted my mother then, *Just to update you. I have a beau. I’m his date at his company dinner tonight. I need a dress. Will you send a few things over to the resort from my closet?*

My mother responded immediately: *Sexy or sweet?*

I sighed. *Professional. It’s a company dinner.*

Mama: *I’ll add jewelry, bags, and shoes. Knock his socks off.*



Chapter 16

GORDON

The chandeliers glistened, reflecting their opulent glow over the vast hall filled with the glitterati of the tech industry. The SynthoSoft VIP customer’s Christmas party was in full swing, and I stood at the edge of the room, trying to rein in my bubbling excitement. But it wasn’t the party that had my heart racing; it was Isadora. I felt like I had a million years ago, and I’d taken a girl out for a dance. Maybe the clichés were right, a young woman reminded an old man of his youth.

She walked in, radiant in a dress that shimmered like the night sky, and every gaze in the room seemed to gravitate towards her.

Raya leaned in close to her, whispering something. I could see a flash of concern cross Isadora’s face but was quickly replaced by a radiant smile.

I tried to look nonchalant, but hell, who was I kidding? Every fiber of my being wanted to be near her, to be the reason for that smile. Yet, professional obligations called.

Taking a deep breath, I walked up to the podium, signaled for the attention of the room, and began. “Good evening, everyone. I want to extend my

warmest welcome to all our guests tonight. The holiday season is upon us, and what better way to celebrate than with friends, family, and our esteemed customers.”

My eyes involuntarily drifted to Isadora, and I couldn't help the smile that crossed my face. She looked back, her eyes sparkling, almost as if she knew the effect she had on me.

“We have a lot in store for you tonight,” I continued, “but first, I'd like to thank you all for being such an integral part of the SynthoSoft family. And in the season's spirit, we have some fun activities planned. Mila will be up shortly to introduce some dinner games, and let me tell you, the prizes are nothing short of fabulous. So, let's embrace the festive spirit and make tonight memorable!”

The crowd cheered, and as I descended the podium, I felt a hand on my arm. It was Isadora. “Great speech,” she whispered, leaning in.

I couldn't resist. “Not as impressive as your entrance,” I whispered. I slid my arm around her waist, letting everyone see we were *together*. “*She walks in beauty, like the night. Of cloudless climes and starry skies.*”

“Never thought of you as a romantic. Byron?”

“You're doing something to me,” I confessed.

She laughed, and in that moment, surrounded by the Christmas cheer and twinkling lights, *Aye, I was pure and utterly besotted.*

The hum of conversations filled the expansive hall, punctuated by peals of laughter and the tinkling of glasses. Now and then, a loud cheer would erupt from a corner of the hall as, yet another game winner was announced. And with each winner came a fabulous gift. I watched with growing fascination as gleaming electronics, high-tech gadgets, and other marvels of technology made their way into the hands of our top customers.

As the CEO, these were the details I typically overlooked, leaving them to my diligent team. However, tonight was different. Tonight, my attention was inexplicably drawn to the smooth execution of the event, and I realized why: Isadora. Her involvement in the planning, alongside Mila, made me want to pay attention and appreciate.

I found Mila talking to Rizwan, the event's organizer at Golden Valley Resort, giving him instructions.

"Rizwan, great work today," I commented.

"Thank you, sir. It's been a pleasure. Your customers absolutely loved the skiing, but I must say your lawyer getting a pedicure...best thing I've seen in a long time."

I laughed. I'd have paid good money to see Cyrus getting a pedicure.

"Only second to me getting one next to him," Drago who was sitting by them, nursing a whiskey lamented.

"Oh stop," Mila protested, "you enjoyed every minute of your spa day."

"True. It was better than ordering California Pizza Kitchen from Doordash and watching reruns of *Law & Order*," he admitted.

Turning to Mila, I lowered my voice, "You've done an extraordinary job. Every customer I've talked to is absolutely feeling the holiday spirit."

"Well, you signed off on the budget, boss." She then pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes playfully, "Not like you to hand out compliments, not that I'm not grateful."

I chuckled, my gaze involuntarily drifting towards Isadora. "Well, let's just say I've found a new appreciation for the finer details."



Chapter 17

★ ISADORA

I was about to find Gordon and get him on the dance floor when Rizwan approached me. His face wore a serious expression that stood out against the joviality of the surrounding room.

“Isadora,” he began, casting a quick glance around to ensure we weren’t overheard. “I’ve just received an alert. There’s a storm heading this way. It’s predicted to hit by tomorrow evening.”

My heart sank. “How bad?”

“Bad,” he affirmed. “If people don’t leave by morning, they’ll be trapped here until the storm passes. The roads will be impassable. I talked to the front desk and the cancellations have already started coming in.”

Taking a moment to digest the news, I nodded. “Thanks, Rizwan.”

As he walked away, I quickly found Mila and Gordon, pulling them aside. “We have a problem,” I began, relaying what Rizwan had told me.

Mila’s eyes widened. “We have to inform the guests. They need to plan.”

Gordon, however, seemed deep in thought. “I have that meeting with Isaac and Adele tomorrow.”

“Yes, but safety first,” I urged. “You can’t risk getting caught in the storm. And I’m sending the whole staff home tomorrow except for those who live in or close to the resort. I don’t want people stuck here for the holidays. We won’t have many guests so I’m going to make do with a skeletal crew.”

“And what about you? Are you going home?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I...I’ll stay with the essential staff. But if one of you could drive Drago to Golden Valley, I’d be grateful.”

“If you’re not leaving, neither am I, baby,” Gordon declared

I was startled at how open he was in front of an employee and blushed. He smiled at that and stroked a finger down my cheek.

“We’ll leave early afternoon,” Mila offered. “And...we’re at the end of the negotiations, don’t you think?”

“Sure. So, how do we do this, Isa?” he asked me.

“Let’s not start a panic. But walk by each table and let them know that transportation will be provided. Rizwan, Mila, and I...”

“And I,” Gordon offered. There was a lightness about him that was alluring and also disturbing. Where had my brooding Scotsman gone?

Since the sky was bright with moonlight and stars, the storm felt far away but when a snowstorm came, it slammed into the Sierras. What with climate change we were seeing strange weather all year around. Not that I was complaining. We needed all the precipitation we could get in California as we recovered from years of drought. I knew Aurelio would be pleased that snow packed mountains would slowly melt to irrigate the Golden Valley farms.

I’d finished talking to the last customers as the soft melodies of the waltz played, the familiar tune from a few months back bringing with it a whirlwind of emotions. The memories of that night were still vivid in my

mind. The dance, the chemistry, and then, the heartbreak of Gordon walking away.

Lost in the waves of nostalgia, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder, pulling me back to the present. I turned around to find Gordon, his eyes sparkling with mischief and warmth.

“May I have this dance?” he asked.

Raising an eyebrow, I replied cheekily, “Think you can keep up?”

He laughed, that hearty sound I had grown so fond of. “Aye, I think so.”

We moved into position, and as his hand settled on my waist, pulling me close, I felt the world melt away. It was just the two of us, surrounded by the rhythm of our heartbeats and the gentle sway of the dance.

“You know,” he murmured, “the last time we danced like this, I made the regrettable mistake of walking away.”

I met his gaze, allowing a playful smile to form. “I remember. You owe me a full dance this time.”

“And perhaps a chance to make it up to you?”

I was bold. “A couple of orgasms should suffice?”

He grinned and brushed his lips against mine.

“Gordon,” I suddenly felt shy, “everyone can see. Raya already...”

“What did Raya say?”

“She said have fun,” I admitted.

“Then let’s have fun.”

The cheeky banter flowed naturally, yet underneath it all, there was a depth, an understanding. Every twirl, every step was charged with meaning.

“I’ve missed this,” I whispered as we glided across the floor.

“Missed dancing or missed me?” he teased.

“Both,” I admitted, laughing. “I know it sounds strange because we’ve only

met a handful of times.”

As the music reached its crescendo, Gordon pulled me close, our eyes locked in a silent conversation. The weight of the moment settled between us, and I felt the intensity of his gaze, claiming me as his, in front of everyone.

“It doesn’t sound strange,” he breathed, brushing his lips against my cheek.



Chapter 18

★ GORDON

I felt an increasing need to confront Adel. Navigating through the throngs of guests, I found her engaged in light conversation near the bar. Approaching her, I noted the subtle tension in her posture, as if she was bracing herself for something.

“Adel,” I began, keeping my voice calm and measured, “we need to talk.”

She met my gaze, her eyes revealing a flicker of apprehension. “What’s on your mind, *mon ami*?”

“We’ve always had a straightforward business relationship, and I respect that,” I started, handpicking my words. “But I need to understand. What’s the rush right now? What is going on with you and Isaac?”

“Nothing is going on,” she snapped but I caught the panic in her voice. “It’s just business. He offered an avenue, a possibility.”

“Why are you liquidating all your assets?”

“None of your fucking business,” she retorted and then downed her drink in one go. “I’ve known Isaac for years, why the fuck wouldn’t I work with him?”

“Isaac isn’t someone to trust,” I pressed, trying to discern her hidden motives. “I’m genuinely concerned about this alliance.”

Adele’s eyes flashed with a mix of frustration and vulnerability. “I appreciate your concern, but I can handle my affairs.”

Despite her words, a nagging feeling told me there was more beneath the surface. “Adele,” I urged, “if there’s something you’re not telling me, now’s the time.”

She looked away, a distant sadness reflecting in her eyes. “Does this mean you’re pulling out of the deal?” She grabbed the sleeve of my suit. “Please don’t do that.” There were tears in her eyes. “I need this. I need to get out. Do you understand?”

“No, Adel, I don’t understand.” Growing more exasperated and concerned, I continued, “I just have a bad feeling about all of this. If there’s anything—“

“I need money.”

“How much?”

“Fifty million.”

I was taken aback. “Whoa! That’s a lot of money.”

“Buy my software, Gordon.”

“Adel, even if I buy the software, it’s going to take a while before you see that kind of money...there will be taxes and—“

“Isaac and I have that figured out,” she cut me off cryptically.

“Figured what out?”

She was silent for a moment. “I know what I’m doing,” Adel said softly, her tone final. She glanced at the clock, then back to me, “It’s getting late.”

I hesitated for a moment, torn between pushing for answers and respecting her boundaries. “Alright.”

She offered a small smile, almost rueful. “Happy Christmas, Gordon.”

Watching her depart, I felt a mix of frustration and unease. The puzzle pieces were scattered, and I had a sinking feeling that the bigger picture was far from pleasant.



Chapter 19

★ ISADORA

With a glass of champagne in hand, I navigated through the merry throng of guests, looking to get back to Gordon when Jeff approached me. Sporting a suit that screamed wealth louder than decorum, he slithered into my personal space with a smirk plastered on his face.

“Isadora,” he drawled, eyes flickering over me with undisguised interest, “you’re a vision tonight.” He spoke like we knew each other well, which we didn’t.

“Jeff,” I replied coolly.

He didn’t seem deterred by my frostiness. “I must confess, I’ve been watching you all evening.”

“Why?” I retorted, taking a sip of my champagne, and allowing the bubbles to fortify my patience.

He laughed, and I noticed how his eyes were glassy, movements too fluid, the unmistakable signs of intoxication. In his drunken state, Jeff’s defenses were down, and he seemed all too willing to divulge more than he should.

“Because you’re hot as fuck.” He followed my glance as I found Gordon sitting next to Adel at the bar. “They used to fuck, you know that?”

I didn’t like this man or his crassness. “Excuse me.”

He grabbed my arm. And as I was about to show him how much self-defense training I’d had, he slurred, “She’s hoping to use that to sell her shit software to him. She’s in deep shit...all her money gone.”

Now, this was new information. I tilted my head, feigning disinterest. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, sloppy grin widening.

He stroked my arm, and I stepped away. I wanted to hear him out, especially after what I’d seen in Adel’s hotel room, but he needed to stop touching me because if he didn’t I’d break his nose.

“And we’ve—Isaac and I— have been encouraging her to sell to Gordon. It’s a good deal for everyone involved.”

There was something in the way he said it, something that sent alarm bells ringing in my mind. “Really? How so?”

Jeff leaned closer, the stench of alcohol on his breath. “Well, let’s just say, the deal benefits us in ways more than one. Maybe not Gordon that much.” He laughed a little at his own joke.

Drunk men were stupid.

I played along. “Gordon is sharp; surely, he’ll notice if something is amiss.”

“Sharp, yes,” Jeff chuckled. “But not sharper than us.”

I forced a smile, my mind whirling with this newfound knowledge. It seemed like there was a storm brewing, not just outside in the winter night but also within these walls.

“Sweetheart,” the word came out along with spittle, “let me show you how I’m better than Gordon in other ways.”

“I’m going to pass on that, Jeff, but thank you for the offer. Excuse me.”

As I walked away, the wheels in my head began turning. I saw Adel leave in a hurry and I followed her. I had just stepped out to the hallway, when hushed voices reached my ears.

Isaac was leading Adel away. I followed them as they turned into an empty hallway, the Christmas party far away here.

“Adel, listen to me.”

I nudged closer, hidden behind the tall fern placed strategically in the corridor’s corner.

“I don’t want to. I just need you to keep your promise to me once Gordon signs on that dotted line.”

“Fuck that, Adel. You need to get rid of Jeff from your life. He’s poison. Don’t you know that?”

“He’s been a good friend.”

“A friend you pawned off on me because you were fucking him.”

Adel sighed. “You got a very capable lawyer in the bargain, didn’t you?”

“Good? He’s a crook, and he’s twisting everything. I’m going to fire him, Adel. I don’t want that man around.”

Adel’s voice was shaky, trembling with an emotion I couldn’t quite place. “Isaac, I’m tired. Tired of it all. Sometimes, I think...” She paused, her next words causing a shiver to run down my spine. “I just want to end it.”

I froze, my heart constricting. Adel was in a dark place.

Isaac’s voice turned desperate. “Adel, no. Please, don’t say that. I... I care about you. More than you know. Let me help.”

“You can’t fix everything,” she whispered, pain evident in her words. “I just need this deal to go through. I need that money. Then...I can start fresh.”

I felt like an intruder, eavesdropping on such a personal conversation, but I

was rooted to the spot, unable to move.

Adel's footsteps echoed down the hallway, suggesting she was leaving the party. Isaac followed her.

As their voices faded, I took a shaky breath, processing what I'd just overheard.

Gordon found me walking to the ballroom and slid his arm around my waist. "I said goodnight to anyone who was not drunk enough to give a shit and now you're all mine."

Oh, I so wanted to, but... "I need to check with Mila and Rizwan and—"

He kissed me. "Be in my suite in fifteen minutes. Is that enough time?"

"Maybe..."

"Twenty minutes and no more."

I linked my hands around his neck and went on tiptoe. "Twenty minutes it is. And what will we do when I get to your suite?"

"Play gin rummy, obviously," he had a boyish charm about him. Granted the liquor had probably loosened him but Gordon wasn't the type who got drunk. I knew that instinctively about him. But he was in a good mood and, I had to admit, so was I.



Chapter 20

★ ISADORA

I called Nova as I hurried to the elevators to Gordon's suite. I was sure housekeeping would notice that I hadn't slept in my room the previous night, which is why when I went to take a shower and change next morning I'd messed up the bed. It was silly. I wasn't ashamed of sleeping with Gordon...just embarrassed. I wasn't used to spending the night with men.

"What?" I heard Nova's voice on the other end.

"Okay, so I'm going to have sex with Gordon," I announced as the elevator took its time going up.

"*Mazel tov!* When?"

"Now. What if I suck at sex?"

Nova laughed. "Just suck him off and sex will be fine."

"Right...because I know how to do that," I bit out sarcastically. Nova was bisexual, and I was hoping she'd have advice, not just go do and it'll all be fine. "Help."

"Isadora," she murmured, "have fun. Sex isn't a class you have to ace or a hotel you have to make successful. Just let go. Enjoy him. Let him enjoy you."

It's a dance. Let him lead when you want him to; and lead when you want to."

"That simple?"

"Yes."

The elevator doors opened, and I stepped onto the floor where all the VIP suites were. "I don't want to disappoint him."

"Trust me, babe, he sees you naked he won't be disappointed. Now, Isa, you have to be naked, okay."

"He's seen me naked," I muttered. "We took a shower together and...did stuff last night."

"And you're telling me now?" she exclaimed.

"Okay, I'm at his door. Wish me luck."

"No luck needed, baby girl. Have fun. And I want *all the details* tomorrow."

I knocked and then used my master card to open the door. The moment I stepped into the suite, I was embraced by a serene warmth. The air was thick with the sweet scent of vanilla candles, their flickering flames casting a gentle, golden luminescence throughout the room. Everywhere I looked, there was evidence of his thoughtfulness.

A chilled bottle of champagne sat on the ornate wooden table, its sleek glass flute companions glistening beside it. A silver platter held an array of plump strawberries, their vibrant red hues contrasting beautifully against the deep sheen of melted chocolate that accompanied them. The elegant setting was perfectly accentuated by a soft playlist of slow jazz in the background, filling the room with a gentle lull of music.

For a moment, I simply stood at the entrance, trying to absorb the scene in front of me. Every single detail, from placing the candles to the choice of

music, whispered of Gordon's efforts. Behind the shrewd businessman's exterior was a heart that knew the language of romance, of making moments special.

I could feel a smile tug at the corners of my mouth, my heart swelling with affection. Walking towards the center of the room, I took in the panoramic view offered by the suite's expansive windows. The snowy landscape outside, illuminated by moonlight, formed the perfect backdrop for this intimate setting.

"Gordon," I whispered, more to myself, touched beyond words.

He emerged from the shadows, a soft grin playing on his lips. "I want tonight to be special," he murmured, pulling me into a gentle embrace. His heartbeat, steady against my ear, felt like the most reassuring tune, promising a night of cherished memories.

He had taken his suit jacket off and was in his dress shirt and his dress pants. His feet were bare, and it added to the intimacy. I slipped my Jimmy Choos off as well and the disparity in our heights made me feel...oddly, safe.

In that moment, all uncertainties, all the complications of the world outside, faded away. All that remained was the magic of the evening and the promise it held.

I melted into Gordon's embrace, savoring the comfort of his powerful arms around me. Resting my head on his chest, I breathed in his familiar scent, a hint of coffee and mint mingling with his woody cologne.

"You didn't have to do all this." I gestured at the romantic setup surrounding us.

Gordon planted a kiss on my forehead. "I wanted to."

A part of me had worried that when I told him this would be my first time, he'd bolt like Flash. I had not expected this thoughtfulness from him, this...

care.

Fuck. I wasn't falling in love with Gordon. I *was* in love with Gordon. When this would end, it was going to hurt like a mother.

Taking my hand, he led me to the table where champagne was waiting. With a flourish, he popped the cork and filled our flutes with the bubbling golden liquid. We clinked glasses, the crystal ringing out delicately.

"To us." Gordon's eyes twinkled in the candlelight.

"Thank you so much for this." I meant every word.

We sipped the effervescent champagne. Gordon fed me a plump strawberry dipped in chocolate, his fingers brushing my lips. I returned the favor, eliciting a groan from him.

Gordon played with his phone and the music changed. The soft hum of the stereo filled the suite, the initial chords of a familiar waltz emanating from its speakers. The hauntingly beautiful tune resonated within the room, echoing the rhythm of my heartbeat. Gordon extended his hand, his fingers lightly brushing against mine, sending tingles up my arm.

As we danced, everything else melted away. The world outside ceased to exist, and it was just the two of us, lost in our shared rhythm. His firm hands guided me, one settled on the small of my back, the other holding mine aloft, fingers entwined. Our eyes locked, and in his gaze, I saw the same mix of emotions reflected—passion, tenderness, longing.

The waltz had always been our thing, hadn't it? It was where our souls met, a dance that spoke of love, longing, and the countless shared memories between us. Each step, each graceful turn, felt like retracing the journey of our relationship.

As the tempo picked up, our bodies drew closer. The world seemed to blur as we spun, and the boundaries between us dissolved. I could feel the heat of

his body, the measured pace of his breathing, and the faint scent of his cologne. It was intoxicating.

Then, the music slowed, pulling us into a seductive rhythm. Our steps grew languid, the space between us nearly non-existent. The intensity of his gaze made my heart race, and as he drew me into a gentle dip, I felt a rush.

By the time the waltz reached its melodic end, we were breathless, our foreheads resting against each other, the world outside a distant memory. We were in a universe of our own, bound by the magic of the dance and the undeniable connection between us. It was, in every sense, enchantingly beautiful.

“Gordon, I want you,” I whispered.

He pushed his hips against me. “I want you too.”

“Did...ah...housekeeping leave condoms for you?” I asked shyly.

He laughed then. “My practical Isadora.”

“Well, I’m not on birth control. So...you know...” Why were we talking about this? Shut up, Isa. Just let him lead like Nova said.

“You’re nervous,” he realized and kissed me on my nose. “It’s sweet.”

“I know the basics but—“

He kissed me then, long, and sweet. As soon as he released my mouth, I was going to say something when he kissed me again. “Shut up, Isadora.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re winding yourself up and I’m doing everything I can to relax you *and* myself, so I don’t gorge on your like a starving man. *Aye?*”

“Aye.” I closed my eyes. “I am nervous.”

“What are you nervous about?” He found the zipper of my dress and pulled it down.

“I don’t know what to do. I watch porn but...you know...if a man called

me a slut or something I'd knee him in the nuts, not—“

He kissed me again as he peeled the frothy confection of a dress off me. Underneath I wore Savage Fenty lacy skin-colored bra and panties.

He stepped back and looked at me. “Fuck,” he said as if not realizing he was speaking.

“Take off your shirt.”

He removed his cuff links and threw them on a table behind him.

“You're so beautiful, Isadora.” He slowly unbuttoned his shirt, and I swallowed. I'd seen him naked...but just yesterday so it was all still new. He was so at ease with his nudity while I was...squirming in my sexy lingerie.

“Focus on me,” he commanded. “Stop worrying about how you look.”

“How do you know what I was worrying about?” I demanded irritated.

He smiled as he took his pants off. “Take off your bra,” he said.

I wish he'd take it off. Because I had no clue how to take off a bra all sexy.

“I...don't know how to.”

He frowned. “You don't know how to take your bra off?”

“I do but not you know...stripper sexy.”

Gordon laughed then and came up to me. “You're a fucking delight, *m'eudail*.”

“I looked up that word. It means my darling.”

I gasped as his hands moved over me, removing me bra, and then sliding my panties down my thighs. He was on knees in front of me and I felt a wave of hysterical panic. Had I washed myself? How did I smell down there? Good god...

“Gordon?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing down there?” I asked not wanting to look down. “Do I

smell funny?”

He rose then, picked me up firefighter lift style and threw me on the bed. “Isadora, your pussy smells like fucking vanilla. All of you does.”

“So...not funny and—“ I gasped as he kissed me *down* there. I knew all about oral sex. I’d done my research and sex positive Nova was my closest friend.

“Isadora, baby, can you shut up and lie down quietly?” he looked up at me. “I’d like to eat your pussy now and you’re hell on my concentration.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want you to not be—“ I lost my train of thought as he licked me, then sucked me and then put his fingers inside me, pump in and out like I did with a vibrator.

My hips moved on their own accord. Nothing had felt like this before. Nothing had ever been this wet, this warm, this exciting and—fuck. I came with force, my thighs shaking, my body convulsing.

I felt him continue to lick my sensitive flesh, now softly gently and then he climbed up my body. I looked at him, his lips glistening with...well me and didn’t quite know how to feel about it. A part of me thought it was sexy as fuck and another wondered, this cannot be hygienic. It hadn’t seemed hygienic when the porn—.

“I said shut up.”

“I said nothing.”

“I can fucking hear you think.” He kissed me then, and I shut up. “How do you taste, baby?” he asked.

“Like...you. Like you did when I tasted you yesterday,” I whispered. “Gordon. Please.”

“What do you want?”

“Something. Anything.”

He stepped away and took his briefs off. He opened the bedside table and pulled out a condom. I sat up to watch.

“Is that difficult to do?” I asked.

He looked at me like he was trying to hold back laughter. “I have plenty of practice.”

“You know they say you need 10,000 hours of practice to perfect something,” I said sagely.

He came on top of me then and kissed me again. “Isadora Santos, you’re an absolutely fucking delight.”

“You already said that,” I told him happily. *I love you, Gordon Mackenzie*, like a whole fucking lot.

“If I hurt you, tell me.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you,” I assured him.

He smiled and then groaned as he slowly entered me. “You’re so tight, baby. Tight and...*fuck me.*”

I lifted my hips as he pushed in. I felt full, tight, impossibly stretched. Nova had warned me that first times were complicated. Some said it was great and others not so great. But usually, it helped if you were with someone who knew what they were doing. Hence, Gordon, according to her, was the right pick. He obviously had ten thousand hours of—

“You’re inside me,” I whimpered.

“Yes.” He sounded like he was strangling. “And I need to move, baby.”

“Then move.” I languidly slid my foot up his calf and rocked against him. “Make me come again.”



Chapter 21

GORDON

I didn't do commitment, but I did intimacy. I liked women. I liked their company. I enjoyed spending time with them. And I loved to have sex.

This was something else.

Was it because she was inexperienced? She may be inexperienced, but she made love the same way she lived her life, full on, with passion.

"Isadora," I tasted her name as I moved within her.

"Hmm," she hummed, her eyes open as she looked into mine.

There was no fear here. No nervousness any longer.

Sex could be fun. Sex could be passionate. Sex could be exciting. What it had never been was this perfumed reality. This delicate dance between excitement, passion, and sensuality and...something else. A deep affection.

I was not a selfish lover. I loved to make a woman come. I enjoyed sex when we both orgasmed. I wasn't arrogant enough to believe that no woman had ever faked it with me, I'm sure some had. I wasn't insecure enough to think that it was my fault when a woman didn't find release. Sometimes, it just didn't happen.

Not this time. She wouldn't know how to fake it if there was a gun to her head. No, this woman luxuriated in living life to the fullest.

"Right there," she moaned when I went deep, lifting her hips so that I could feel her, so she could feel me.

"Yes, baby. Are you close?"

She smiled then. "Does it matter? We have all night."

I choked out a laugh. "I'm an old man. I can't go all night." Sure, I could, my libido said. With this woman? *Aye, I could.*

She lifted herself and offered her mouth to me. "Kiss me."

"Demanding, aren't you." I surged inside her as I kissed her.

She was fucking with my head, and I dare say my heart. Isadora may be inexperienced when it came to sex, but she was far more experienced than I at opening herself up and living. I was almost envious of her ability to enjoy herself as she did.

"I'm going to come, baby. Are you close?" I was begging, pleading. I needed to feel her squeeze me.

She pulled me close. "I already came."

I grinned. "No such thing as too many orgasms."

"Show me," she whispered, her eyes full of mischief, of desire, of lust, of... yeah, love.

She was in love with me or at least she thought she was, which was alright, because I *knew* I had fallen in love with her. Somewhere in the past few months while I'd been pretending she didn't affect me, she'd taken residence in my heart and now as she lay in my bed, there was no going back, not even if I wanted it.

I pulled out of her, and she whimpered. "Gordon."

"Turn around, baby." She looked at me, her eyes flashing with curiosity,

and she went all fours.

“God, you are beautiful.” I put my hands on her ass, stroking and then went inside her. My hands went up her waist as I held her, pounding into her. I shouldn’t, I tried to tell myself. She was new to this, but the beast had taken over.

I found her clitoris as I chased my orgasm, wanting us to come together, desperate to feel that high when it happened.

She came, first slowly and then all but squeezing the release out of me, her cunt a vice.

I rolled off of her and discarded the condom into the discreet bin by the bed. My heart hammering within my ribs. I pulled her close to me, wanting the closeness, needing it. I didn’t want the intimacy to end.

She snuggled into me and laughed softly.

“What?”

“I’m not a virgin any longer.”

I looked at her then. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fabulous,” she exclaimed. “Is this how it is? No wonder people want to have sex all the time. I thought it was...you know, exaggerated. People making it up because no one wants to admit they have bad sex, now do they. But...wow.”

I kissed her forehead. “Wow, indeed.”

“But you’ve had sex before.”

“Not like this.”

She stilled in my arms. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like...” she gently bit my chest, “you know what.”

It was too soon, I thought. But then it would *always* never be the right time.

For a man like me who'd kept up so many walls all my life except with my family and a few friends, lowering them for Isadora was pure magic... breathtakingly special and it scared the shite out of me.

"Like what, baby?" I persisted. I didn't want to pressure her. I was her first lover. Sure, she'd think I was the fucking cat's ass. I didn't want her to feel that because I'd fallen in love, she had to reciprocate. Well, fuck, I wanted her to. I didn't want to be alone on this ride. I didn't want to get hurt. Worse, I didn't want to let her go.

"Like...you know...that it's more than sex."

"Is it more than sex for you?" *Very mature, Gordon, fishing for this woman's feelings without revealing your own. Class act!*

"I will not answer that." She pulled away and sat up.

She was beautiful. Naked and flushed. Her dark hair tousled. The dark tips of her breasts erect. Her stomach gently curved.

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to have sex with you again and...you're going to...well...bolt like you did before." She sighed. "Can we talk about the sex instead?"

I grinned. "Sure. Did it work for you?"

"Sure. Did it work for you?" she threw it back at me.

I pulled her down and hugged her. I put her hand on my heart. "Isadora. I have fallen in love with you."

Her entire body went stiff.

Fuck! Now I'd done it. She was going to...bolt. I should've waited, finessed it. For a man who knew how to manage million dollar deals, I certainly had no clue how to reel a woman in.

She sat up again. When I tried to pull her back into my arms, she pushed my hands away. "I want to see your face when you say it again."

“Why?”

“I just do.”

I sat up, stacking pillows behind me. I stroked a satiny breast and then as I pinched a nipple, stealing her breath, I said, “I love you, Isadora Santos.”

She looked at me with such joy that it was like being blinded. She threw herself into my arms. “I can’t believe you said it. You love me?”

“Madly.”

“And you won’t do the pushing me away thing again?”

“No. I don’t think I could survive it.”

“Well, then Gordon, I love you too. I am madly, ocean’s deep, Sierra mountains high in love with you.” She kissed me all over my face, her joy contagious.

I’d never felt this before. This peace when I was with a woman. I hadn’t even had it with Pilar. Actually, nothing I had with Isadora could be compared to what I had with my ex-wife. That had been...a fucking nightmare. Isadora was a bloody dream come true.

“But you’re still very young and...I want you to...take your time.”

“Take my time to do what?” she asked, peering at my face.

“To...keep your options open. If you...” I didn’t know what the fuck I was saying...

She nodded thoughtfully. “You mean in case I meet a younger stud muffin and want to fuck him?”

“Stud muffin?”

“Well, you’re sort of a stud muffin,” she teased.

“Don’t ever fucking call me that,” I warned her. I touched her lips with my fingers, and she kissed them. “I don’t want you to rush into this.”

“Are *you* rushing into this?” she asked, taking a finger inside her mouth,

and sucked it.

“I’m crawling into it, baby.”

“I know who I am, Gordon. It comes of having a balanced childhood. I grew up with love and security. I grew up with a family that adores me. I am the little Santos, but my brothers and my parents never treated me like that. My brothers were never over-protective.”

“They didn’t chase your boyfriends away?” I would’ve if I had a sister who looked like Isadora.

She laughed. “My mother would have their heads if they did that. And, honestly, mostly my family felt sorry for the boys who were interested in me.”

“Why?”

“I wasn’t that into them and...even as a teenager I knew what I wanted and what I didn’t want. Hence I was a virgin until a few minutes ago when you *finally* ravished me.”

Her honesty was disarming.

“I’ll always worry about our age gap,” I said honestly.

“That’s okay. Do I need to worry about your cholesterol and things like that? You’re Alejandro’s age and he’s fit as a fiddle. He does Ashtanga Yoga. He doesn’t smoke, and he drinks...you know like a grown up, in moderation. He has no bad habits. He’s going to live a long time. How about you?”

She made me happy, I realized as I looked at her amused. “I can give you latest checkup results. I’m fit as a fiddle.”

She nodded. “I don’t want to be a widow at thirty because you have clogged arteries and your ticker goes bye, bye.”

I considered her words. *We were getting married and my ticker...was on the fritz. Got it.* “Is this payback for me saying I’ll always worry about our age

gap?”

“Yep.” She cuddled into me. “I need to get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be hell, getting all those guests out.”

“I’m not fucking leaving you here. Not now.” I slid my hand down her body and stroked her between her legs. “Not when you gave me this... something you’ve given no one else.”

She moaned softly. “I can’t leave my staff. I’ll go back home on Monday. We have a wedding here on Christmas Day. Can you believe it? I’ll make it to Christmas dinner with my family, but it pisses me off. Speaking of which, what are you doing for Christmas? Are you going to Scotland? You should come to Golden Valley. You’ll—“I hauled her up to me so I could kiss her and shut her up.

“I was going to Park City and was planning to spend Christmas and New Year’s at my house there.”

“Avid skier are you?”

“Yes.”

“You can stay with us and ski here,” she said easily.

“And your family won’t mind?”

She chuckled, “Nope. My mother and father are going to grill you a little about where we will live once we’re married.”

“Once we’re married?” Any other woman would not have said that to me. She would’ve waited for me to ask. I was glad Isadora was not any other woman. She was uncomplicated. No games. Her logic was simple: *I loved her, and she loved me, and we’d get married.* And fuck, yes, I wanted to marry her.

Even I couldn’t believe I felt this way. I’d met her a few months ago and now she was my life.

“You want to get married?” I asked softly.

“Yes. Not right now though. I’m just twenty-four but we can’t wait too long because you’re *old* as you keep telling me. And I’d like to have children before I turn thirty if possible.”

Children? Isadora was a runaway train. I loved it. I loved everything about her. I loved how easy it was to be with her.

She suddenly looked up at me. “Do you want children?”

I hadn’t up until now. “What if I don’t?”

She shrugged and went back to lie her head on my shoulder. “Then we won’t have any. I’d like to but—“

“I’d love to have children with you, baby. I never thought I’d have the privilege. I’d be honored to have...” I felt my throat close as emotions swarmed me. My parents would love Isadora. They’d absolutely adore her. She was someone who people were drawn to, and I could imagine, she and my sister would become thick as thieves.

A voice inside my head was screaming, *it’s too soon*, but I silenced that voice. I’d been waiting for Isadora my whole life, it wasn’t too soon or too late, it was just the right time.

“There is one thing you need to know,” she mumbled sleepily.

“What? You’re already married?”

“Ha! Ha! I can’t live in LA, not full time. I want to live in Golden Valley. I have a few acres earmarked on a lake. We’ll build a house there.”

She fell asleep as I lay awake, contemplating the earthquake that had just changed my life.

People who knew me would never believe that I made love to a virgin, told her I loved her and then like a docile puppy agreed to marry her, have children with her; *and* build her a fucking house in the ass end of nowhere.

Fuck, even I couldn't believe it.

I'd never been happier.



Chapter 22

★ ISADORA

“Stay in bed with me,” Gordon murmured as I tried to get up
“*Amor mío*, I’ve got to. I have a full day ahead of me ...and so do you.”

He pulled me down, not that I put up much resistance and rolled on top of me. “I’m bigger than you so what I say goes.”

This was a lazy playful Gordon. A lazy playful *and* aroused Gordon. I felt him hard and heavy in between my thighs.

“If I let you fuck me will you let me go?” I mock sighed.

He slid inside me and watched as my eyes half closed, my body went from warm to hot.

“You’re already wet for me,” he whispered.

“*Apparently*,” I said with mock sarcasm.

“You’re sassing me, aren’t you?”

I laughed and then moaned as he surged inside me.

“And just for that I’m going to not let you come until you beg for mercy,” he grinned.

I was nearly a half hour late for my first appointment by the time I snuck into my suite and got ready for the day.

I had finished one meeting with the manager responsible for transportation and was hurrying towards the reception, when the sharp sting of raised voices halted me in my tracks. I peeked around a tall ornamental fern, spotting Adel and Gordon deep in what appeared to be a heated exchange. Adel, in her sleek workout gear, looked momentarily out of place beside Gordon, who was dressed more casually in jeans and a snug sweater.

“You think I wouldn’t do my homework, Adel?” Gordon’s voice was filled with a mix of disbelief and anger. His Scottish accent, which often softened when he was in a jovial mood, now had an edge that could cut glass. “My team has done its due diligence. That solution you and Isaac are trying to peddle is a dud. You made it look good but after testing...what the *feck*, Adel? I trusted you.”

Adel’s face paled, her mouth opening and closing as if searching for the right words, but Gordon didn’t give her a chance. “Did you truly believe you could swindle me?” he continued, his voice dripping with scorn.

“I need the money, Gordon.”

“Are you crazy? Do you think I’ll walk into a scam with open eyes? All the meetings are off. And as for your reputation? You can kiss it goodbye.”

I pressed my back against the wall, my heart racing. I had never seen this side of Gordon. This cutthroat businessman who the media alluded to.

As Adel tried to utter a response, Gordon turned abruptly and walked away, leaving her standing there, a picture of devastation. I quickly retreated, not wanting to be spotted.

Outside, the storm clouds had been gathering ominously, casting a foreboding shadow over the Golden Valley Resort. Working on overdrive, I

ensured all our guests were safely on their way before the storm unleashed its fury. The resort's usually bustling atmosphere was now eerily subdued, a silence only broken by the howling of the wind.

Mila's looked dismayed when I found her in the Alpine Alcove meeting room. She was looking outside the window, watching the snow continue to cascade, creating a thick blanket that entrapped us all within the resort's confines.

"Hey, all good here?" I asked.

"The meeting is going to be *short*. Gordon is telling everyone to *feck* off," she murmured, turning to face me.

"His Scottish comes out to play when he's in a mood."

"Yeah," Mila shook her head. "This is such a cluster...*feck*."

Drawing a deep breath, I approached, stopping beside her. "Mila," I began cautiously, "what exactly is going on between Gordon and Adel?"

She hesitated for a moment before confessing. "Raya and her team found out something unsettling. That's why she left early. She's already back in LA. Isaac and Adel have been working on a scheme to cheat Gordon." The disappointment in her voice was clear.

I was taken aback. "But they must've known they'd get caught?"

Mila shook her head, her lips pressed tightly together. "I have no idea what they were thinking because this is the kind of shit that Gordon just doesn't stand for. You know what stings the most? It's Jeff's involvement. I trusted him...I just can't believe he was in on this."

"Do you know Jeff well?" I ventured. Jeff worked for Isaac, and sure the LA tech world was a small one. But I hadn't gotten the feeling that someone like Mila would be *friendly* with someone like Jeff, whose face showed up in the dictionary when you looked for "*sleazy used car salesman*."

Mila turned her gaze from the window, locking eyes with me. A shadow of a memory seemed to flit across her face. “It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t everything,” I murmured, not pressing further.

Now I was a curious person by nature. My brothers would attest to my snooping abilities. I came by it honestly because my mother was just as *curious* as me. However, we did not trample over people’s barriers. We reserved that *exclusively* for family members.



Chapter 23

★ GORDON

The tall windows of the Alpine Alcove meeting room showcased the encroaching, darkening skies, and the first flakes of what promised to be a massive snowfall were drifting lazily down.

Isaac and Jeff sat opposite me, looking both defiant and uneasy. My core team—Cyrus and Mila were with me; and Raya on video was on the screen.

“Where’s Adel?” I demanded.

Mila cleared her throat. “She sent me a text saying she’s not feeling well and...that we should continue without her. Isaac has her proxy.”

I wanted to drag Adel down to the meeting but who the fuck cared at this point. We were ending this three-month charade.

Breaking the charged silence, Raya, her face stern, began, “Isaac, our due diligence showed the software you and Adel are selling is, for lack of a better word, a dud. It’s riddled with bugs, security gaps, and is nowhere near the capabilities you promised.”

I could feel the anger boiling within me. “Isaac, did you think you could dupe me with a half-baked product?”

Isaac's jaw tightened. "Adel's software is solid, Gordon. They've put in years of research and development. As have we."

Jeff, ever the lawyer, interjected. "We had a verbal agreement, Gordon. And in California, as I'm sure you're aware, that's legally binding."

That was enough for Cyrus. "Go fuck yourself, Jeff."

Jeff bubbled with resentment. "You can't talk to me like that, you son of a —"

I raised my hand, silencing Jeff. "Enough." I turned my gaze back to Isaac. "As Cyrus said, fuck yourself, Jeff, and fuck California law. There was a verbal agreement upon delivery of a sound product and since the product is a *fecking* disaster, I don't think we're going to worry about the law."

Jeff shifted uncomfortably in his chair but held his ground. "We've kept our end of the deal."

The room felt colder, the tension escalating with every passing second. The snow outside now came down more heavily, mirroring the tempestuous atmosphere indoors.

Drawing a deep breath, I made my decision. "The meeting's over. I'd advise you to leave the resort and head home before this storm gets any worse. We will not be discussing this matter again."

As the two of them left, a mix of anger and defiance in their steps, the tempest raged outside, turning the once picturesque landscape of Golden Valley Resort into a dark, frosted wasteland. The windows of the meeting room were embossed with frost, turning the room's interior into a gilded cage against the storm's fury.

Raya signed off after a quick chat and Cyrus patted me on the shoulder as he walked out of the room.

"I'm so sorry, Gordon," Mila said.

I shrugged. “Business is business.” But it wasn’t as simple as that. I was *hurt* that Adel had tried to use me. Sure, we weren’t close now, but I’d never pegged her for someone who’d be the one trying to swindle me.

“At least the customer event was successful,” Mila tried to cheer me up. “I have so many emails from happy customers, even though they had to rush out of here today.”

I smiled tightly at Mila. “You both should get on your way as well.”

“You’re really going to stay here?” she asked.

That thought cheered me up. “Isadora doesn’t want to leave her crew alone and...I think a weekend snowed in a high-end resort with my girlfriend isn’t the worst thing that could happen to me.”

“So...it’s official, I assume, that you two are dating?”

Since I’d brought her to the company Christmas party as a date, the cat was definitely and deliberately out of the bag. “I think we’re probably engaged.”

Mila gasped. “You think?”

I grinned. “Yeah, I do. Why are you so surprised?”

I needed to buy a ring for Isadora. What would work best for her? Not the usual big diamond. She wouldn’t care. She’d want something personal.

“I...I just didn’t think you’d marry after Pilar.”

Mila had just started working with me when I was going through my divorce a decade ago. Mila had been a young graduate, and I had already put SynthoSoft on the map, hence the nightmare situation with Pilar. As my then lawyer had said, money always made divorces worse.

“I didn’t either, but...this feels right.”

I’d expected Mila to be happy for me because she always tried to push me to date seriously and not just fuck around. But she wasn’t and that irked me.

“She’s so young for you, Gordon.”

“She’s just the right age for me,” I snapped.

I now regretted having this discussion with her. Would our age always be an issue to the world? It wasn’t to her parents and brothers she’d told me but maybe it would be. I knew my family wouldn’t care—they’d fall in love with Isadora.

“Of course, it’s none of my business,” Mia was contrite.

“Come on, Mila.” Cyrus put a hand on her elbow. “Let’s get going before we have to spend the weekend with the G Man.”

I let the darkness go. I was in love for the first time in my life. How did it matter what people thought?

“No worries, Mila. As Cyrus says, you better get going and beat the storm. The sky is working itself into a frenzy.”

Mila nodded and left quietly with Cyrus. I stood watching the clouds when I heard the meeting room door open and close. In the window’s reflection I saw Isaac.

“Did Adel send you to plead your case?” I grumbled, not attempting to hide my irritation. My annoyance was palpable; I neither had the time nor the patience for these behind-the-scenes machinations.

“Adel...she isn’t speaking to me. I’ve called and left messages, nothing,” Isaac confessed. “I’m here on my own accord.”

“Why?” I turned to face him.

Isaac’s usually composed face was marred with genuine concern. He swallowed hard before he began, his voice edged with a desperation I’d not heard before. “Gordon, it’s not as you think. Adel’s in trouble. A lot of trouble.”

I raised an eyebrow, unwilling to be drawn into another one of their scams. “Go on,” I said, my tone skeptical.

“She’s being blackmailed. Someone has some information on her, something she’s desperate to keep hidden.”

I studied him for a moment. The earnestness in his eyes was unmistakable. *And* not too far from what we were suspecting. Someone was *bleeding* Adel dry. “Why come to me with this?”

Isaac hesitated, choosing his words with care. “Because you’re a man of means, Gordon. And because despite everything, I believe you care for Adel. I can’t stand by and watch her suffer.”

Outside, the storm howled and moaned, echoing the chaos of our conversation. I felt trapped, not just by the snowstorm but also by the intricacies of the human web that was rapidly entangling us all.

“And what,” I said slowly, every word measured, “Do you suggest I do?”

Isaac’s plea, desperate and sincere, echoed in the chamber, underscored by the storm’s wrath.

“I don’t know. She wanted to sell to pay off the blackmailer.”

“How much is the blackmailer asking?”

“Too much.” Isaac sat down on a chair as if exhausted. “She won’t tell me how much, Gordon.”

I need fifty million dollars. Man of means or not, I didn’t have that kind of money lying around in my safe at home.

“Blackmail is a cunning trap,” I mused carefully. “Once sprung, the jaws only tighten. Do you know what this blackmailer has on her?”

Isaac shook his head. “She won’t confide in me. But the changes in her are unmistakable. She’s distracted, on edge. I fear what she may do if driven to desperation.”

I sighed, the easy paths now blocked. “I don’t know how to help her Isaac and I’m not sure I want to.”

“She’s liquidating everything she has, Gordon. Everything.”

“Is she planning to pay the blackmailer off or run with the money?” I asked.

Isaac was taken aback by the question. That thought hadn’t crossed his mind though it had mine. Paying off a blackmailer was folly. You’d keep doing it and from all appearances she’d been doing it for a while. Maybe now she’d decided to end the whole thing and disappear with her money.

“I don’t know but...it is plausible that’s why she’s liquidating her assets.”

Outside, the storm’s fury seemed to increase as we forged the delicate bonds of an unexpected alliance. The lamps in the hall flickered, casting brighter rays into the shadowed chamber.

“You should get going,” I warned Isaac. “Let’s talk next week in LA.”

“Will you help her?”

I nodded. “I’ll try my best.”

“Thank you.”

I listened as Isaac’s footsteps faded and considered the man. He might be in love with Adel, but the feds were investigating him. My money was on insider trading. That was just the kind of thing that Isaac would try to pull.

Adel on the other hand...I wasn’t sure what she’d done that was so horrible that she was allowing herself to be blackmailed. I’d ask her, I decided and then maybe we could see how to help her.



Chapter 24

★ ISADORA

The lobby was eerily silent, the only sounds were the howling wind outside and the rhythmic ticking of the antique grandfather clock in the resort lobby.

Isaac and Jeff stood tensely near the front desk, their eyes darting between glancing at their watches and the doorway. Their impatience was unmistakable as the minutes dragged on with no sign of Adel.

Gordon sat resolutely in an armchair by the fireplace going through his phone, not paying much attention to anything else.

In the far corner, Cyrus and Mila were huddled together, whispering in hushed, anxious tones. Their faces were etched with worry and their postures rigid with tension. Occasionally they stole nervous glances at Isaac and Jeff or peered out the lobby windows at the worsening weather.

Drago was reading the latest Salman Rushdie book *Victory City*, ignoring everyone. He'd been delighted to leave Golden Valley Resort and then I broke his bubble when I told him Maria's strict instructions meant he was

going to be at the mercy of my mother, who was going to pamper him. Drago was *not* looking forward to that.

A custom all-terrain vehicle stood menacingly outside, resembling a predator lying in wait. It was an imposing beast, built to conquer the most perilous conditions.

“Where is she?” Jeff finally shattered the silence, unable to contain the frustration in his tone. Adel had missed the meeting and now it appeared she was late.

“Has anyone heard from her?” I asked quietly. We were rapidly running out of time before the storm hit full force.

“Mila got a text from her earlier,” Cyrus reminded us. “Maybe you could text her, Mila.”

Mila nodded. “Yeah.” She pulled out her phone and groaned. “It’s been doing this all week. It just turns off without warning. I think I need a new phone.”

Across the lobby, Gordon’s gaze locked with mine, his eyebrows raising in an unspoken question. I could only shake my head helplessly in response.

The giant clock ticked relentlessly in the background as the minutes continued to pass. When fifteen minutes turned to twenty with no sign of Adel, I could stay still no longer. “I’m going to check on her,” I suggested.

What the hell was Adel doing? I’d told her personally that we needed everyone out of the resort before noon.

The worsening storm outside seemed to roar in approval as I made my way hastily down the darkened hallway to Adel’s suite. My knocks went unanswered, fueling a sense of foreboding that clawed up my spine.

I used my master key to open the door.

The dim light from the hallway cast eerie shadows on the hardwood floors

in Adel's suite. Everything was unnervingly silent, save for the soft crackling of the fireplace. My eyes were immediately drawn to the hearth. Adel lay there, motionless, her face pale against the dark hue on the polished wooden floor and the orange glow of the fire. Near her head lay the fireplace poker, painted dark red. As I came closer, I could smell blood, it was like a halo around Adel's head.

I approached her cautiously, already suspecting the worst. Kneeling beside her, I gently felt for a pulse. Her skin was cold, lifeless. The grim reality settled within me.

Taking a few moments to collect myself, I called Gordon. He picked up immediately. "Isa?"

"I need you to bring Drago up here. Adel is...ah...dead."

"Fuck. Are you okay? Step out of the room, baby. I'm there in a second."

"Drago uses crutches, it's going to take you more than a minute," I said dryly, but I took his advice and stepped out of the suffocating suite, closing the door behind me. I leaned against the wall, feeling my whole body shaking. "Gordon?" I spoke into the phone.

"Baby, stay on the line. I got this."

I listened to him whisper to Drago who nodded.

"What's going on, Gordon?" Isaac demanded.

I put the phone away from my ear as I felt a wave of nausea. I'd seen a couple of dead bodies before. My *abuela* and an aunt. But this was grotesque. Adel lay still, eyes wide and glassy, looking up at the ceiling. The surrounding blood had congealed, giving out that irony odor that I'd probably smell for the rest of my life.

Bile rose in my throat as shock and fresh horror crashed over me. My heart slammed against my ribs, breath coming in panicked gasps. My legs felt

unsteady, so I let myself crumble onto the floor and leaned against the wall, the image of Adel burning itself into my mind as I waited for Gordon.

“Baby.” Gordon helped me stand.

“Where’s Drago?” I asked, looking around.

He crushed me in a hug. “You okay?”

I nodded. “I’m fine. She’s the one who’s dead.”

Gordon nodded. “Drago is hobbling his way here. I didn’t want to wait.”

I smiled. “You taking care of me, Gordon?”

He kissed my mouth softly. “Stay here. I’m going to look.”

I held his suit sleeve. “I checked her pulse. She’s gone.”

He nodded grimly but opened the door and walked in. I didn’t look beyond the open door and trained my eyes to the elevator at the far end, waiting for Drago. As the elevator doors opened, Drago came through.

Gordon stepped out of the suite and put an arm around me. “I’m so sorry you had to see that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Drago came up to me. “Do you have anyone on staff with any medical training?”

I thought about it for a moment. The staff doctor was long gone. There was no one in the hotel...and then I remembered that we had someone who’d be perfect.

“Tanya, our spa manager. She lives in the resort. She’s still here. She used to be an ER nurse.”

“ER nurse to spa manager?”

“Everyone needs a change in career from time to time,” I remarked. “Why don’t you both manage things here. I’ll go get Tanya.”

Drago looked from me to Gordon. “I’m assuming you’ve been inside?”

Gordon nodded.

“Did you touch anything?”

Gordon frowned. “I’ve seen enough *Law & Order* episodes. I know what not to do.”

I looked at my fingers then and realized there was blood on them. “I... checked her pulse.” I lifted my hand and Drago sighed.

“Oh, fuck, Isa.” Gordon came up to me.

“Can I wash my hands?” My eyes filled with tears.

Drago nodded. “We’ll take your fingerprints once we get crime scene guys here.”

A message flashed on my phone, and I grimaced. “Well not for the next forty-eight hours they won’t be here. The roads just closed. I’m assuming the last of my guests are still downstairs.”

“Yep. And getting curiouser by the minute. I told Mila to not let anyone leave to come up here,” Gordon informed me.

“Go,” Drago instructed me, “I’ll check the scene and then talk to everyone. I don’t want *anyone* in here to contaminate the scene.”

The usually sullen LAPD detective, brooding over a sprained ankle, was suddenly animated. It was an odd and almost unsettling sight to see someone uplifted in the face of such tragedy, but as they say, everyone has their calling.

“You look more energetic than I’ve seen in a long time,” I told Drago.

He shrugged. “Murder is better than getting a fucking aroma therapy massage. Your masseuse all but killed *me* trying to make my ankle better.”

“Did it work?” I wondered.

“Just go get Tanya,” he snapped. “Gordon, you stay guard and make sure no one comes in.”

“Aye.”



Chapter 25

★ GORDON

“I’m sorry to let you all know that Adel Kovács has died,” Drago announced gruffly as we all gathered in the bar off the hotel lobby. Just last night this place had felt warm and welcoming, with its huge fireplace and cozy spots to kick back. But tonight, the news of Adel’s death made it feel cold and gloomy, even with the fire going.

The storm outside raged on, the windows framing a dark, freezing abyss that got worse with each falling snowflake. The dim lights cast an eerie glow over us all, making the whole scene feel strange and unreal. Adel was gone, just like that. And we were left here in the shadows to take in the chilling news.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Isaac rose. “I want to see her.”

“And do what?” Drago enquired.

“I don’t believe you.”

Drago shrugged. “That’s your choice. From my preliminary assessment, it’s evident that someone struck Adel with a fireplace poker.”

“What?” Now Jeff rose, furious. “I thought she had a fucking heart attack or something.”

“Blunt force trauma appears to be the cause of death. I can’t confirm cardiac arrest, that’ll have to wait for the coroner’s report,” Drago stated matter-of-factly in his usual no-nonsense style. As a seasoned homicide detective, he cut right to the chase at the crime scene. Drago had probably seen it all before and wasn’t one to mince words or get sentimental when examining a victim. “The evidence suggests that the victim had been struck violently in the head, likely with a heavy blunt object, I suspect the poker, judging by the extent of the trauma. I’m going leave the detailed forensics to the lab techs.”

Mila had her hand on her mouth. “I can’t believe this.”

Drago sighed. “I know this is a shock.”

“When did she die?” I asked.

Drago looked at me. “Based on body temp and lack of rigor mortis, about an hour or so ago. No longer.”

I looked at Isadora who was sitting next to me on the comfortable leather couch. “When did the guests and staff leave?”

“Ah...everyone was gone by ten thirty. Elspeth?” she asked the bartender.

A tall redhead in her early twenties, Elspeth was a local and lived close by. She was happy to stay in the resort and had volunteered to be part of Isadora’s skeletal crew. I knew she’d thought the resort would be empty but now there were a few guests remaining. And one of these guests, based on time of death and when everyone else left the resort, had probably murdered Adel.

I could see the same thought cross Isadora’s mind. She looked at everyone in the bar, horrified.

I took her hand in mine.

“I’ve been in touch with the local authorities,” Drago began, his voice even and authoritative. “Given the circumstances, I’ll be taking the lead on the investigation until they can arrive.”

Indignant murmurs rose immediately, the audacity of the implication not lost on any of us.

“You can’t possibly believe we had something to do with this,” Isaac interjected, the incredulity clear in his voice.

Jeff looked equally shocked, his face paling, “This is preposterous. We are here for business, not—.”

Ignoring the rising dissent, Drago interjected, “I’ll be speaking to each of you separately. For now, try to remain calm.”

“Man, we’re grieving,” Jeff, who didn’t look like he knew grief from his ass, protested.

“You can grieve while you give me your statement,” Drago said lazily. “Isa, can I get a room?”

Isadora stood up. “We have a boardroom off the bar here. Elspeth, can you make sure the fireplace is on in the Sierra Room and let’s get some drinks in there.”

She looked around the room. “I know these are trying circumstances. But we’re in a beautiful resort and I assure you that chef is still here and has promised to feed us. Elspeth is going to serve you any and all drinks you need or want. We’re going to make sure you’re all comfortable.”

Isaac had tears running down his face. “Comfortable? She’s dead and you’re talking about comfort.”

Always the drama queen, I thought.

I moved to the window and looked out at the raging blizzard. Snow swirled

wildly, already accumulating into deep drifts. We were trapped, cut off from the outside world. A murderer hidden amongst us.

As if reading my thoughts, Drago came to stand beside me. “Until this storm clears, no one leaves. Any expert skiers here?”

I grinned. “You mean that someone will ski out of here during a snowstorm? No. Maybe except me.”

“Yeah but you’re not leaving Isa here, and going anywhere, so I’m not worried.”

I put my hands in my pockets. “I can’t believe Adel is gone.”

“You knew her well?”

I nodded. “We dated many, many years ago. She was in the tech world, and we were *friendly* even if we weren’t friends. Are you sure it’s murder? Could it not have been an accident?”

“Maybe if she fell on the poker again and again. Besides that, all I can see is that someone cracked her skull open with one hit and then went for hit number two, three and four.”

“That’s a lot of anger,” I stated.

Drago considered me and I knew he was treating me like he would everyone else, as a suspect.

“Not Isadora,” I warned him.

He smiled. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Not Isadora, Drago. Me, everyone else. Not her.”

Drago chuckled. “I touch a hair on her head and Maria will use a poker on me. And I know it’s not her. She was downstairs with *me* during the window of the murder. Could she have slipped away and done it? Sure. But I don’t see a motive.”

I took a deep breath, feeling tension leave me.

“But Adel was your lover once...and Isa can be pretty jealous,” he continued.

My eyes flashed with rage, and I grabbed Drago’s arm. “Don’t fuck with me.”

Drago was an LAPD homicide detective, who’d worked in vice where he spent time undercover for a significant amount of his tenure. He wasn’t someone I could intimidate no matter how much Scottish thuggery I had in my blood.

Drago grinned. “Man, you fell hard for her.”

Tell me about it!

“Drago,” Isaac came up to us. “Where is she?”

“In her suite.”

I knew Drago had turned off the heat in the room to preserve the body and the scene.

“I need to see her,” Isaac pleaded.

Drago looked at me with sympathy. “After your statement...if possible. It’s a crime scene, Isaac. I can’t let people just wander in or out.”

Isaac walked away, and we heard Jeff boss around the bartender, rudely asking for a Scotch.

“This is going to be a very long forty-eight hours,” I acknowledged.

“Yeah, it’s going to be one for the history books.” Drago’s eyes blazed with determination.

The hunt had begun. Friends instantly became suspects. Behind one of those innocent facades lurked a cunning and merciless killer.

I scrutinized each familiar visage, searching for signs of deception. Cyrus’s strong brows were furrowed in concern; Jeff’s face impassive as he cleaned his glasses. Isaac wrung his hands anxiously while Mila stared blankly into

the fire. Any of them could be the culprit. No one was above suspicion. Well, except Isadora and Drago.

Outside, the wind howled remorselessly. We were now involuntary players in a deadly game we hadn't chosen.



Chapter 26

★ ISADORA

While Drago spoke with the skeletal hotel staff, taking their statement, I asked Gordon to join me in his suite.

Snow pressed heavily against the windows of Gordon's suite, the world outside blanketed and muted by the ongoing storm. Inside, the heated wooden floors and warmly lit room stood in stark contrast to the frosty atmosphere between us.

Taking a deep breath, I began, "I overheard your argument with Adel." My voice wavered more than I would have liked, revealing the tempest of emotions raging within. "In the lobby."

A multitude of expressions flitted across his face: surprise, confusion, then a hint of amusement. It was clear he knew what I was insinuating, and to my surprise, he seemed to find the whole situation entertaining.

"Isa," he chuckled, his rich baritone wrapping around my name in that intimate way he had, "are you interrogating me?"

The levity in his voice juxtaposed starkly against the gravity of the situation. My eyes fixed on his, searching for any sign of deception. "Did

you...ah...you know?"

His mirth faded just a tad, replaced by a gentler, more earnest expression. "Baby," he began slowly, "I assure you, I didn't do anything to Adel. I was in the meeting room when she was... when it happened. I was on a call. There's a record."

I felt a small sense of relief, but questions still plagued me. "Are you sure?"

"Yes...but even if I wasn't, I didn't kill her. I didn't need to or want to."

"Damn it, I wish I'd thought to ask you where you were when she died. I feel like a fool," I muttered.

He pulled me into his arms then, eyeing me with a blend of admiration and amusement. "I'm not in the habit of offering alibis unless asked. And I'm glad I didn't because you are a delight. You never cease to surprise me, *m'eudail*."

"I may have read too many Agatha Christie novels," I whispered.

Gordon reached out, his fingers lightly tracing the back of my hand. "I appreciate your directness. Always have. And I'm glad you came to me. Trust, especially in circumstances like this, is vital."

"You're not mad at me?" I had been certain he'd be pissed off that I'd dared to suspect him. I mean, it sounded silly when I thought it out loud, but *someone* had killed Adel. She didn't just die all on her lonesome.

"I'm *very* mad," he said calmly, but he didn't sound mad at all. "Maybe you need a spanking."

I frowned. "You're not mad but this is a sex thing, right? Spanking?"

Gordon laughed and hugged me closer. "Yeah, it's a sex thing."

"Are you into spanking?" I asked now curious. I'd seen BDSM porn. It wasn't my favorite kind of porn and honestly I had very low pain tolerance.

This was the main reason I hadn't gotten a tattoo, even though I badly wanted one.

"If my partner is." *Dios mío*, way he said *partner*! My panties went damp like that.

I cleared my throat. "Would you spank me?"

"Are you asking me to?" He unbuttoned my suit jacket and took a deep breath when he saw I wore a black demi cup underneath and nothing else. He took the jacket off.

"Gordon, I have to go back down."

"I know, baby." But he basically ignored my protest. "We'll save the spanking for another time."

He unbuttoned my pants and peeled them off, taking my panties down as well. He helped me step out of them and his voice became hoarse. "Keep the heels on. They're sexy."

I was wearing booties with high heels. "I have a thing for shoes...and bags. I have too many. Well, at least Alejandro—" I stopped talking when he parted my lips down *there* and kissed me.

In less than a minute I was panting, my hands on his hair, pushing him, pulling him, I wasn't sure. God! My knees were giving away.

And then right before I could orgasm, he stood up.

"I was almost..."

He turned me around and bent me over the dresser. He ran a hand down my spine and between my legs. He caressed my perineum, and I almost jumped out of my skin. "Ah...Gordon."

"Yes."

I heard him unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants.

He dipped his finger inside me and ran my juices up between my buttocks. I

flinched.

“You want me to stop?” he asked.

“No,” I gasped.

And then suddenly, his hand crashed against my right butt cheek, and I cried out. I don’t know how it was possible, but I was wetter.

“More?” he asked simply.

“More,” I whimpered.

He caressed the ass he’d just smacked and then before I could catch my breath, his hand came down on my left cheek. “Please,” I sobbed, not sure what I was pleading for.

He came inside me then, a hand on the small of my back keeping me in place. He was gentle, almost inexorably slow as if he wanted to feel everything as he moved in me.

“Touch yourself,” he commanded as his hands cupped my breasts, squeezed the tips.

Isadora Santos was a prude. I mean there was a reason I didn’t sleep with anyone until I turned twenty-four. Now I was having sex with a man who said things like *touch yourself*.

Dios mío! There was no way. God! I should never have tried to seduce a man this experienced. He was going to think our sex was boring.

“You want me to stop?” he asked.

I turned to look at him. He wore only his dress shirt, and his pants were at his ankles. He should look sleazy, but he looked beautiful.

“No. I don’t want you to stop.”

“Then touch yourself, Isadora.”

“I can’t do that.” Sudden tears sprang into my eyes.

“Hey.” He touched my cheek. “We’re just playing.”

“I’m embarrassed,” I admitted and tried to look away, but he wouldn’t let me.

He turned me around and kissed my mouth. “Why are you sad then? Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head, unable to stop the tears from streaming down my cheeks. “I’m boring in bed,” I blurted out.

He looked stunned for a second and then burst out laughing. I hit him on his chest. “Are you laughing at me? I’m feeling vulnerable and you think it’s funny.”

But the way he was laughing made my lips twitch.

“Baby, I’m trying to have a quicky with you right after you saw a dead woman because I’m desperate to have you, which I shouldn’t be since I spent half of last night inside you. And you think you’re boring?”

“I’m too shy to touch myself,” I confessed.

“Then we’ll take it slowly. We won’t do anything that makes you uncomfortable.” He was so gentle that I went right back into his hug, listening to the beating of his heart. He smelled of cologne, something woodsy and all Gordon.

“We should go back down,” he murmured.

“Yes. I’m sorry I killed the mood...ah wrong word considering *her* body is still there on that other side of the building.” I sighed. “And now the mood is truly dead...you know what I mean?”

“It’s not a big deal, Isadora.” Gordon pulled his pants up as I hunted for my clothes.

“I always do this. I talk too much and...I ruin things and...” I babbled as I put my clothes on, frustrated with myself.

“Hey.” He lifted my chin with his finger. “The most amazing sex I’ve ever

had was with you last night...is now...*with* you.”

“For me too,” I grinned.

“That’s not saying much. It was your first time.”

“And it was fantastic.”

“And you don’t talk too much.”

I made a face. “Now I know you’re lying because you keep shutting me up by kissing me. So, I know you think I talk—“

He cut me off by kissing me.



Chapter 27

★ GORDON

The ever-present roar of the storm outside juxtaposed starkly against the warm, intimate setting of the Golden Valley Resort bar. Despite the raging blizzard, inside, the glow of candles and a crackling fire bathed the room in a comforting, amber hue. Amid this seemingly serene setting, tension hung heavily in the air, each face etched with a blend of disbelief, worry, and subtle fear.

Isadora and I met with Drago in the board room he'd commandeered to take statements.

"Any update?" Isadora asked him as she leaned a hip against the table, her arms crossed.

I set a glass of whiskey in front of Drago and took a seat next to Isadora. It wasn't exactly subtle—because it felt very much like it was Drago against us.

"I've taken everyone's statement, except you two."

"You want me to leave while you speak with Gordon?" Isadora asked.

Drago shook his head. "It's fine. I know *you* didn't kill Adel. And I don't think Gordon did either. But I do have questions."

Isadora nodded, and I pulled her onto my lap. “Do you mind?” she protested and pushed away from me. I let her. It was so easy to rile her up that I enjoyed doing it. That thought gave me pause. I was *playing* with her. It had been a long time since I’d played with a woman. I had lost that...well, youthfulness and like a cliché it was back when I was fucking a woman eighteen years my junior. *Put me on a Viagra commercial already!*

“Isa, you mentioned you overheard Adel talking to Isaac last night at the Christmas party?” Drago prompted.

Isadora nodded and then looked at me. “I forgot to mention it... there was so much happening.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me everything.” I took her hand in mine because I knew she was nervous even though she was hiding it. She didn’t like to talk about this because when she did, she thought about Adel’s dead body.

I felt protective towards Isadora. It was a novel emotion. And not because she couldn’t take care of herself. She was more than capable. No, I *enjoyed being* protective of her, of taking care of her, of loving her.

A shard of joy seared through me. I was in love. *Fecking hell!*

“Isaac was telling Adel that he wanted to help her, and ...oh, *por dios!* I almost forgot.” She looked at both of us. “Now, don’t judge me. I’m curious by nature. My brothers say I spy on them. I don’t. I just...find out things about them. I keep my ears and eyes open. I don’t snoop around. Okay?”

Drago murmured something to the effect of *kill me now*. “Okay. Can you tell me what you found when you were...ah...*not* snooping.”

Isadora looked sheepish. “When I took Adel to her room when she crashed into a server and got juice all over herself. That was...wow, just yesterday

morning. Can you believe it? It feels like it was such a long time ago and now she's—“

“Isa, baby.” I put a hand on her thigh, which was nervously hopping up and down and stilled it.

“I’m babbling again. I babble when I’m nervous. I don’t normally get nervous but when I do it’s babble city and...” She stopped talking as she saw both of us amused at her. “You’re going to say you’re laughing *with* me and not at me, right?”

“Right,” I murmured.

“Okay, so I went into her suite and there was a fresh bouquet of scarlet roses...we need to check how they got there. I’m sure there’s a note on the computer next to her profile and room.”

We waited patiently. There was no point hurrying her because she was anxious, and it would only make the *babbling* worse. I found that I liked it. If Drago wasn’t there, or if we weren’t actually taking a statement during a murder investigation, I could kiss her to shut up. A very pleasurable way to help her *babble* less.

“There was a card and Adel read it. Her hands were trembling. She threw the card on the desk and walked away. She asked me to get out.”

“Which you didn’t do?” Drago was now taking a piss because he was as amused as I was.

Isadora glared at him. “I have two older brothers, you think you can pull that let’s mock her shit on me?”

“Sorry.” Drago was still smiling.

She did that, I thought. Made people smile. She was so genuine herself that she invited everyone to bask in her warmth.

“I hesitated, you know, thrown off by her sudden coldness, but before I

could *leave*, Adel disappeared into the bathroom. And then curiosity got the better of me. The card said...now this was strange. All it said was *Frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron.*"

"Water like a stone. Snow had fallen. Snow on snow on snow. In the bleak midwinter," I said instinctively. They both stared at me. "It's a Christmas carol?"

"Right...ah...*in the bleak midwinter*?" Isadora asked.

"Yes."

Drago leaned back and considered. "Maybe it's just a Christmas carol and means nothing."

"Actually, the carol juxtaposes the hardships of the world with the hope and salvation the Christ child brings," I explained in mock seriousness, and Drago sighed.

Isadora chuckled. "According to my *abuela*, the song helps us realize material things don't mean anything, what's truly valuable is one's heart and devotion."

"Are we done with the carol lesson here?" Drago asked dryly.

"Yeah. It's certainly a cryptic note to leave with flowers," I agreed.

"Cryptic? It's *espeluznante como el infierno*," Isadora retorted.

"She gets more Spanish when she's...flustered," I explained

Drago grinned, "Yes, I agree it's creepy as fuck."

"I said creepy as hell...*infierno*," Isadora corrected him. "Did you find the card in her room?"

Now it was Drago's turn to look sheepish. "I'll be honest, I tried to do a search, but it's fucking hard with a crutch."

"I could do it for you," Isadora pounced at the idea. "I didn't kill her. Swear on my *abuela*'s grave."

Drago nodded. “Sure, that’s all we need someone to say. If someone swears on their fucking grandmother’s grave we just set them free. It’s an LAPD rule.”

Isadora narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t make me call Maria. Or...my mother.”

“Fine, go search the room. Wear gloves, please. And take some plastic bags so if you find anything, stick it in there. It’s the best we can do while we’re stuck here...for a couple of days from what the weather report says.”

“I’ll come with you.” No way she was going into that room with a dead body without me.

Isadora froze as she realized Adel was still in the room. “You covered her with a sheet or something, right?”

“Yeah,” Drago replied. “And dropped the temperature. That room is freezing temps. It’s the best we can do, or we’d have to carry her into your freezer in the kitchen.”

“No fucking way. I’ll have to replace the freezer if a body has been there and right now the resort can’t afford it.”

I put an arm around Isadora and brushed my lips against the side of her head. “My practical, Isadora.”

“Drago, you’re sure I didn’t kill Adel but are you sure Mr. CEO here didn’t? He had a thing with her, *and* he had a fight with her.”

I grinned and hugged her close. “She loves me like crazy.”

“Yeah, the love is pouring out of her.” Drago ran a hand through his head. “Based on the time of death, Gordon was in a meeting. I saw the fucking recording and time stamp. Raya sent it through. Thanks for that.”

“I’m glad you didn’t kill her. Though it would be a nice story to say that I lost my virginity to a murderer,” Isadora mused.

“I didn’t hear that,” Drago muttered. “I don’t know that so if anyone asks me I can’t tell them. Your mother is going to ask me if you had sex, isn’t she?”

Isadora leaned down and kissed Drago on his forehead. “You go terrorize the others and we’ll go search Adel’s room.”

“I’m taking statements, not terrorizing anyone.”

We held hands as we left the boardroom. I, Gordon Mackenzie held a woman’s hand. *Aye*, I was behaving like a wet behind the ears schoolboy. I didn’t know what had gotten into me.

“I love you, you know that.” She stopped me in the hallway and hugged me tight. “You get me. You don’t think my jokes are weird.”

Yeah, I knew what had gotten into me. She had.

“I think your jokes *are* weird, *m’eudail*.”

She pulled away from the hug but held my hand as we walked. “And you were doing so well until now. Men. They always ruin a good thing.”



Chapter 28

★ ISADORA

Gordon and I entered Adel's suite, the air was frigid inside to preserve the crime scene. Adel's body lay motionless, under a white sheet, on the floor where she had fallen. I shivered, from both the cold and the eeriness of being in the presence of the deceased.

"Let's look around." Gordon scanned the room. I gave him the surgical gloves I'd picked up from the reception and snapped mine on as he did his.

I began opening drawers and rummaging through Adel's belongings. I wasn't sure what I was looking for exactly, but knew any clues could help identify her killer.

"She has sexy lingerie." I pulled out a red Agent Provocateur teddy.

Gordon looked at it for a long moment.

"Did you give this to her?"

"Baby, Adel, and I were an item fifteen years ago. And I don't buy women lingerie."

I put the lingerie back and meticulously went through all the drawers while Gordon went through her clothes in the closet.

“What do you buy women?”

Gordon paused and turned to face me and looked thoughtful for a moment. “I’ve bought some jewelry. Scarves from Hermès. And—.”

“Obviously, has to be Hermès. Is that like your parting gift?”

I frowned. “A what?”

“I read this book once when this older man who sleeps with younger woman usually gives them an Hermès scarf as an *it’s been nice fucking you but it’s over now* gift,” I explained.

I went through her bedside drawer and found a photograph in an old-fashioned frame. It was of a younger Adel with an older woman. I took the photo to Gordon.

“Do you know who this is?”

Gordon peered at the photo. “Her mother. She was a countess. Adel comes from French royalty.”

“No wonder she kept saying things like *mon ami*,” I commented and put the frame where I found it.

I paused for a moment and looked around. “You know what I don’t see?”

Gordon waited.

“Her phone. Did you see her phone anywhere?”

Gordon shook his head. He pulled out his phone and made a call. “Drago, do you have Adel’s phone?”

While he talked I walked around Adel, hating that I was invading her privacy to where the scarlet roses still stood. I examined the vase and saw a florists name and phone number. *Roses of Sierra*.

I snapped a photo and send it to Drago, asking him to contact them about who purchased the flowers for Adel.

On the table there was a few papers, sticky notes. No card with that cryptic

message about Christmas carols.

One sticky note read, *Remember mammogram* and something clenched inside me. This was a normal every day woman doing the usual things women do like booking mammogram appointments and as another note said, *Don't forget vitamins.*

Gordon finished his call and pulled out a mink coat.

“Mink? How absolutely crass,” I declared.

“Now, this is a gift I *have* given a woman.”

“Mink? How could you?”

“With ease,” Gordon went through the pockets of the coat. “It was faux, and *she* loved it. Hard to wear it in LA though. Good thing *she* moved to New York.”

“What was she? A model?”

When Gordon ignored my question and focused on the sticky notes, he found in Adel's pockets he held them up to me.

“So, she was a model?” I took a few of the notes.

“Hmm,” he said noncommittally.

“She seems to write stickies. The rest of us write stuff in our calendar... speaking of which, what did Drago say about her phone?”

“She didn't have it on her, and he doesn't have it.”

“Now that's suspicious.” I looked for the phone and even went down on my knees to see if had fallen under the bed or some other place in the room. The phone *was* missing.

“The killer took her phone,” Gordon suggested.

“I think so. They could open the phone if she used facial recognition as so many do these days. And access what was in it. I mean, even with a dead person, the phone would open, right?”

Gordon shook his head. “No, phones cannot be unlocked with your face while you are sleeping or after you are dead. And even if they opened her eyes, the phone detects body temperature so unless they did it while she was recently dead...but unlikely. Now, thumbprint, yeah, I can see that happened.”

“This room is cold.” I shivered in my suit.

I walked up to the fireplace wishing I could turn it on and searched it. I caught the burnt edge of a card.

“Gordon,” I called out.

He came over and we looked at the burnt card edge. “Was this the card that Christmas carol was written on?”

I nodded. “It was printed, not written. This is it.”

I pulled out a plastic bag from my pocket and put my first piece of evidence in. I laid the plastic bag on the desk. And rifled through papers on it. There was nothing interesting but then under the desk blotter there was a manila envelope. I opened it and out came a card. On it was typed, *snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

I dropped the card on the table. “Gordon,” I squeaked.

He looked at the card and took the manila envelope; and pulled out a baby’s yellow sock.

“This is morbid.” I took a step back. *Curiosity killed the cat* and was giving me nausea.

Gordon set the sock down on the table and went back to the fireplace. “See this, Isadora.”

I came to him, and he showed me a burnt piece of paper. It had the Golden Valley Resort logo on top. It was from a notepad that we left in all our meeting rooms and hotel rooms.

Most of the paper was burnt but one sentence could be made out despite the burns, *Snow had fallen, snow on snow, Snow on snow.*

“That’s from that Christmas carol as well,” I whispered. “Someone has a macabre sense of humor.”

“And that someone is in this hotel,” Gordon said what I’d already surmised. “This note was written here.”

“Can you make out the handwriting?”

He shook his head. “Block letters and mostly burnt. Black ink, pretty common. I don’t think so.”

“The pens we leave in the meeting rooms are black ballpoints,” I agreed. I held out another plastic bag and Gordon put the charred note inside it.

It was getting dark and the dim light—thanks to the snow and lights—filtering from the outside into Adel’s suite lent a somber atmosphere. It was cold, eerily so, with the icy touch of the storm seeping through the windows.

“Let’s get this done,” I snapped out of the feeling of dread. *Next time you find a dead body, don’t say stupid shit like I can search the room.*

I went into the opulent bathroom. She’d used the bathtub I noticed as the residue of the bath salts were in the large tub; and an empty glass of wine was on the ledge. I felt sad to see that—she’d been just living her life and *poof* someone took it away from her.

I looked through all the little and big bottles on the bathroom counter. She used Sisley for skincare—toner, moisturizer, face wash, masks...wow! She had more stuff than even I did, and I was a complete skincare whore. *And* Tom Ford for makeup. I preferred Fenty, but then I was not white like Adel and needed makeup to suit my brown skin.

Gordon leaned against the bathroom door. “Anything interesting?”

I shook my head. “Not so far. Have you dated any women of color before

me?”

His eyebrows rose comically. “Excuse me?”

I shrugged. “I was thinking about her makeup. She has all Tom Ford and I use Fenty because they cater to women who are different shades of brown. And I wondered.”

Gordon seemed uncomfortable with the question, but he surprised me by saying, “I have dated women of...well all colors, sizes, and ages. How about that? Does that sound diverse and inclusive enough for you?”

“What ages?”

He grinned. “Well...for the past many years it’s been women my age and older. Probably the youngest was in her thirties.”

“Models are older than that.” As I sifted through Adel’s belongings, my fingers brushed against a cold, smooth surface amidst the delicate fabrics and accessories. Drawing it out, I held a locket, its ornate design catching my eye immediately. It was crafted from silver, perhaps even white gold, bearing intricate swirls and patterns reminiscent of Art nouveau. Time and wear had given it a slightly antiqued appearance, though the craftsmanship was impeccable.

“I haven’t dated models in a long time.” He walked up to me and slid his arms around me, his chest against my back. “And I don’t intend to date anyone ever again.”

I paused. “*Ay señor*, when you say it like that, it sounds a bit final, does it not?”

I felt him stiffen. He nuzzled my ear. “Am I rushing you? You’re so young, you should...experience more.”

“Don’t you dare step away,” I ordered. “You’re not rushing me. I love the idea of *never ever* going on a date again. Have you seen the riffraff that you

have to date? I'm glad I've kissed all my frogs."

He brushed his lips under my ear, and I shivered. "*Amor mío.*"

"Yes, baby." He was hard against my ass. It was perverse the way we couldn't keep our hands off of each other. There was *literally* a dead woman in the room next to us.

"This is a beautiful locket," I murmured as I looked at it.

The front of the locket featured a single, stunning sapphire, its deep blue hue twinkling like a distant star. It felt heavy for its size, suggesting that it was solid and well-made. I thought.

I turned in Gordon's arms. "Did Adel have children?"

Gordon shook his head. "Not that I know of, and I'd know if she had kids. And from what she told me she never wanted children. Adel was not the maternal kind."

"But she stored a lock of hair in this beautiful piece of jewelry," I whispered.

I put the locket and the resin stone into a plastic baggie.

We'd done the search as best we could, we decided. After that I turned all the lights off in the suite and went outside.

In the hallway I felt my insides clench. The darkness, the storm, the murder, everything seemed to spiral out of control. And at that moment, all I craved was the reassuring presence of someone familiar, someone grounding amidst the chaos.

I turned and hugged Gordon. Burrowing into him. I was so glad he was here, he was *there*.

"Hey." He stroked my back.

I sniffled. "I didn't know her but it's terrifyingly sad that she's gone."

"I know."

I looked up at him. “Killed your boner didn’t it to see that lock of hair?” I teased.

“Absolutely. I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to get it up again.” I kissed Isadora’s nose.

“You know what worries me?”

“I think so. What we found means Adel’s killer, the blackmailer, is here. Among us.”

“And we’re in a resort cut off from the world,” I continued.

And just as I said that the lamps flickered, and an ominous darkness suddenly enveloped us. The cozy warmth of holding Gordon was immediately overshadowed by the weight of the storm’s fury, which had now claimed our power.

“*Por dios*, I’m worried about a killer and the storm *kills* our electricity. The universe is a vicious bitch.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll save you,” Gordon laughed as he used his phone as a flash light.

“Like a knight in shining armor?” I mocked.

“*Aye! I’ll be yer gallant knight in gleamin’ armor, ma bonnie lass,*“ he announced in a very Scottish accent, making me laugh in the darkness, despite my fears.



Chapter 29

★ GORDON

I accompanied Tanya to the electric room to turn on the generator while Isadora and Elspeth were in the kitchen, helping the chef.

We walked down the corridors of Golden Valley resort using a torch because I wanted to save power on my phone, though I wasn't sure if it mattered. We had no reception of any kind, not 5G, LTE or Wi-Fi. The faint echo of our footsteps on the hardwood floors added to the building tension of the situation.

“Thanks for coming with me,” Tanya broke the silence. “This storm has really thrown a wrench into everything.”

“It's no trouble.” *And I wanted to talk to her, get more information about Adel's body.* “It's been a long tough day for you as well.”

“I'm going to remember seeing that red halo of blood around her head forever.”

“I'm so sorry you had to go through that.” I felt her anxiety and changed the subject to ease her. “How did you end up working in a spa?”

As predicted she chuckled as she flashed the torch light at a door. The label on it read *Electric Room*. She gave me the torch to hold and pulled out a bunch of keys around a ring. “Now, I need to find the key for this room. Usually, we use keycards for everything...but with the power out.”

She tried different keys as she talked about her change of career. “My father was an IT project manager and always thought I’d become an engineer myself.”

“Small world,” I murmured. “I’m in IT as well.”

“I know. You’re the CEO of SynthoSoft. Trust me, everyone knows who you are.” There was no mocking or ass-kissing in her tone, she was just stating fact.

“But you didn’t become an engineer?”

She tried another key and sighed when it didn’t work. “No. I wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to take care of people.”

“That’s noble.”

The next key she tried slid, and the door opened. “*Viola!*”

“Excellent.”

We went inside and the silence was loud. Usually, an electric room was filled with sounds. I flashed the light around until I found the generator.

“I don’t know how to turn this thing on,” Tanya confessed.

I gave her the torch light and looked at the switches, dials, and buttons on the generator. “Very modern.”

“Nothing but the best for Isa,” she muttered, and I wondered if I caught a little resentment.

I flipped some switches, the generator hummed; and the lights in the room flickered back to life.

“There are enough bells and whistles here,” I considered, “Do we need to

program what parts of the building should have power?”

Tanya grimaced. “I believe it is pre-programmed. Only the rooms where people are checked in will have power; *and* some of the public areas. But Isa would know.”

I looked through the panels on the generator. “How long have you worked for Isadora?”

“Oh...a few months...since she started the resort. Before that I was at Bliss in LA. I moved here after my father passed away.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your father.”

I looked through the control panel and saw that Tanya was right, the system as pre-programmed to conserve power and light the most important areas only. The corridors were powered by LED lights that consumed very little electricity so at least we wouldn’t be in the dark, stumbling around when we needed to get from point A to point B.

I used a plastic wedge to leave the door to the electric room slightly ajar so it would remain open during the power outage.

“Thank you. He was very young, and it’s still painful,” she confessed.

“I’m so sorry. How did he pass?” I asked as we walked back to the stairs to go upstairs to the lobby and bar area.

“He...ah...died by suicide.” There were tears in her voice.

“I can’t imagine how hard that must be. Where did he work?”

She chuckled. “He worked for Alantis Software.”

I paused as we took the stairs she was a stair behind me. “Alantis?”

She nodded, and I saw her eyes flash in the dim LED lights that were guiding us back to the main part of the resort.

“Adel sold that company a year ago. Adel started Alantis. Did you know that?”

She didn't respond for a moment and then said softly, "Imagine my surprise when the dead woman I'm asked to examine is the one who killed my father?"

We were at the reception and my heart beat faster. This was a *very* strange coincidence. "Killed your father?"

Tanya nodded. "He was supposed to be her partner. He helped with the software she'd built and sold. She cheated him out of it. Daddy never recovered from that."

"Your father was Marcus Bennett," I breathed. "*The Marcus Bennett.*"

"Yes." She clutched at my arm. "Please don't tell anyone. I don't need anyone to know."

"Tanya, Detective Horvat will want to know of your connection with Adel."

"I don't have a connection," she hissed. "The first time saw her in the flesh was here at the resort."

"Either you tell Drago, or I will." I put my hand on hers. "You have nothing to be worried about." *Unless you killed Adel, in which case you have a lot to be worried about.*

She sighed. "I'll talk to him."

"Good." I patted her shoulder in a *there, there* futile gesture. "Let's see if dinner is served," I added to diffuse the tension between us.

Tanya went straight into the boardroom where Drago was, and I went to find Isadora. She was stepping out of the kitchen and seeing her made my heart skip a beat. *Skip a beat? Feck! I was done for.*

"You sorted out the power. Thank you." She came up to me and went on tiptoe to brush her lips against mine.

I hugged her close, feeling tension release. Is this how it could be? I'd have

this every day. I'd be able to feel like this all the time.

"Aye, the generator's up and humming. Parts of the resort should be lit up now."

She slid her hand into my arm and walked me back to the bar area. "Food is almost ready. I feel like it's been an endless day but also a short one. Everyone is at the bar. It's the warmest room with the fireplace *and*...there is *the* alcohol."

"Who's drunk?" I asked.

"Jeff."

"Obviously. There's something I learned from Tanya."

Her eyebrows shot up. "What?"

I told her about Tanya's father.

Isadora's face paled. "*Madre mía!* This keeps getting worse, doesn't it? Tanya knew Adel. What a coincidence. Do we believe in coincidences? In mystery novels there are none and you're not supposed to believe in them. In the *ABC Murders*, the great detective Hercule himself said, '*One coincidence is just a coincidence, two coincidences are a clue, three coincidences are a proof?*'"

"Never expected you to be an Agatha Christie fan." I kissed her hair. I couldn't stop kissing her, touching her. This was new. Everything she brought to us was new and fresh.

"*Si, Señor.* Though right now, I feel like I'm in one of her books and want to say things like, *use your little gray cells, mon ami.*" She said that last bit in an affected French accent.

I laughed, charmed by her.

"Tanya hating Adel is only one coincidence. We need two for a clue and three for," she reminded me.

“Aye, if the world’s finest detective said so, it must be true.”

She snickered. “What do you know about her father?”

“He was a fantastic coder. Innovative. He worked with many people...made little money, never had that big pay day. But Alantis was supposed to be that. The story in the IT world goes that he had creative difference with Adel and quit as lead developer.”

Isadora leaned against me as we came to the entrance of the bar. “Did you know he died by suicide?”

I shook my head. “Not really.”

“I never would’ve guessed Tanya would have history with Adel. Makes me wonder what else we’re missing?”

“It’s got me on edge too,” I admitted.

She exhaled deeply, and we stepped into the bar where there was a low hum of conversation between the few guests and staff who were left in the resort.

“We have good news,” Elspeth announced as soon as we entered the bar. “The storm will pass us by tomorrow morning *and* the roads will be clear by tomorrow afternoon...latest evening.”

“Any news on the power?” Isadora wondered.

“Afraid not. Two power lines are down,” Elspeth said.

“How do you know this?” I asked. “I have no bars on my phone.”

Elspeth grinned. “I went out and then up the snow embankment to the bottom of the first *piste*...it’s a walk, but I needed a break.”

I looked out of the window. It was dark and windy, but the snow did light things up. “That looks truly ominous.”

“And refreshing. I got a signal there and checked the Sierra weather report.”

Isadora smiled at me. “This storm too shall pass.”

“And god’s glorious sunshine will last forever,” I finished. With Isadora I

could weather many storms. I was certain of it.



Chapter 30

★ ISADORA

“I never trusted that bitch,” Cyrus told me as we stood out in the patio. He was smoking a cigarette, and I was hoping to get some bars on my phone to get in touch with my mother who was probably out of her mind with worry, even though I’d warned her this could happen because of the snowstorm.

“Looks like no one trusted Adel.” I gave up on my phone and put it in my jacket pocket. “Why did Gordon even agree to pursue a partnership with her?”

Cyrus took a long drag of his cigarette. “They have history. And despite her reputation I think he trusted her. Never trusted Isaac.”

I nodded. “How about Jeff?”

“Asshole,” Cyrus replied succinctly.

I laughed. “Mila...and he, were they ever a thing?” I remembered my conversation with Mila and how she’d been extra sad about Isaac and Adel pulling one on Gordon because Jeff was involved.

Cyrus grunted. “Yeah. Jeff worked for Adel then. That was...what two years ago? They dated for nearly a year...not sure when and why they broke up, but I know they did because I think he was sleeping with Adel for a while when he worked with her and even after.”

“Everyone knows everyone in this world.”

“And everyone is fucking each other,” Cyrus chortled. He finished his cigarette and dropped it into the snow-covered trashcan.

“Did you have anything with anyone in the IT world?” I mused.

“Sure. I’ve been divorced three times. The last time soured me on women.”

“When did that marriage end?”

“Three months ago,” Cyrus admitted. “But no one I work with. I don’t shit where I eat. It complicates things.”

We were walking back to the bar when I put a hand on Cyrus’s shoulder. “A question, did you know a man called Marcus Bennett?”

Cyrus looked confused. “The coder? Sure.”

“Tanya is his daughter.”

Cyrus raised an eyebrow. “No fucking way. He hated Adel. She ripped him off but good. But he was an asshole. He’d stolen code from people and...no one was sad to see him get booted out of Alantis.”

“He died by suicide.”

Cyrus considered what I said. “Didn’t know that. Didn’t make the IT gossip headlines. But then with Musk and everything else that’s going on, news needs to be pretty juicy to hit the grapevine.”

At the bar Elspeth had turned on Christmas music to add holiday cheer to a not-so-cheerful situation.

As Mariah sang, “*All I want for Christmas is You*,” my eyes found Gordon. He was talking to Mila who was crying in the far corner. Jeff was at the bar

drinking and hitting on Elspeth.

Tanya was sitting with Drago on a sofa. He had his foot up, and it looked like she'd told him about her connection to Adel.

I went up to Mila and Gordon. He was holding Mila's hand and then looked up at me."

I didn't even like her," Mila sobbed and laid her head on his chest.

Well, hell. I was jealous.

"Can you help get dinner set up?" I asked Gordon and sat down next to Mila. He grinned and let go of his assistant. He kissed me lightly on my forehead before walking away to find the chef.

"Did you know Adel well?" I asked Mila.

She nodded and picked up a tissue from a box on the center table to wipe her eyes. There were makeup smudges on the discarded tissues. It looked like she'd been crying for a while...and on my boyfriend's shoulder.

"It's just that I spoke with Detective Horvat, and it all came back. When... Jeff and I...we were together, we spent time with Adel. She wasn't a very nice person...selfish and just...she could be so mean. Gordon never saw it. He thought she was *great*." She said that last line with a sneer. This wasn't the first time I'd seen resentment for Gordon in Mila's behavior...it peeked out once in a while.

"They had history," I repeated what Cyrus had just said.

"But then Gordon has history with everyone," she added. She picked up her glass of wine and glugged it down. *Ah, lots of drinks, loose lips*. She held up a hand and called out to Elspeth, tapping her glass.

I didn't like how she was treating Elspeth as help. We were all trapped here, and Elspeth was one of us. In fact, I'd asked the staff to join us for dinner so

we could all eat together. The chef, Tanya, Elspeth, and Keith, our only housekeeping staff would eat with us and everyone could serve themselves.

Elspeth walked up and filled Mila's glass after I nodded for her to do it. It was obvious Mila had had a few and once in a while we had to cut off guests when they became rowdy. But we had extenuating circumstances here. First, Mila was not causing a disturbance and second, it looked like I could get more out of her drunk than sober.

"Gordon sleep around a lot?" I asked like we were sisters, woman to woman, gossiping. *Por el amor de dios*, of course, he'd slept around a lot. I had no problem with that. If he slept around now that we were together then I'd cut his balls off.

She sniffled. "You should ask him. You're dating him."

Oh, oh, oh!!! Mila had a thing for Gordon, I realized and felt chagrined. If I worked with him I'd be crushing on him too.

"You have a thing for him?" I asked softly.

She blinked. "What? No. Not at all." Drunk or not she wasn't admitting to that.

"You've known him a long time."

"Since he got divorced. Pilar was...oh...terrible. He has a type. Not you... you're not his type. You're different."

I liked that very much.

"Did Adel have a type? Was she seeing someone recently?" I wondered.

"Isaac," Mila said matter-of-factly.

"Really? Then why did they get separate rooms?"

She shrugged. "Adel was like that. She didn't like anyone in her space. She was always such a bitch." The scorn was back in her tone. "And she hated women. Hated the competition. When she and Gordon were together, she

treated me like I was beneath her. Then Gordon dumped her, and she knew *what was what and who was what; and she wasn't all that.*“ She said the last in a sing-song manner like it was a ditty. An ugly smile twisted her lips. I didn't think I liked Mila, I thought, not this drunk Mila. The normal professional one was fine—this one gave me the creeps.

Before I could respond or ask more questions, the chef came in and announced that dinner was ready. Knowing Chef Armand, although we had a storm outside, the meal would be perfection. He'd told me in his French Canadian accent, “We still have guests, *ma cherie* and we will make sure they're fed well.”

The chef stood a solid six foot two and had a commanding presence, with a frame built from years of laboring in bustling kitchens. His jet-black hair, peppered with gray at the temples, was pulled back into a tight ponytail, revealing a forehead marked with lines of concentration. A neatly trimmed beard graced his chiseled jawline that made him look stern. But those who knew him well, knew that he was warm and funny; and loved to talk about his beloved Québécois grandmother's recipes.

Armand directed us to the dining room that was made cozy with the fireplace and plenty of battery-fueled candles. He waved his hand and flashed his maple leaf intertwined with *fleur de lis* adorns tattoo on his right forearm.

We sat randomly but ended up just the way I'd want to. I was sitting in between Isaac and Drago; across from Gordon, who was in between Mila and Tanya. Cyrus and Jeff were at the opposite ends of the table with a space for Keith next to Tanya. There was a seat next to Drago for Chef Armand.

“We start with *velouté de panais et pommes*, a creamy parsnip, and apple soup garnished with toasted pumpkin seeds and a touch of maple syrup.”

I rose to help Keith serve soup to the guests.

“We have a nice white 2020 Burgundy from Meursault to go with this...the salinity of the wine will be an excellent counterpoint to the sweetness of the *velouté*.”

We set the opened wine bottles on the table so people could serve themselves.

Once everyone was seated, I raised my glass, “I know this is not how any of us were planning to spend this weekend right before the holidays, but we’re warm, safe, and going to be very well fed. To Chef Armand.”

Everyone cheered to the chef.

Chef Armand raised his glass right after, “Happy Holidays, *joyeuses fêtes*.”

I smiled as the Idina Menzel rendition of *Baby Its Cold Outside* played as we settled to eat.

“Tell me everything,” I whispered to Drago.

He looked pointedly at me. “Because?”

“Because you need me, Lord Sprainsalot.”

“This is my first sprain so it’s not Sprainsalot,” he countered. “Your boyfriend convinced Tanya to talk to me.”

“Is she a suspect?”

Drago grinned. “Sweetheart, everyone is a suspect.”

“Except me, of course...and you.”

Drago shrugged and when I smacked his arm with my napkin laughed. “Yeah. Yeah. Couldn’t be you, Gordon, or any of the staff. All your times are accounted for.”

“Even Tanya’s?”

“That one is tricky because she was in the spa and...without power the security camera feed is not available. Once we have power we’ll be able to

dig in more. *And* hopefully by then I'll have a crime scene and the medical examiner here."

I caught Tanya's eye, and she looked away. I knew she knew I knew what she'd told Gordon and Drago.

"Hey, Mila said that Adel sent her a text message saying she won't be attending the meeting this morning," I ventured. "Have you seen that message?"

Drago ate some soup. "No. Her phone is dead."

"That's convenient."

"Actually, inconvenient for her *and* me. It bothers me too."

I looked around the table and wondered who was hiding their crime and guilt, their evil. I suspected Jeff...Isaac...Mila...Cyrus and Tanya. That was *everyone*. If I wasn't sleeping with Gordon, I'd have suspected him as well.

After soup, chef announced we would be enjoying *canard à la Québécoise*, slow-roasted duck leg, glazed with a rich blueberry and balsamic reduction, served with garlic and rosemary roasted potatoes; as well as a *salade de betteraves et chevre*, which was a delicious roasted beet salad with goat cheese, arugula, and a maple-mustard vinaigrette.

"The duck I hope makes you less nostalgic for the holidays," Chef announced. "And I promise the dessert will cheer you all up as I have whipped up a lovely *bûche de Noël*."

I loved Chef Armand's French Christmas cake with his signature twist. Instead of the customary chocolate sponge cake, the chef used a delicate pistachio *génoise*, its pale green hue bringing holiday cheer especially in contrast to the tart cranberry mousse filling infused with hints of orange zest and cardamom, beautifully balancing the sweetness of the cake, and evoking yuletide.

We went back to the bar for dessert, scattered and casual. Gordon was out in the patio keeping Cyrus company while he smoked another cigarette and Gordon had taken a cigar from the well-stocked bar.

Keith brought out the Christmas log cake, and everyone clapped. You had to because it was beautiful. The exterior was coated in a velvety chocolate ganache, which was expertly textured to resemble bark. The 'log' was adorned with candied rosemary sprigs and sugared cranberries, looking like evergreens and berries in the woods. A dusting of powdered sugar completed the look, mimicking the soft snowfall of a serene winter's night.

"Wow!" Jeff exclaimed as he dropped next to me on the couch. "That looks fabulous."

"Yep, it's a multi-layered sensory experience that brings the flavors, aromas, and sights of the festive season to life."

As we ate cake, Jeff considered me, "So, you're fucking Gordon?"

I winced. I disliked crassness. "None of your *fucking* business, Jeff."

"He fucks everyone."

Ah, another drunk man telling me how my new boyfriend was a well-known man whore. *Cállate, please!*

I wanted to leave when I caught Dragos' eye. He tilted his head toward Jeff, and I sighed. He wanted me to prod him about his relationship with Adel.

"You must be pretty devastated about Adel," I began even though Jeff looked nothing close to even being remotely sad.

"She was a complete bitch," he echoed Cyrus's sentiment. It looked like no one was Adel's fan...maybe except Gordon who'd had sex with her *and* everyone else according to everyone.

Dios mío! People needed to stop judging people for living their lives the way they wanted to.

Once everyone went to their rooms, Gordon, Drago, and I congregated in the bar with our drinks, lounging on the comfortable sofas.

“I’ll be glad when we have more cops in the house.” Drago took a sip of his scotch. He pulled out his notes. “Adel died around noon based on when rigor mortis set in. We also know this because of the text message Mila got from Adel. And that when we found her, the body was still warm. Rigor mortis sets in approximately two hours after death.”

Gordon leaned back, holding me. I lay with my head on his shoulder, my body angled so my feet were up on the sofa. I was exhausted.

“What did you learn from Isaac?” Gordon asked.

“The same stuff as you already know. She was being blackmailed and wanted to pay off the blackmailer...but I think you’re right Gordon, I think she was running away. Taking the money and disappearing.”

“What could she have done that could be so bad...” I snuggled closer, my eyes closed. “And...” I sat up. “The lock of baby’s hair and the baby sock.”

They both looked at me. “What?” Gordon asked.

“There was a baby...” I blurted out. “There had to be.”

“Where was a baby?” Drago seemed as confused as Gordon.

“Adel...I think had a baby at some point. Can we search everyone’s rooms?”

“Who is *we*?”

“Gordon and—“

Drago raised a hand. “Not you, Nancy Drew, and your Scotsmen. The police. Hopefully tomorrow when they can get in here.”

Isadora gave him a petulant look. “Haven’t we proved to you we’re good at searching a room?”

“Yes. But that was desperation...it was the victim’s room.”

I smiled when Isadora stuck her tongue out at him. “You’re such a spoilsport. And who is Nancy Drew?”

Drago sighed, looking at me. “How can she not know who Nancy Drew is?”

“Because she’s twenty four,” I supplied. “Nancy Drew is a fictitious young detective.”

Isadora grinned. “I like that. I could be a detective. A crime solver. Maybe I could open a detective agency and—“

The bar door pushed open wide. Mila walked in looking pale as a ghost. She was in her pajamas, a shawl wrapped around her. She wore comfortable and warm booties that were provided in each room and suite.

“I can’t find Jeff,” she said on a shiver. “And...I’m terrified.”

“What do you mean you can’t find Jeff?” Gordon immediately rose and went to Mila. Her face was pale, and she looked frightened.

Gordon put an arm around her. “Hey, sweetheart. Come on let’s get you seated. Isa, *m’eudail*, can you get her a...brandy or something.”

I wasn’t sure if Mila was being a drama queen or if she really was upset. Either way, I got her some brandy.

“He spent the night with me,” she told us after a few sips of brandy. I sat next to Drago while Gordon was crouched by Mila, holding her hand. She began to cry again, and Gordon comforted her, his arms around her.

“For fuck’s sake,” I whispered, my hand on Drago’s arm.

“Easy, tiger,” Drago breathed.

“He’s holding her.”

“He’s being nice.”

My eyes narrowed and then I realized. I looked at Drago in shock. “What?” he asked.

“I’m jealous,” I whispered.

“Tell me something I don’t know. Do you mind letting go of my arm? Your nails are leaving scars.”

I sighed and moved my hand away. “I’m *never* jealous.”

“It runs in your fucking family,” he muttered.

“What?”

“When you fall in love, you get jealous. Your brother, for a moment, wanted to rearrange my face because he thought I had something going on with Maria.”

I chuckled. “Alejandro? He’s never ever jealous.”

“Unless he’s in love.”

I nodded. “I *know* I’m in love. *Madre mía*, is she planning to sit on his lap? *Putá.*”

Drago cleared his throat. “Gordon?”

Gordon looked up and then saw my face. He winked at me and grinned. He knew I was jealous, and he was okay with it. In fact, he was enjoying it. *Pendejo*, as Papa would say.

Mia stop sniffing and extricated herself from *my* man’s arms.

“Jeff spent the night because I didn’t want to be alone,” there was shame in her voice, and I was immediately contrite. She was upset and I was being a jealous lunatic. “And then I woke up, and he was gone. I thought he went next door to his room, but he isn’t there. I thought he came down and...now I’m really worried.”

“He probably is just wandering around the corridors,” I suggested, though there seemed to be no earthly reason for Jeff to do that.

This is why drinking too much was bad for your health. Both Mila and Jeff were drunk and ended up in bed. Shagging an ex! Nothing good came of that.

At least that's what my friend Nova always said.

"Honey, we'll look for him," Gordon placated her.

If he didn't stop touching her I was going to—. We heard a chilling scream then.



Chapter 31

★ GORDON

The scream sent a chill down my spine. Rushing towards the source, I noticed Drago, despite his crutches, was making his way with remarkable speed. Isadora and Mila were just steps behind me.

We converged in the grand atrium, the heart of the Golden Valley Resort, where a grand spiral staircase cascaded from the upper floors. At its base stood a majestic wrought iron sculpture of a reindeer, the sharp edge of its horn impaled into Jeff's back. It was here that Tanya stood, her face as white as the snow outside, staring down at the floor where Jeff lay motionless, his blood, a dark stain contrasted starkly against the polished floor beneath.

I knelt down beside Jeff, my finger on his pulse, though I already knew. His eyes were vacant, and a pool of blood had formed around his head.

Isadora stood by a frozen Tanya, rubbing a hand down her arm.

“Well, that’s one way to use Rudolf,” Drago muttered unhappily.

“Oh God, not another one,” Mila whispered, covering her mouth in horror.

Drago, eyes sharp, immediately assessed the scene. “Nobody touch anything,” he warned. “Gordon, we need to cordon this area off.”

Elsbeth and Isaac had rushed down because of Tanya's cry. They stood at the head of the stairs, having coming down from their rooms, the macabre sight of a dead Jeff in front of them.

"Use the other stairs," Isadora instructed them.

They went around the open atrium and came down the other side. "Elsbeth, I need some tape to cordon this area off."

She nodded. "We have some in the storeroom from construction work we'd done. Let me get that for you."

Mila was visibly shaking, her earlier composed demeanor replaced by sheer shock. "I can't believe this," she stammered.

I went up to Isadora and put my arm around her. She was shaking, and I didn't blame her. Two murders in two days...this was the craziest holiday season I'd ever experienced.

She snuggled into me. "Isaac, can you take Mila into the bar?" she requested as she saw how Mila was now all out sobbing.

Drago held out a hand to direct Tanya. "Come on, let's get you into the bar where it's warm."

Tanya, who was still in shock, mumbled, "I found him here. I was...not able to sleep and I...*oh god*." She looked down horrified her pink bunny slippers which were turning a horrible shade of red, soaked on Jeff's blood.

"Fuck me," Drago cursed and then looked at Isadora.

"No," I said firmly. "I'll take care of this. I want you to go to the bar now."

She eyed me with defiance. "Are you handling me, *amor mío*?" There was nothing loving about how she said *amor mío*. I kissed her forehead gently. "No, baby, I'm taking care of you."

"I'm—"

"Please, for my sake." I kept my voice gentle, but I was furious that Isadora

had to witness this, that this was happening in her beloved resort, the one she'd worked so hard to make successful. And I was enraged that I couldn't protect her.

“Fine.”

I helped Tanya leave her slippers behind and helped her away from the scene. She turned into my arms and began to cry.

“*Válgame dios*, are all the women around here falling over him?” I heard Isadora whisper loudly to Drago who chuckled.

I didn't per se like jealous women. It didn't work for me. I liked my freedom and when women were jealous, it was because they were insecure. Isadora was *not* insecure and her jealousy...was well more possessiveness than anything else. I couldn't fault her on that. I felt possessive about her. If she had been in the arms of another man...*fuck*, my response would've been a lot more forceful than her cursing in Spanish. The weirdest part? I liked that she was possessive.

Here we were falling love in the middle of a snowstorm with people bloody dying around us, with *bloody* being operative word and I couldn't be happier that she was with me; and furious that I couldn't take her away from this ugliness. When Raya had once told me that love makes fools of us, I'd told her how grateful I was to not be in love—I hadn't known falling in love would feel like this, that it would make me feel whole even if it did make a fool out of me.

I looked pleadingly at Isadora. “Can you take her to the bar while I take care of things here?”

She rolled her eyes and took Tanya by the hand to the bar. Drago looked at Jeff and sighed. “I hate having a sprained fucking ankle right now.”

He hobbled around the scene and then peered at something.

“What?” I asked.

“This iron reindeer was by the staircase. So, someone had to lift it and hit him with it. It doesn’t look light.”

I pulled out the pair of gloves that I’d used earlier, which were still in the back pocket of my jeans. Drago nodded appreciatively at how quickly I’d learnt to become a good assistant to the detective.

“It’s not too heavy,” I remarked as I gripped the iron reindeer. “But...it’s not light either. You need to be in shape to lift it high and hit someone with it.”

We both looked at the stairs and Jeff; and we both could see how it happened.

“Someone hit him from higher up the stairs while his back was turned to them,” Drago murmured.

“So, someone had to have picked up the reindeer, gone up and...what waited for Jeff to be down?” This from Isadora who had come back into the main foyer with yellow caution tape.

“Looks like it doesn’t it,” I mused. “Explains how he fell the way he did, face first.”

“That’s pretty deliberate.” Isadora wrapped her arms around her as if warding off an uneasy feeling.

Drago looked up the stairs and then down. “Yeah. It is. And first degree murder. Someone wanted him dead.”

“Well, the suspect list has shrunk by one.” I went up to Isadora and took the roll of tape from her.

“Yeah,” Isadora agreed. “And I so wanted Jeff to be Adel’s killer.”

“Why?” Drago asked.

“Because he’s a smarmy asshole,” she said absently.

I grinned and brushed tendrils of hair that has escaped her ponytail away from her face. “I’ll take care of this. Go. Get something to drink. I’ll be with you.”

“And I better go to talk to Tanya,” Drago sighed.

I stood alone with Jeff and grimaced. The storm outside howled in the distance, as if amplifying the dark cloud that had descended on the resort.

I cordoned the area off the best I could and went back to the bar. The hushed whispers and muffled gasps of the occupants surrounded me, amplifying the significance of the evening’s events.

“Anyone seen Cyrus?” Isadora asked.

“He’s probably sleeping like the dead. He has insomnia so he takes something,” I explained.

“This is madness,” Isaac muttered, rubbing his temples.

Beside him, Mila, still visibly shaking, sobbed quietly. She clutched a tissue and looked at everyone in the room. “Who could’ve done this?”

“I’m going with a madman who got into the resort,” Elspeth theorized.

Isadora stood by the bar. “I’m going with someone in this room.”

Everyone gasped and stared at her. “How can you say that?” Mila was first to pounce at her.

“That’s a horrible and insulting thing to say,” Isaac countered.

I went up to Isadora and took her hand in mine, her warm touch a small comfort amid the cold confusion. Her intelligent eyes darted around the room, observing every reaction, every gesture.

“Isaac, you hated Jeff, didn’t you?” Isadora said.

“What? He was my lawyer.”

She smiled then. “You were thinking about firing him.”

Isaac stared at her. “What?”

”I know you only took him on because Adel asked you to. Because Adel was sleeping with Jeff.”

A gasp and a sob tore out of Mila. I felt bad for her. Why a smart, intelligent, and beautiful woman like Mila would want to be with an asshole like Jeff, I didn’t understand. But now not only was her lover dead, but she was also finding out that he was cheating on her with Adel.

Isaac shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it,” Drago suggested.

“Adel was worried about how the board would react if they found out she was having an affair with her general counsel. She asked me to hire him. My general counsel had just retired and...I owed Adel more than a few favors,” Isaac explained. He licked his lips like they were dry. Isadora went on the other side of the bar and poured a glass of Scotch and handed it to me.

I took it to Isaac who thanked me and downed the whole glass in one go.

“I thought he and Adel were over but...they weren’t. She knew how I felt about her and still...she...” he closed his eyes, “I loved her. She used me. I was okay with that as long as it meant she needed me, that I could be with her.”

My gaze caught Tanya’s. The young spa manager was seated at the far end of the bar, being comforted by Elspeth. She looked shaken, her complexion pale, her eyes wide and filled with a mix of fear and confusion. Given that she’d found Jeff’s body, suspicion was naturally directed towards her, but she didn’t seem to have caught onto that.

A loud thud outside momentarily distracted us. The storm was in full force, and the gusts of wind rattling the windows served as a stark reminder that we were isolated, cut off from the outside world.

“Mila I’m so sorry,” Isadora said, “But I have to ask. Isaac, was Adel still

seeing Jeff?”

”Yes,” Isaac said sadly. “He was with her the night before last...the last night she was alive.”

I could see the heartbreak in Mila’s eyes now. Jeff was a right git. He’d spent a night with Adel and then on the day she died, he’d spent the night with Mila. Regardless, he didn’t deserve to be murdered. Asshole he might be but that was not a crime punishable by death.

Drago pulled me aside when the first burst of questions and recriminations had quieted. “Can you take Isa’s master key and make sure Cyrus is where he’s supposed to be?”

“I can confidently tell you that he takes some super heavy drugs and—“

“So, I can cross him off the list,” Drago interrupted me.

“Sure.” I’ll go make sure that one of my closest friends was not a killer.



Chapter 32

★ GORDON

“I can’t sleep,” Isadora announced when I dragged her into my suit in the early hours of the morning. She wanted to stay the night at the bar, but I wanted her alone and to get some rest, wipe some of those shadows under her eyes away.

“Then you’ll just lie down with me. Now get out of your clothes.”

She nodded slowly. “I need a shower. I feel I have death cooties on me.”

I smiled. “Let’s conserve water and take one together. Okay?”

“Well, we are in California and there have been record droughts.”

I got her into the shower, and she leaned her head against my chest. “I didn’t know you a minute ago and now I can’t imagine life with you.”

I nuzzled her hair. “*M’eudail*, you’re not alone in feeling like this.”

She kissed my chest and gently licked a nipple. My heart hammered, and I felt her smile. “It scares me though.”

I lifted her face to look at me. Water was falling over both of us and she closed her eyes. “Because I believe in *señales*...in signs.”

“You do?” I found it charming.

“When I first saw you.” She went back to licking the water drops off my chest. “I thought *thug in a suit*. And it was a sign.”

I laughed. I used the dispenser to get some shampoo and rubbed it into her hair. “What was the sign?”

”You’re not surprised by the thug in a suit remark.” She leaned back enjoying my hands on her. She gently rocked her hips against me, and I groaned, feeling her softness, making any remaining blood in my brain rush south to my cock.

“You’re not the first to suggest I look like a crook, darling.” I pushed her head so the water would pour over her, wash the suds away. “But how was that a sign.”

“I just knew I had to meet you. I just—“ I turned her around and ran my hand over her body. Her skin was smooth, and her ass was firm, round. I gripped the tight globes, and she moaned.

“Put your hands on the wall,” I instructed her.

She did, and I moved under the shower stream. I should wait, I thought. This was new to her. She’d had sex for the first time a night ago. I should... but I didn’t. I pushed her head down and traced her pussy with my erection.

“I don’t have a condom,” I whispered. I didn’t want to stop. Me, Gordon Mackenzie who *always* suited up didn’t want to sheath myself. I wanted to go in raw. It was confusing...but also a sign. She was the *one*.

“Can you pull out?”

“There’s a risk.” I entered her smoothly. She was wet. My hands moved to her breasts, and I squeezed her nipples.

“I can take Plan B. Gordon...*please*.”

“No. No Plan B.” *What the fuck are you saying, gadge? Are you out of your mind?*

Isadora turned around and looked at me. “Are you sure?”

“It’s your body, your choice, but I am sure.”

I was forty-two years old. I wanted to have a baby. I wanted Isadora to have my baby. I wanted it all. How had she changed my brain patterns in just a few days? Months, I reminded myself. It had been months since I first saw her, first fell under her spell.

She smiled then, a slow seductive smile. “Come inside me.”

I didn’t have to be told again. It was heaven to enter her bare, to feel her without a condom. “Oh god.”

She pushed back as I went in and I held her close, this woman who had become so precious to me. “Gordon?”

“Yes, baby.” I could hardly breathe, everything inside me was exploding into technicolor. I could feel my orgasm start at my spine. I would not last long, and I wanted her to come before I did.

Another time when I wasn’t feeling so desperate for her I’d go slow but not this time. I stroked her clitoris. “Are you close?” I whispered, wanting to let go.

“I don’t know,” she moaned. “Harder. Please.”

I pounded into her and when I felt her release, it took me with her. She was sagging against the wall. I felt the same way, loose, boneless.

I pulled out of her and turned her around so I could hold her. “I love you, *m’eudail*.” The words slipped out of me, words I’d never spoken before, like they’d always been there for Isadora.

“I love you too. I’ll love you more if you’ll dry me off and carry me to bed,” she mumbled. “I can’t keep my eyes open.”

I held her close that night. The macabre events of the past two days had made me realize that living life to the fullest was important. Whatever Adel

was planning...it all meant nothing did it? She'd died. Her life cut short. Situations could change on a dime. I wanted to live fully, without fear of commitment, without worrying about future pain. I was going to live in today. I was going to love Isadora, marry her, make babies with her...build a life with her. She believed in signs, well, I guess so did I. Seeing Adel and Jeff dead were all the signs to know that life was short. And I wanted it to be meaningful.

It had already been three in the morning by the time we went to bed, and we were woken up with the piercing sound of Isadora's phone going off.

She blindly reached for her phone.

"Mama?"

I heard some urgent speaking on the other end. Isadora turned to snuggle against me. I loved this best I decided. I wanted this every morning.

"Mama, I'm in bed with a very handsome man. Can I call you back...oh my god," she sat up, "the phone is working."

I pulled her back down to me. Last night there had been urgency but this morning as the skies looked blue and the storm had cleared, I wanted us to take our time. Hopefully, no one else would die while I indulged my future wife.

"Yes, mama, it's Gordon. I'll be home as soon as the roads clear," she said on a yawn.

I stroked her back and squeezed her ass. "It wasn't my fault, mama, there was a storm, and it took out the...everything."

She listened for a moment and then chuckled. "I love you too, mama." She hung up and smiled at me. "My parents have been worried."

"You told me them about me?"

"Si."

“And they don’t mind?” The ease with which she’d told her mother that the *handsome* man in bed with her was me was jarring. But I also felt proud that she was happy to announce me to her family, people who she loved the most in the world.

“Mind?” She looked perplexed.

“I’m probably not what they want for you.” I was a divorced, bitter old man.

She rolled on top of me and kissed my mouth. “What do you think they’d want for me?”

“A younger strapping—“ She bit me, and I yelped. “What was that for?”

“Cut it out with the age nonsense, will you?”

“You really don’t think your parents will care that I am *eighteen* years older than you?” If it was my daughter, I’d object.

“No, I *really don’t think* they’ll care. They trust me to make my own decisions.”

She slid her body over me, making me hard. “I have a question about sex.”

She surprised me with the change in the subject. I flipped her, so she was on her back. I went down her body, kissing her breasts, her stomach.

“What’s the question?” I asked as I nuzzled her belly button.

“Ah...blow jobs.”

I looked up at her. “Yes?”

”I’d like to give you one.”

My lips twitched. “And I’d love to have you give me one.”

“You get a lot of blow jobs?”

I was getting used to how she seemed to bring things up from nowhere that only made sense to her. I threw her thighs over my shoulders.

“I’ve gotten some.” I kissed her pussy and heard her breath catch. It was

like a game now to see how long it would take me to distract her.

“Are they difficult to give?” Her hips writhed as I sucked her clitoris.

She was so sweet, I thought, so *very* sweet on my jaded tongue. So, beautiful and wanton. Passionate and sensuous. Fun and funny.

I licked her languidly, enjoying how she lost track of her words, of everything but what was between us. Her hands were in my hair, holding me down.

“*Amor mío,*“ she sobbed, “please...Gordon...*please.*”

I slid a finger inside her, feeling her muscles clench around me. She was still tight, and I felt a surge of possessiveness. This was mine and *only* mine. No one else had had her. No one had touched her, given her an orgasm. It made her even more precious and me the luckiest son of a bitch in the world because I got to explore this new world with her.

I inserted a third finger, finding her g-spot as I suckled her clitoris. She exploded, and I moved over her, wanting to feel her spasms on my cock. I surged inside her.

“Isadora,” I groaned, kissing her, letting her taste herself, finding it erotic. I could feel her squeeze me, milk me.

“Say you love me,” she demanded, wrapping her legs around my waist, holding me close.

“I love you. I love you very much.”



Chapter 33

★ ISADORA

I decided that sex in the morning was a brilliant thing. I was a morning person and always cheerful to the consternation of my oldest brother who *used* to start his morning grumpy...but not since Maria moved in with him. Food for thought on the whole starting the morning right thing with sex thing! Breakfast of champions and happy people.

As they say all good things end... but they don't say that about bad things. The storm had passed, but on our doorstep was the Sierra Country Sheriff, Ciara Bailey.

A tall African American woman, the sheriff exuded an aura of authority. She had a well-built physique, and I knew it was because of a disciplined routine of physical training. Weathered lines framed her face, each one telling its own story of a hard-earned experience. She sported a no-nonsense bald look which stressed her strong jawline and sharp high cheekbones.

Despite her stern exterior, there was a warmth about her. Perhaps it was the subtle upward twitch of her lips or the way she inclined her head to listen

intently—but mostly it was her dry sense of humor. I adored her because she was one of my mother’s closest friends and a surrogate aunt.

“Sheriff Bailey.” I shook her hand as she walked into the foyer of the resort and eyed the dead man covered with a white sheet, which had smudges of blood. Since we were in a professional setting I didn’t hug her as I would normally do.

“Looks like you’ve had an eventful couple of days, Isa,” she muttered.

“Absolutely no kidding,” I agreed.

Dressed in a crisp khaki uniform, fitted perfectly to her form, her shiny gold badge on her chest polished to perfection, gleaming even in the subdued lighting, Sheriff Bailey walked up to the body. Her boots, scuffed from years of wear, made a soft thudding sound.

She bent down and removed the sheet and nodded gravely.

The morning light filtered into the room, revealing a pristine white snowy blanket that had transformed the landscape overnight. Despite the beauty outside, an uneasy tension still permeated the Golden Valley Resort, amplified by the soft buzz of conversations among the trapped guests.

“Detective Drago Horvat.” Drago hobbled up to the Sheriff.

“You were holding fort here?” The Sheriff shook his hand.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sheriff Bailey grunted and looked around. All the guests were now in the foyer, watching the show.

“This everyone?” she asked me.

I nodded. “Except for...Gordon Mackenzie. He’s still taking a shower.”

Sheriff Bailey narrowed her eyes. “And you know that how?”

“I spent the night in his suite.”

“Paloma know about this?” she demanded.

I sighed. “Paloma knows about everything.”

“The second body is upstairs,” Drago informed her.

The Sheriff looked at his crutches. “Let’s take the elevator.”

I raised a hand to get her attention. “Sheriff, the roads are open, which means guests are going to come through my doors. I’d really like these bodies out of my resort.”

“We’ll see what we can do. Crime scene is fifteen minutes behind me.”

The Sheriff left with Drago, and I looked at the tired guests and staff. “Alright, everyone, let’s head to the dining room. Chef Armand is preparing a breakfast to get us through the day.”

“When can we go home?” Mila asked, her arms folded. She was pale in jeans and a sweater.

“As soon as Sheriff Bailey says so.”

I nodded to Elspeth who ushered the guests away from the foyer and Jeff’s dead body. I went to my office and called Raya. I needed her help on shedding some light on the lingering mysteries of the past two days.

“Isa,” Raya’s voice came through, clear and focused, “I’ve been worried sick! Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Can’t say the same for Adel and Jeff.”

“What?”

I told Raya about Adel and Jeff’s murder.

There was a pause. “*Holy fuck*. What do the police say?”

“Sheriff Bailey just got here, and crime scene is going to be here in fifteen minutes or so.”

“*Tía* Ciara?”

“Yep! I need your help.”

“Anything.”

“I’m convinced Adel had a baby. Can you dig around and see if there are any records or anything that could hint towards that?”

There was a momentary silence on the line. “You think this could be connected to the murders?”

“I don’t know. I just need to find out. Something’s telling me it’s significant.”

“All right,” Raya sighed, slipping into her professional mode, “Give me a few hours. I’ll see what I can uncover.”

“Thank you, Raya,” I whispered, feeling an overwhelming mix of gratitude and concern.

“Don’t mention it. Just stay safe. And call if you need anything.”



The air in the dining room was thick with tension. The vast panorama of windows, that usually let in the serene beauty of the snow-laden landscape, now served as a stark reminder of our isolation. In the warm, golden glow of the overhead chandeliers, everyone sat, quietly consuming the lavish breakfast spread Chef Armand had prepared. He had outdone himself: there were perfectly fluffed scrambled eggs, a selection of fresh fruits, crispy bacon, and fresh baguettes with an assortment of homemade jams. A centerpiece of smoked salmon lox with capers and cream cheese stood out. The coffee was strong and aromatic, and as I took a sip, I relished the warmth it brought to my insides.

As I buttered a piece of toast, Cyrus leaned over, his face a mix of concern and frustration. “Damn it, the news is out.”

“What news?” I asked.

”Adel and Jeff’s murder.”

“How’s that possible?” I whispered, scanning the faces around the room. The usual morning chatter was hushed, replaced by soft murmurs and apprehensive glances.

Cyrus showed me his phone. The headlines screamed: *Tech Mogul Gordon Mackenzie Connected to Double Murder at Luxury Ski Resort!* My heart sank.

“Is this going to hurt Gordon?” I asked.

“Maybe.” Cyrus forked some salmon onto his plate. “It’s a scandal and... you know, G, he hates the media attention.”

“You know he was asked to check and make sure you were in your room and not bludgeoning Jeff to death,” I grinned.

He smirked. “Took a sleeping pill. Was out like the dead. Elspeth told me what happened while she served me coffee. By the way, your bartender deserves a raise.”

“Yes. All staff that got us through these two days will be taken care of. I promise. I’m just sick that the news is out. Who could’ve...?” My voice trailed off as I pondered the implications. Our temporary sanctuary in the storm had turned into a sensationalist media circus. At least the roads were not clear enough for the media to show up here...at least not for a while, and I didn’t want to think what the notoriety might mean for the resort.

Elsbeth moved around the room, refilling coffee cups, her face impassive. Tanya, her eyes red and puffy from the previous night’s revelations, quietly ate her breakfast. Isaac looked nervous, while Mila stared into space. Keith kept glancing at the door as if expecting the sheriff to come barging in at any moment. And Chef Armand, despite the culinary feast he’d presented, looked worriedly at all of us, as if gauging our reactions.

“All we can do now is damage control,” Cyrus interrupted my thoughts. “I’ve already reached out to the SynthoSoft PR team.”

“I wonder who leaked it.” I said, a touch of bitterness in my voice. We were already grappling with tragedy, and this media invasion felt like salt on an open wound.

At the far end of the room, the door opened, and Gordon entered, his eyes scanning the headlines on Cyrus’s phone. His face remained composed, but the tightening of his jaw revealed his unease.

“You saw?” I went up to him and gave him a hug.

“It doesn’t matter.” He hugged me close as if his life depended upon it.

But I knew it did matter to Gordon. “I’m here, *amor mío*,” I whispered, kissing him on his mouth.

Gordon smiled at me. “And I thank the heavens for that.”



Chapter 34

GORDON

I sat in the boardroom, now transformed into an impromptu interrogation space. The door creaked open and in walked Sheriff Bailey, a tall woman with sharp eyes that seemed to see right through you.

“Gordon Mackenzie.” She shook hands with me and sat down across from me. “I appreciate your cooperation. Let’s begin with your relationship with Adel Kovács.”

“Adel and I have known each other over a decade. We had an intimate relationship that turned into us becoming professional acquaintances.”

“Who ended the relationship?” she asked.

“I did.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “It had run its course.”

The Sheriff nodded. “How did Miss Kovács take the ending of the relationship?”

“Fine. She’s not into commitment any more than I am.”

“And now you’re mixed up with our Isadora?”

The way she said *our* Isadora made my alarm bells go off. “I wouldn’t use the term mixed up.”

“You’re obviously sleeping with her...but are you *seeing* her?”

I couldn’t help smile. It was wonderful that there were so many people in Isadora’s life who loved her and cared for her. It made me miss my family in Scotland.

“I intend to marry her,” I told her plainly.

Her eyebrows rose. “Whoa! Settle down, sparky. That’s a bit too quick. How long have you been *seeing* her?”

I may have impregnated her this morning. Well, I wasn’t telling that to a cop with a weapon who thought of Isadora as a daughter.

“When you know you know,” I suggested.

“That’s a terrible cliché.”

I shrugged. “I’ve got nothing better than that. I love Isadora. I want to build a life with her.”

Sheriff Bailey looked through her notes then. “You’re eighteen years older than her. That’s *old*.”

I smirked. “Yes, ma’am.” The *ma’am* slipped out. She was starting to intimidate the big bad Gordon Mackenzie. How the mighty had fallen!

“I don’t care about your age. I care about how you’ll treat our baby. Not that she thinks of herself as a baby mind you.”

“I called her that once and she ripped me a new one,” I agreed.

The Sheriff laughed. “That’s our Isa alright. It’s opportune you were on a video call during time of Adel’s death, which the coroner now has confirmed. Detective Horvat seems to know his stuff. But then he’s from LA where they kill people all the fucking time. Are you planning to take Isadora with you to LA?”

The change of topic made my head spin. “Ah...my work is in Los Angeles.”

“Her family is in Golden Valley. Her work is in Golden Valley,” she countered.

I wanted to tell the woman to mind her own business. Isadora and I would navigate this, but I didn’t think she’d take to it kindly.

“I’m going to let Isadora decide where we live.” *That sounded safe, right?*

She considered me for a long moment and then looked at her notes. “Were you aware of Adel Kovács and Isaac D’Mello’s plan to dupe you into buying a crappy piece of software?”

The change in topic was a relief. But I was glad she’d asked the questions she had because I was more than a little nervous about what Isadora’s family would say about our relationship. Especially as I was probably going to have some of the same concerns as they did—which were all around *defiling Baby Santos*.

My jaw tightened. “I had suspicions, which were confirmed just a day ago. I confronted her about it.”

She scribbled something in her notebook. “And how did that confrontation end?”

“I was disappointed in her. Angry, even.”

“Did you get physical with her?”

My eyes flashed with anger, which I smothered. I didn’t like this line of questioning because it wasn’t about Adel, this was about Isadora again. “Are you interrogating me as a potential suspect or a potential groom?”

She grinned. “I’m taking your statement and, yes, maybe as a groom. You know you’re not a suspect. But you’re a wealthy man. I wouldn’t put it past you to hire someone to murder Adel Kovács.”

“If I hated someone so much that I wanted them dead, I’d do it with my own bare hands.”

She looked at my hands. I knew they were worker’s hands, not those of a Fortune 500 CEO. The Sheriff looked up, her eyes scrutinizing. “Were you aware of any external pressures on Adel? Perhaps something related to your impending deal?”

I shook my head. “The specifics of our deal were strictly business, Sheriff. I wasn’t aware of her personal issues or any external pressures she might’ve been under. But, from conversations we’ve had in the past two days and what we found in Adel’s room, she was being blackmailed. Isaac also clarified this.”

She nodded, making more notes. “It’s interesting because the nature of these murders seems tied up with this deal you were trying to make.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I can’t see how. The deal falling through would be a professional setback, yes. But murder?”

Sheriff Bailey stared at me for what felt like an eternity before finally speaking. “There appears to be a connection between you and the murders. After all, you set this shindig up.”

“Actually, it was Mila, my assistant along with Isadora and Raya, she’s the CTO of SynthoSoft who set this shindig up,” I countered though if she was a Santos family friend, she knew Raya.

She nodded. “I’ll talk to Miss Silva as well.” She confirmed her knowing Raya by using her last name, which I had not mentioned. “I think this is it for now.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?” I finally asked.

She shook her head. “Take care of our girl.”

“Oh, I intend to.”



Chapter 35

★ ISADORA

Once guests were given the green light to leave, most packed up their bags despite the late hour. I didn't blame them. I wanted to leave as well but since we had a wedding on Christmas day just three days away, I was going to stay and then head home after the wedding, leaving the wedding reception in the capable hands of Rizwan.

By the time the sun set, an eerie calm settled over Golden Valley Resort. The stunning view from the expansive windows belied the dark undertones that had become part of the resort's recent history.

We were all gathered in the foyer when Sheriff Bailey, with Drago by her side, walked in, her face a mask of stoicism.

Without preamble, she announced, "We have made an arrest in connection with the murders of Adel Kovács and Jeff Hephner."

All eyes turned towards her, the silence palpable.

"Tanya Bennett," she continued, "is under arrest on suspicion of murder."

I felt as if the ground beneath me had shifted. Sure, Tanya had hidden the fact that her father had worked with Adel and then died by suicide, but why

would she kill Jeff?

“Tanya?” Elspeth cried out. “That’s not possible. What proof do you have?”

”We will not be discussing an ongoing investigation.” Drago took a step forward, addressing us all. “What I can share is that we found evidence in Tanya’s room that connects her to these deaths.”

My heart raced, trying to piece everything together.

“I’m glad I’m getting fuck out of here,” Isaac said and glared at me. “I should sue you.”

”For what?” Gordon demanded, stepping forward.

“Torture for two days when it was *her* employee who killed them. Killed Adel.”

I swallowed, feeling nausea rise through me.

Elspeth, upset with news about Tanya, left the resort almost immediately.

Isaac and Cyrus were the first guests to leave. Gordon and Mila had driven together, so they’d drive back together. Gordon had wanted to stay but with the PR nightmare that had already started in LA, he had to get back.

I pulled Drago’s arm and brought him into the now empty boardroom. “What do you have on her?”

“Isa, you know I can’t talk about—“

Gordon followed us. “Yes, you can. Come on, Drago, we’re family and this is important.”

Drago sighed. “We believe that Tanya was blackmailing Adel about her father’s suicide. Adel confronted her, things escalated, and Tanya accidentally killed her. Jeff probably suspected Tanya, confronted her as well, and she killed him to ensure his silence.”

“So, it was all opportunistic?” Something wasn’t sitting right with me.

“And what about the baby sock and—“

“We’ll talk to Tanya and then we’ll know more.”

”What did you find in Tanya’s room?” Gordon demanded.

Drago grimaced. He didn’t want to divulge case details, but he could see we were going to be persistent. “We found evidence that she wrote the blackmail letters. And...we found the pair of the sock.”

“That’s a bit too convenient, don’t you think? Do you think someone framed her?” I wondered.

“That only happens in the movies,” Drago barked. “In real life people who kill make mistakes. And she made a few.”

A sense of sadness enveloped me. Two lives lost, another ruined. Once Drago left, I turned to Gordon. “I can’t shake off the feeling that Tanya isn’t the actual murderer.”

He raised an eyebrow, his voice laced with a hint of condescension, “Baby, I understand it’s been an overwhelming day. And Tanya is your employee. But we have to trust the authorities.”

I felt a twinge of anger at his tone. “It’s not just about Tanya being my employee. It’s about the evidence and the storyline not adding up completely.”

He sighed, rubbing his temples. “Isadora, the evidence is there. The motive is apparent. Why are you fighting it?”

My voice rose, frustration clear. “Because it doesn’t sit right with me. Why are you fighting *me* on this?.”

He looked taken aback. “I’m just trying to be logical about this.”

I countered, “Being logical doesn’t mean accepting everything at face value.”

Gordon ran a hand through his hair, clearly exasperated. “Isadora,

sometimes, the obvious answer is the right one.”

I stared at him, feeling the distance between us. “And sometimes, it’s the answer we’re fed to divert us from the truth.”

“Okay.” Gordon raised both his hands in defeat. “Tell me what you need to do to feel better about the fact that Tanya has been arrested.”

”Two things. First...do you know a good criminal lawyer? She should have representation. I’ll pay.”

Gordon nodded, pulling out his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Asking Mila to—“

I shook my head then. “Not Mila.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you saying you suspect her?”

“Ask Cyrus. Not Mila.” I couldn’t explain it, but I had a feeling about Mila. Something had happened, something I didn’t recollect that had set me on this path.

“Okay. But Mila is not involved. She didn’t know Adel well. And sure, she was sleeping with Jeff but—“

“Maybe she bashed his head in for being a douchebag.”

“She’s always known he’s a douchebag.”

“He was sleeping with Adel...which means she has motive,” I pointed out.

“Now who’s letting their emotions about an employee get in the way?”

He smiled and kissed my lips. “I’ll ask Cyrus to make sure Tanya has a lawyer. Anything else?”

”Yes. I need to talk to Raya.” On cue my phone rang. I grinned, it was Raya.



Chapter 36

GORDON

“This is outrageous,” Isaac shouted as he was shown to the boardroom. “I was pulled over by a squad car.”

“Stop whining! You’d driven just a few miles,” Cyrus admonished as he came into the room. “I was pulled over and the cop gave me a ticket *and* instructed me get my ass back here.”

I grinned. “Were you speeding, Cyrus?”

“Sure.”

Sheriff Bailey had requested everyone to be brought back to Golden Valley resort as some new evidence had come to light.

I was surprised to see Tanya seated *without* handcuffs, looking scared and pale. I felt sorry for her. If she indeed had been framed as Isadora suspected, I could only imagine how hard this must be for her.

“Thank you, everyone, especially the staff who have put in some long hours,” Isadora addressed Chef Armand, Keith, and Elspeth.

Keith waved a hand. “I’m expecting a show, boss.”

Isadora used the computer in the boardroom to add Raya to our call, her face on the screen. She was in the SynthoSoft office from the flicking lights of Los Angeles behind her in the darkness.

“I’m sorry that you’re all here late in the evening. I promise this will not take long. As you can see Tanya Bennett has been released on her own recognizance and we believe that the evidence shows we have another suspect.” Sheriff Bailer looked at Drago who nodded. He handed a file to Isadora, and she smiled nervously.

I hadn’t seen her most of the afternoon as Mila and I had worked in a meeting room.

“I also want to thank Sheriff Bailey and Detective Horvat for letting me talk to you,” Isadora continued. She rose then and stood by the monitor. “Thanks, Raya for joining this call.”

Raya waved a hand and remained on mute.

“Cyrus, you told me you never trusted Adel.”

Cyrus nodded. “Yeah. But not enough to kill her.”

“True. But you have feelings for Mila, and it must have pissed you off she was sleeping with Jeff who was sleeping with Adel.” Isadora looked at me and sighed. “You need to put out stricter sleeping with colleagues codes.”

“Only Mila works for me,” I said pleasantly to her.

Cyrus glared at Raya. “What we discussed was in confidence, Raya.”

“I’m sorry, Cyrus,” Raya didn’t sound apologetic at all. “But I couldn’t lie to the police, not for a murder investigation.”

“Or any police investigation I hope,” Sheriff Bailey interjected.

There was an uncomfortable splatter of laughter.

Isadora walked up to Tanya then. “I’m sorry for what you went through. But your connection to Adel was the strongest. She was the reason your

father died by suicide. You blamed her.”

Tanya had tears in her eyes. “I did.”

“And you confronted her in her room.”

Tanya nodded. “She had just come back from working out and I told her who I was. She laughed at me, said that it made sense I was working here in the spa. That I was the pathetic child of a pathetic father.”

Tears were flowing down her cheeks. I pushed a box of tissues toward her. She thanked me with her eyes and wiped the tears away. “But I didn’t kill her. When I left her room, she was alive. I promise. And...Jeff? I don’t even know him.”

“From my conversation with Jeff, he had also been to see Adel right after you left, Tanya. According to him, she was already dead then. He ran, afraid,” Drago filled in the blanks. He hadn’t mentioned that little nugget to us.

“Why didn’t you suspect Jeff then?” Isaac demanded.

“Because he’s dead, you moron,” Cyrus sighed and looked at me. “And you want to go into business with this idiot?”

“No, I don’t.” I leaned back to enjoy the show. I wasn’t sure where Isadora was going with this, but it was fun to watch her in action.

She came to me then. “Now, we know you have an alibi.”

“As do you.”

“You had an argument with Adel that morning,” she prompted.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Raya had let me know that the software testing showed it had a lot of bugs. We had to dig deep to get to them. I was furious. I trusted Adel. We were friends...at least, I thought we were friends.”

Isadora turned to the monitor then. “Raya, you got more information than that, didn’t you?”

Raya looked grim. “Yes, our investigator spoke with two people who worked for Mr. DeMello who have given affidavits that they told Mr. DeMello that neither the DM Solution software nor the Kovács’ software was ready for prime time. Mr. DeMello requested them to make it look good because Adel wanted to get rid of the software and her company.”

Isaac stood up. “Who did you talk to? They’re lying.”

“They have emails to this affect, Isaac,” I muttered shaking my head. I’d seen the report Raya had put together prior to this little denouement scene.

Cyrus flung his hands up in the air. “You commit crime *and* leave a paper trail. What the fuck did you think would happen?”

“There is no crime in asking a piece of software to be made to look good,” Isaac protested.

“There is,” Drago contradicted lazily, “If you intend to sell it as something it’s not. That’s called fraud.”

Isaac sat down angrily. “Fuck you, Gordon. Fuck you to hell and back.”

“Now, Isaac, you were in love with Adel, and she didn’t give you the time of day. She friend-zoned you.” Isadora came up to where Isaac was sitting. “And you only hired Jeff, who you wanted to get rid of, because Adel asked you to.”

“Yes.” Isaac head was bowed.

“She was being blackmailed, you knew this.” Isadora leaned against the table, looking at Isaac. He nodded. “Do you know who and why?”

He shook his head.

“Isaac, please, this is a murder investigation,” Isadora urged.

He sighed. “I don’t want to malign her name. She’s dead, don’t you see?”

“If you’ve lied to me, Mr. DeMello, I’ll arrest you for obstruction,” Sheriff Bailey threatened.

Isaac sighed. Isadora walked to my chair and stood behind me. Her hand on my shoulder. I liked that she always touched me, because I always wanted to touch her. I gripped her hand and held tight.

“When Adel was sixteen, she got pregnant. She had a baby.”

I felt Isadora’s hand tighten on my shoulder.

“Go on, Mr. DeMello,” Sheriff Bailey urged.

“Yeah.” Isaac drank some water that was in front of him as if he was having trouble getting words out of his mouth. “She...ah...abandoned the baby in a church bathroom. She found out later that the baby died. She regretted it. She even had taken some of the baby’s hair and made jewelry out of it. She wasn’t a killer...she was just young and scared. Last year, someone started to blackmail her about it.”

“They had proof?” Isadora prodded.

Isaac nodded. “Yeah. They had proof. They had the baby clothes and the note Adel had left with the baby.”

“What did the note say?” Drago asked, leaning back.

“Just, *I’m sorry*.” He looked up at Isadora, shaking his head. “She wrote it on some piece of paper she’d found. It was the holiday season and there was a Christmas carol on that paper.”

“*In the bleak midwinter*,” Isadora whispered.

Isaac nodded. “The blackmailer would send her notes with versus of that carol and an account number as well the amount of money they wanted. For a year, Adel paid. But then...she decided to liquidate her assets and run. Go to a country where there is no extradition and live the rest of her life.”

“That’s why the urgency to sell,” I observed.

“Yes.”

“And you were planning on running away with her, weren’t you?” Isadora

squeezed my shoulder and moved away.

“That’s what we had planned.”

“But then you found out that she was sleeping with Jeff.”

He snarled at that. “Yes.”

“You went to talk to Adel, and she told you her plans had changed. She was going to go alone, didn’t she?” Isadora challenged Isaac.

He seemed to shrink in size. His eyes filled with tears. “Yes. But I didn’t kill her. I loved her.”

“It was an accident. You got into a physical fight, and she hit her head on the corner of the marble fireplace,” Isadora reflected.

Isaac looked small and weak as he sobbed; and in that moment I felt sorry for him.

“But if you killed her, who was blackmailing Adel.” Isadora looked at me winked and walked up to my executive assistant. “Maybe you?”

Mila looked up and snapped, “Excuse me.”

Isadora nodded. “No, I won’t excuse you. Killing Adel was no accident, was it? Jeff had told you that Adel had no will, that all her money would go to her next of kin.”

“She had no next of kin,” Mila snapped. “Gordon, what is this?”

“I’m the boss here, Miss Kent not Gordon,” Sheriff Bailey spoke up. “Isa, continue.”

“But what if she had a daughter,” Isadora offered. She turned to the screen then and nodded at Raya.

“I did some research and found out from San Francisco county records that a baby was found thirty years ago at the City Church of San Francisco. A baby had been left for dead, which is what the media reported, however, the baby was alive.”

Isadora went and stood by Mila, resting against the table. “When you came to the bar after you killed Jeff and decided to all but sit on my boyfriend’s lap, I noticed something.”

Isadora grabbed Mila’s hand and pushed up the sleeve of her sweater. Underneath there was a burn mark.

“This is a hereditary birth mark. It’s a genetic mutation. You know who else has this same mark?” Isadora asked.

Fuck me!



Chapter 37

★ GORDON

The revelation thundered through the room. The boardroom, moments ago echoing with speculations, had now fallen into a stunned, chilling silence. Mila. Mila was the murderer. The realization was suffocating.

This was the second time in two years one of my employees was committing crimes. A year and a half ago my then CTO Chloe Langford had been arrested for corporate espionage and sabotage. She'd also hurt Raya in ways that there could be no justice for. And now, Mila? I sure knew how to pick them.

Before anyone could properly react, I saw Mila move with startling agility. She pulled a sleek Glock 43X from her purse. With a swift motion, she grabbed Isadora, pressing the cold muzzle of the gun to her temple.

“No sudden moves!” Mila’s voice was shrill with desperation, her eyes darting wildly.

Rage coursed through my veins, a roaring torrent that drowned all other thoughts. This was Isadora, my woman. My legs moved before I could think, propelling me forward, my every instinct focused on getting to Isadora.

Before I could reach her, a firm hand clamped around my arm, yanking me back. I turned, ready to lash out, but stared into the determined eyes of Drago.

“Stay back, Gordon!” he warned, his voice low and steady. “You charge at her, you’ll get Isadora killed.”

I could see the logic, but it did nothing to quell the fury in me. Every fiber of my being wanted to rip Mila apart and save Isadora, but I was trapped, paralyzed by the knowledge that any move I made could lead to Isadora’s death.



Chapter 38

★ ISADORA

The icy wind slapped me as Mila yanked me through the resort's side door. The snowy ground made each step slippery. My heart raced, adrenaline pumping. Every cell in my body screamed escape. Mila's grip was firm but uncertain. Now or never.

I recalled my self-defense training, with my protective brothers teaching me the moves. I shifted my weight, ready to strike. Without warning, I stomped Mila's instep and twisted violently, breaking her hold. Her startled gasp gave me time to pivot and elbow her gut. She doubled over, breathless. I kicked the gun from her hand, sending it skidding across the snow.

With the advantage in my favor, I tackled her, pushing her down into the snow. Mila grunted upon impact with the ground. Swiftly, I straddled her, pinning her down with my knee pressing firmly against her back. My heart thumped loudly in my ears, and my breath formed mist in the cold air.

"Gordon!" I shouted, my voice echoing in the night.

Moments later, I heard the crunch of snow under running feet. Sheriff Bailey and Gordon burst onto the scene. Relief flooded Gordon's face as he

took in the sight before him.

“Well done, Isa,” Sheriff Bailey commended as she secured Mila in handcuffs.

Gordon approached me. “You okay?”

I nodded, still catching my breath. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Gordon’s arms encircled me, pulling me close, and in that moment, surrounded by the cold of winter, I found warmth and security. He began to kiss me, my lips, my cheeks, my forehead. “I was so fucking scared.”

“Me too,” I confessed and kissed him back, furiously happy to be alive, happy to be in love, happy to be with Gordon.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. But very cold.” I was shaking both with cold and the adrenaline jag.

Mila was taken away by Sheriff Bailey’s officers and we were back in the bar that had been our safe space for the hours we were trapped with dead bodies in the resort.

Gordon picked me up, and I didn’t protest.

“Hey, where are you taking her?” Sheriff Bailey demanded.

“To my suite.” Gordon didn’t even slow down. “You okay, baby?” He kept asking.

Behind closed doors he stripped me and himself; and walked into the bathroom, turned the shower on. The warm water made me feel better immediately. What also helped was Gordon’s arms around me, holding me.

“I love you,” he said again and again as he kissed whatever part of my face and body he could reach with his lips. “I was so fucking scared.”

I kissed him back, feeling exactly the way he did. “I was scared that I’d leave you and my family.” Tears filled my eyes. “You’ve become my family. How did that happen so quickly?”

“I don’t know but I feel the same way. I’m so fucking in love with you, Isadora Santos. I can’t let go.”

I put a hand to his cheek. “I don’t want you to.”

“I don’t give a shit that you’re younger than me.”

“Me neither.” I smiled.

He kissed my mouth, deepening the kiss, until we were both moaning. He took me to bed and lay me down.

“We’re making the bedding wet,” I protested.

“We’ll get housekeeping to change the sheets.” Gordon entered me as if unable to wait a second longer. “I needed this. I need you.” Tears ran down his cheeks. “I thought she’d kill you. I...fuck.”

He appeared so vulnerable, and he was mine. This imposing CEO, feared by many, was now fearful of losing me. His love and devotion humbled me deeply. My own overwhelming love for him was a realization of a truth I had always known, love was a genuine force. I had witnessed it in my parents and now in Alejandro and Maria. Love was what powered the world, and now I had found it for myself.

He moved inside me, rocking my fucking world. “*Dios mio!*” I gasped.

“Not god, baby, just Gordon,” he teased.

I laughed then and kissed him. For now, there wasn’t an urgency to orgasm, just a need to be close, intimate, feel each other’s life force, know we were alive.

“Marry me,”

I looked up at him shocked. “What?”

“Marry me.”

I bit my lower lip and looked at him. “Do it properly...with a ring and...ask me again.”

“I promise I will. But I need an answer now.”

“Yes. Yes. Of course, yes.”

“I don’t want to wait a year or whatever the fuck people wait to plan a wedding. I want to get married like now.”

I lifted my hips to take him and wrapped my legs around his waist. “How about February? I have an opening here in the resort for one Saturday.”

“I’m marrying you in Scotland.” His fingers found my clit. “Say, yes, Gordon, I’ll marry you in Scotland.”

I whimpered. “My family, Gordon and…” He pulled his hand away just as I was about to come.

“Gordon,” I whined.

“Say, yes, I’ll marry you in Scotland otherwise no orgasm for you.”

He said it so seriously that I fell hard. “Fine. But my parents will expect a reception here. They love to party and we’re big on dancing.”

“We can do that.” He kissed me to seal the deal and then he sweetened the pot by giving me an orgasm.



Chapter 39

★ GORDON

We congregated back at the bar for dinner. Sheriff Bailey had texted Isadora that Mila had confessed to both murders and that Drago had the details.

I asked Cyrus to get someone in his staff to craft an email that I could send out about Mila and the events of these two days. The company I knew was in an uproar, inundated with gossip and rumors. I was glad Raya was in the office, keeping everyone calm and using the talking points we'd crafted for the both employees and the media.

Everyone was there, well everyone except Mila. Cyrus was on a couch. Elspeth back behind the bar. Chef Armand and Keith sat on two matching arm chairs next to one another. Tanya sat at the bar, looking shocked and unhappy.

Where's Isaac?" The weight of the night's events pressed heavily on my shoulders.

"He left," Cyrus said and then turned to look Isadora, patting the spot invitingly. "Now come here, sit down, Miss James Bond and enlighten us

about the ongoing drama.”

I pulled Isadora into my embrace, feeling the need to shield her from it all. “She’s with me,” I stated firmly, dropping a light kiss on her head. The familiar scent of her hair, mixed with the chilly night air, brought a momentary relief. “God, Isadora, I need some time alone with you. The fear of losing you tonight... it was unbearable.”

She patted my chest gently. “We have forever, *amor mío*. But first, we need to hear what Drago has to say, instructions from tía Ciara.”

I raised an eyebrow at her, questioning, “Tía? Aunt? No wonder she was grilling me about you.”

Drago suddenly thumped his hand on the bar, making everyone jump. “Of all the times to have a sprained ankle!”

Isadora shot him a knowing look, “You realize if it weren’t for that ankle, you wouldn’t be here?”

Cyrus interjected with an update, “Oh, by the way, Raya went into full panic mode when she saw Mila put a gun on you. I tried to reassure. But she’s spilled everything to your parents. Brace yourself.”

Isadora let out an exasperated sigh. “That means they’ll probably be here in two hours.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “That’s precise.”

She met my gaze, a hint of mischief in her eyes. “It’s a two-hour drive from Golden Valley Inn...so that’s how long it’ll take. I’d hoped you’d meet them on Christmas day, but guess it’ll be sooner.”

Elsbeth slid a tequila Isadora’s way. And then another. I could see the tension easing from her with every sip. I felt the burning need for a stiff scotch but decided that sober was a better way to meet my future in-laws.

“Drago, care to share our detective journey with the group?” Isadora asked,

her voice steadier.

Dragging his gaze away from his injured foot, Drago nodded. “It was a team effort. Raya had a part, as did you, Gordon. But Isadora? She was the linchpin.”

She rested her head on my shoulder, and for the first time that night, I felt like a measure of peace. She was here, in my arms and it was perfect.

“Raya found out about the baby being alive. And when she told me I remembered the burn mark Mila had when she was climbing onto your lap that night when she came looking for Jeff. It was the same one that Adel had. Raya went through Mila’s emails and found her conversations with Jeff and found that while Adel and Isaac were planning to swindle Gordon with bad software; Jeff was working with Mila.”

“Why did she kill Jeff?” Tanya asked.

“According to Mila,” Drago began, “Jeff and she planned to blackmail Adel dry. But once they found out she was planning to run, they changed track. They killed her. They were seeking the right time when they recognized you, Tanya.”

She blinked. “What?”

Isadora smiled apologetically at her. “I’m so sorry you had go through that horrible arrest. Mila met you weeks ago when she was here.””She knew who you were, and they framed you. They left threatening notes for Adel to scare her and also framed you.” Drago held his empty glass of wine at Elspeth, and she nodded, filling his glass up.

“Who killed Adel?” I asked.

“Mila.”

“Why did she kill Jeff?” Cyrus wanted to know

“Jeff wanted Mila to marry him so they could share Adel’s inheritance, but

Mila didn't want that. She got him to the foyer and killed him. She was going to then go to the bar and pretend she didn't know where Jeff was. And...you know the rest."

"How did she know I would find his body?" Tanya wondered.

"That was a stroke of luck," Drago added dryly. "I am really sorry, Tanya."

She waved a hand. "Thanks to Isadora I'm not going to prison...but it's frightening to see that they *framed* me. How could they hate me so much when they didn't know me?"

"They're narcissists, Tanya. They don't care about anyone. They don't hate you or like you. They just used you," I tried to comfort her.

"Doesn't make it any better," Tanya quipped. "I'm going to call it a night. Usually, I love living in the resort but tonight...I desperately want to get out of here."

"Then do that." Isadora went up to Tanya. "Just stay in a cottage at the Inn in Golden Valley."

"Really?"

"Yes, just pack up and leave. We'll be fine here. I'll help manage the spa and Angelica can take care of clients."

Tanya gave Isadora a hug and left.

"That was nice of you," I said to Isadora when she came back to sit with me.

I pulled Isadora onto my lap, wanting her weight on me. She didn't mind, just snuggled in like she'd been doing this for years instead of days.

"Not really. Just the decent thing to do. She's going to associate the resort with terrible things that happened to her and her father. Maybe I can ask Devi who manages our spa at the Inn to swap with Tanya." She leaned back into me her mind already wandering to other things.

“I was wondering if we can get out of here as well,” I asked.

“I have a wedding on Christmas day,” she said sadly. “I can’t leave.”

“They would still want a wedding here despite the murders?” I asked surprised.

Isadora laughed. “But of course. They booked this place a year ago and unless they are cancelling their wedding, they won’t give up their space. We can go to Golden Valley...but I live with my parents, Gordon.”

I groaned. “Fuck.”

“I mean, you can stay with me. I have an entire wing to myself.”

“Ah...” I didn’t know how comfortable I was sleeping with the daughter of the house under her parents’ roof.

“Fine, we’ll stay in the inn or a cabin, the one next to Aurelio’s is free...I think. Oh, and one more thing, my father is a traditionalist so...you have to ask him for permission to marry me.”

Fuck me! At the age of forty two I had to ask for permission to marry her! Well, if that was what it took...then that was what I’d do.

“Absolutely,” I promised.

“Good.” She kissed my cheek. She stood up and clapped her hands. “Everyone, chef ordered pizza from a fabulous Italian pizzeria down the street, which is luckily open, so let’s eat pizza, drink wine, and cleanse our hearts and souls. Bring some holiday cheer into Golden Valley resort.”

On cue, Elspeth started the music and Bing Crosby sang to us about a *White Christmas*.



Chapter 40

★ ISADORA

The whir of engines sliced through the chilly night air. A barrage of car headlights flashed through the windows of the resort, signaling the arrival of vehicles. Even before the doors opened, I knew. My heart surged with a mix of relief and annoyance. My family had come for me.

The bar door swung open and in came a procession that felt like it belonged in a heartwarming Spanish telenovela. First, my father, Arsenio, and then my mother, Paloma. Following closely behind were Alejandro, my protective older brother with his fiancé Maria and my favorite and *only* nephew, Silvano. Bringing up the rear, was my younger brother, Aurelio.

Before I could utter a word, I was swallowed up in a whirlwind of hugs, kisses, and tears. The warmth of their embraces, the familiar scents of home, the soft murmurs of concern and love—it was all overwhelmingly comforting.

Silvano, my nephew, who I was very close to, thanks to babysitting him his whole life and having movie nights with him, slammed into me first.

“Raya said that a woman had a gun on you,” he whispered. “A gun. Glock 43X.”

“Ah...okay.” I didn’t know my guns but Silvano, my Mensa-smart nephew would have found out. “We talked to *tía* Ciara.” Well, that explained it.

“*Mi niña*,” my mother murmured, her hands cupping my face, her eyes searching mine for any sign of distress.

Alejandro, ever the protective one, looked me over, ensuring I was unhurt. “Isa,” he said, his voice low and gruff, “you had us worried sick.”

I rolled my eyes, even as I hugged him tighter. “I’m fine,” I whispered back.

Aurelio, with his ever-playful demeanor, ruffled my hair. “Thought you could have all the fun without us?”

“Seems that way,” I chuckled.

“*Mija*.” My father enveloped me in a hug, and I felt tears sting my eyes. It had been two long days and having him here with me just made it all slam into me.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he wiped my tears away.

“Yes. It’s just...you know...emotions.”

“I know, *mija*.” He kissed my forehead and held me close.

My mother talked to the staff and asked them how they were doing. It looked like between Ciara and Raya they had the low down on everything that had happened during the snowstorm.



Chapter 41

GORDON

Paloma was the first to come to me. I held my hand out, and she waved it away. “In this family, we hug.” She enveloped me in her slender arms, and I felt a rush of panic. What if I wasn’t good enough for these people? It was humbling to know that an arrogant man like me who thought he was good enough for everything was now anxious.

“Thank you, Mrs. Santos,” I replied, but she waved me off.

“I don’t know who that is but I’m Paloma. And this is my husband, Arsenio.”

Arsenio stepped forward, his gaze assessing. I held out my hand to shake his, not sure if I was supposed to hug him or what? Arsenio put his hands on my shoulder and squeezed, ignoring my outstretched hand. So, a semi hug. “So, you’re the man who has stolen my baby’s heart.”

Yeah, and her virginity. Christ, I’m going to hell.

“And she has stolen mine,” I responded, and his nod was approving.

Elsbeth and the rest of the staff had been sent away, so Maria was playing bartender with Drago. “What would you like Gordon?” she asked.

“A scotch, thanks.”

Alejandro came up to me then and Maria groaned. “Alejandro, not now.”

He smiled at his fiancée and then turned to me. But he wasn’t smiling. “She’s fallen in love with you. And I don’t know why.”

“Me neither,” I admitted.

“You hurt her, and I’ll fucking bury you,” he finished as I’d predicted he would.

“Alejandro,” Maria cried out. “I’m so sorry, Gordon. Isa finds out you’re threatening him here, *she’ll* bury you.”

“Well, he won’t tell her, right?” Alejandro challenged me.

“Ditto what he said. Hurt Isa, and there’ll be hell to pay. I’ll help *him* bury you.” Aurelio had a twinkle in his eye that told me he was part-teasing, part-serious.. “I’m a farmer, I know where to bury people so no one will ever find you.”

“Duly noted! And, here I thought you were being metaphorical about burying me,” I mocked.

Alejandro laughed.

They insisted on taking Isadora home, but she convinced them she needed to work at the resort the following day. The family tasked me to stay with her and make sure she was alright.

Maria came up to me and gave me a hug. “Welcome to the family.”

“Thanks.” I kissed her on both cheeks. “No one seems to care I’m eighteen years older than her.”

“No one does. Now, if you were an asshole, regardless of your age, they’d work hard to break you both up,” Maria grinned. “Raya and Mateo speak highly of you. That’s better than a USDA prime meat stamp.”

“Look at you talking like a rancher’s wife.”

She laughed. “There is one thing you need to know. You take their baby girl to live in LA and there will be hell to pay.”

I nodded as I watched Isadora laugh at something her mother said. “I’m figuring that out. How are you making it work?”

“I kept my place in Silver Lake and I’m there when I need to be. Alejandro travels for work and so do I...but we are home for the weekends. That’s important around here.”

“Thank you for the tip,” I said appreciatively.

“And build that house she wants by *her* lake, though everyone disagrees it’s hers...but it is hers. Otherwise, you’re going to be sleeping under your in-laws’ roof and as lovely as they are, trust me, Paloma might stand outside the door listening in.”

Paloma came up to us then. “What did you say about me?”

“I was telling him how much you like to snoop.” Maria slid an arm around Isadora’s mother. There was an ease to their relationship, like they were friends.

“I don’t snoop,” Paloma told me seriously. “That’s Isa. I just do it *with* her to keep her company. I’m being a supportive mother.”

With every passing moment, every shared laugh, every warm touch on the shoulder, and every welcoming smile, I felt myself being woven into the fabric of the Santos family. By the time the Santos family left, my initial apprehension had melted away. I was falling in love, not just with Isadora, but with her family as well.



Chapter 42

★ ISADORA

We celebrated a traditional Mexican Christmas and got together for *Noche Buena* on the night before Christmas. We spent the day cooking, eating and being a family.

Gordon had called me from LA the day before, asking me what he should buy for my family to put under the Christmas tree.

“We don’t do presents,” I informed me.

“What does that mean?”

“We don’t do presents. We do experiences. For Christmas we usually travel. This year we’re not able to because I’m working between Christmas and New Year, it’s crazy busy at the resort,” I told him. “But it’s only for this year. I promised my family I’ll do better next year.”

“I can’t just show up on Christmas Eve with empty hands, Isa,” he protested.

“Ah...bring flowers. Mama loves flowers. She can’t have enough. And some wine. We love wine. Does that work?”

He chuckled on the other end of the line. “Copy! Flowers and wine. Although, it feels strange not wrapping gifts.”

I laughed, imagining his confusion. “We like to spend time together more than giving each other things we’ll forgot about. Trust me, you being with us will mean more to them than any present you could bring.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said with a hint of uncertainty.

As I’d suggested he showed up on Christmas Eve, with an extravagant bouquet of assorted flowers and a case of wine. The wines were from Burgundy, Bordeaux, and Mexico. My mother’s eyes lit up at the sight of the flowers, and my father gave a nod of approval toward the wine selection.

“You did good,” I whispered to him.

“Question? Where are we staying tonight?” he asked. I knew he wouldn’t be comfortable staying at my parents’ home, but I wanted him to be. He had to bite the bullet sometime.

“Here.”

“Isa—“I went on tiptoe and kissed him. “Please. This is my home.”

“Fuck, baby, you’ve got me wrapped around your little finger so that I’m never winning an argument again.” He pulled me into a deeper kiss and all but jumped away from me when he heard clapping. It was Silvano and my mother.

“Usually, people clear their throat or something,” he murmured.

“Not in my family. Come on let’s get you something to drink, an apron and you can help us cook.”

“I’m more the watching you while you cook kind of man,” Gordon countered.

“Then have a glass of wine and you can partner with Silvano to be our official *Noche Buena* taste tester.”

The warmth of the kitchen enveloped us, the rich aroma of traditional Mexican dishes filling the air. I was side by side with my mother, Maria, Raya, and Aurelio, working on different components of our festive meal. We were in the middle of a spirited debate on the right amount of spice for our mole sauce when Silvano, the young genius of the family, zipped by, snatching a tamale.

“Hey, little tester,” I called out, playfully. “What’s the verdict?”

He chewed thoughtfully before proclaiming, “Delicious! But perhaps a hint more chocolate in the mole?”

Aurelio rolled his eyes, playfully jostling Silvano. “Always has to show off that palate of his!”

Raya chuckled. “Well, when you’re busy pondering particle physics, you develop a taste for the finer things.”

I held up a fork to Gordon who was sitting on a bar stool around the center island. He took the bite, and it was obvious he relished it. “Wow! I can’t see it needs anything.”

“Inexperienced palate,” Silvano patted Gordon’s shoulder. “But you’ll get there after ten or twelve Christmases.”

Just then, the rhythm of a lively mariachi tune floated from the living room. Mateo took his wife’s hand, pulling Raya into an impromptu dance between the kitchen counters. Their journey to love had its hurdles, but I couldn’t have been happier to see Raya so radiant and to have Mateo become part of our vibrant family tapestry.

Feeling the infectious beat, Gordon pulled me into his arms. We swayed and twirled, lost in the music and each other. “I’ve never seen a kitchen transform into a dance floor so seamlessly,” he whispered in my ear, his breath warm against my neck.

“That’s how the Santos do Christmas,” I replied, smiling, as our feet moved in rhythm.

All around me, amidst the dance and sizzle of the frying pans, was the comforting cacophony of family—teasing, laughter, and boundless love. It was perfect, every note, every scent, every touch. And I was proud to share it with Gordon.



Chapter 43

GORDON

Stealing a glance at Isadora, who was animatedly chatting with her cousins, I quietly walked up to her father.

“Arsenio, may I have a moment?” I asked my hopefully future father-in-law who was pouring himself a glass of wine. He handed me a glass and took one himself.

“Sure. Let’s go to the library.”

He took me to a room where the warm glow of an elegant chandelier illuminated the walls, lined with an impressive collection of books. Arsenio sat down in a plush leather chair and asked me to be seated across from him.

“I love this wine from Guadalupe de Valle. Thank you for bringing it.”

“I go down there quite a bit. I invest in a few vineyards in Valle. And...in other places.”

“We’re big fans of Callahan Vineyards. Alejandro knows the Callahan family well. Do you know their wine?” “I do. I like their Pinot Noir.”

“So, what did you want to talk about.”

“Well,” I began, clearing my throat, “I want to discuss something of importance with you.” I was feeling extremely uncomfortable.

He put down his glass, tilting his head slightly, indicating I should continue.

Taking a deep breath, I took the plunge. “I deeply care for Isadora. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. And with your blessing, I’d like to ask her to marry me.”

For a moment, there was silence. He was going to say no. I could see it on his face.

“You’re asking *me* if you can marry my daughter?” He looked very surprised.

The tone of his voice didn’t sound promising. *Fuck!* I was screwed.

“Isadora told me you’re traditional and I respect that. I love her and I’ll be good to her. I know you’re worried that I’m older than her...but I’ve never loved another woman like her love her.”

Arsenio glared at me for a moment and then as if he couldn’t stand it any longer burst into hearty laughter, almost falling off his chair.

“*Ay, Dios mío!*“ he exclaimed between chuckles. “I tried. I really tried to keep a straight face but...Isadora really got you! I should have seen this coming!”

Confusion must have been written all over my face because he patted the seat next to him, signaling for me to sit. “Gordon,” he wiped a tear of laughter from his eye, “our family isn’t that traditional. Isadora played a prank on you. And fair warning, it will not be the last prank she plays on you.”

I felt a mixture of relief and embarrassment as I leaned back on the armchair. “So, you’re saying I don’t need to ask your permission?”

Arsenio smiled, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “While I

appreciate the respect, Gordon, it's Isadora's decision. But for what it's worth, I can see how much you love her and that's all that we care about."

"So...when she seriously told me I needed to ask your permission, she was just taking a piss?"

"Yes, she was," he sounded serious again. "Maybe you should reconsider marrying her. I married her mother, and she's made my life hell. She's always on about something. She wants parties. And you saw how everyone keeps dancing in our house. It's crazy."

"Now you're taking a piss."

"Yes," Arsenio grinned. "Paloma is the best fucking thing that ever happened to me. I always told my children, marry someone who makes you more than you are, not less. See, Alejandro's first wife made him less...she gave us Silvano, so I say we're even *and* she's dead so it's in the past. Now, Maria? She makes him more. He makes her more. They make Silvano more. Family does that. So, as long as you help each other grow and be better and happier people, man, marry her don't marry her, I don't give a shit."

Feeling considerably relaxed, I leaned back. "I can't believe you don't care I'm eighteen years older than her."

"I'm about the same years older than Paloma and when she married me, I had two kids, one was a teenager. Trust me, I was worried about ruining her life." He picked up his wine, and I did the same.

"*Salud.*"

"*Slàinte.*"

"I fucked up big time with Paloma. Almost drove her away. She was packing up getting ready to leave. *Bueno*, maybe it's for the best I thought. She was from Boston, and I dragged her here. She was so young. So beautiful. I hated I was this old bitter man. Alejandro and Aurelio kicked my

ass but good.“ He smiled as if remembering. “They helped me win her back. I’ve never looked back. She told me something then. See, I knew she made me more but what I didn’t realize is that I made her more as well. Now, twenty-five years later, I’m the happiest fucking *hombre* I know.”

I smiled. “It shows.”

“She also drives me up the wall,” he added. “You think this prank was too much? For our first wedding anniversary there was an exploding cake and a Mariachi band. I almost died of a heart attack.”

I chuckled, shaking my head in amusement. “Well, it seems I have a lot to learn about your daughter’s sense of humor. But mark my words, I’ll come up with a way to get her back.”

Arsenio grinned, raising his glass. “That’s the spirit. Isadora loves a good prank.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll make sure my retaliation is for the history books,” I said already plotting. “In fact, I think I have an idea.”

“Care to share?” Arsenio asked, leaning forward curiously.

I told him my plan, and he burst out laughing again. “That is *perfecto!* You’re a brave man for marrying into this family, Gordon.”

“To new beginnings,” I said, raising my glass again.

“To new beginnings,” Arsenio echoed warmly. “Welcome to the family, son.”



Chapter 44

★ ISADORA

Around early February, I knew.

We only had sex without a condom that one time in the shower. That one crazy time when we both needed to feel alive.

And I think that was all my body needed. *Madre mía*, I was knocked up. I just knew it. I knew it before I made the doctor's appointment to get birth control pills, ha! And when I avoided the aisle with home pregnancy kits at the local CVS.

If I was pregnant, I was okay with it. I wanted to have babies, and I wanted to have them before I turned thirty. That was the plan if I found the right man. I had found the right man. He'd proposed to me, albeit in the heated moments while we were trying to catch a murderer *and* having sex. But since then, *nothing. Nada. Zilch.* No talking about marriage. Living together. Moving in.

He came over every weekend, now comfortable staying at my parents place with me. I'd taken him to see *my* lake and told him how I wanted to build a house there. He'd nodded and listened and then...*nothing.*

I was expecting a man on bended knee with a ring the size of Montana because he could afford it; and he was giving me *nothing*...well except a lot of orgasms. We talked every night on the phone if we weren't together. He told me he loved me. Whenever he came for the weekend he was on me like a starving man. We were trying out everything. I'd figured out blowjobs though I still hadn't been able to make him come. Anal...was going slowly, thank god. I was mostly embarrassed, but he didn't seem to care about that and made me want things I never thought to want.

We'd figured out sixty-nine was our favorite position. Now, here was a man dedicated to eating pussy.

The sex was great. The relationship was awesome.

I was pregnant, and he had not talked about marriage since that time at the resort.

Maybe he didn't want to marry me anymore, I thought unhappily as I waited for my doctor to show up. They'd taken my blood and urine sample. They'd done the blood pressure, ear temperature, breathe deeply thing. And now I sat in my gown, swinging my legs, my ass catching a draft, waiting for Dr. Amira Ahmed to show up.

I'd been seeing Dr. Ahmed since I turned eighteen and needed an ob./gyn. She didn't even know I was dating so when I showed up asking for birth control pills she'd grilled me on why and I told her about Gordon. She was thrilled for me. *But* now she'd get my blood test results, and she'd know I was pregnant. *Dios mío!* What if Gordon didn't want to marry me anymore? Well fuck him then. I could have a baby on my own. My family would support me. But why would he not want to marry me?

There was a knock on the door, and it opened when I sullenly said, "Come in."

“Well?” I asked when Dr. Ahmed pursed her lips.

“Well, you’re pregnant.”

Resigned, I nodded.

“You suspected.”

I nodded again. “One time. One time we had sex without a condom. One time.”

“We try to teach you in sex ed that it takes just one time,” Dr. Ahmed pointed out.

“*One time!* I came here for a quick appointment for birth control. But the universe seems to have other plans.”

“Right. So, when did you have this unprotected sex with your Scotsman?”

“Three days before Christmas. So...I’m like what eight weeks or so?” I’d done the math.

“Okay. What do you want to do?” Dr. Ahmed sat down and asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Is this a moment where I say congratulations or book—” “Yes. Congratulations.” I blinked. “Yes. I’m having a baby. When is it due?”

“Around mid-September.”

“Okay...what do I need to do to have a healthy baby.”

I took a deep breath as Dr. Ahmed smiled warmly. “Having a baby is an enormous responsibility, but also an amazing blessing. Let’s start with taking care of your health, making sure you’re eating well, staying active, and taking prenatal vitamins. I’ll give you some information on what to expect during pregnancy and early childhood development.”

I nodded, my mind racing. *A baby. Gordon’s baby. Our baby.*

“What’s bothering you?” she asked. “Are you worried the Scotsman won’t want the baby?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “He wants to marry me. He said so...but not lately. What if he changed his mind?”

“Then it’s his loss,” Dr. Ahmed put her hand on my shoulder. “Your family is going to be thrilled.”

I smiled. I knew that. Even if I was going to be a single mother, they’d support me and be there for me. But I didn’t aspire to be a single mother. I wanted to marry the love of my fucking life.

“I don’t know how to tell him,” I confessed nervously.

Dr. Ahmed patted my hand reassuringly. “You do it when and how you feel most comfortable. This is your news to share when you’re ready.”

I let out a shaky breath. Gordon would be thrilled, wouldn’t he? We’d talked about getting married and having a family one day. For god’s sake when he’d said no Plan B, he’d meant a baby, hadn’t he?

Maybe this was all happening sooner than expected, but we loved each other. We could do this, raise a child. I just needed to work up the courage to tell him.

“Thank you, Dr. Ahmed.” I felt a small spark of excitement taking root inside me. “I have a lot to think about and plans to make. Wow! I’m going to have a baby!”

Dr. Ahmed smiled. “Yes you are. And what an adventure it will be! Say hello to your mother for me.”

I sat in my car, my fingers trembling slightly, as I dialed Gordon’s number. The phone rang once, twice, and on the third ring he picked up, “Hey baby, how’s your day?”

I took a deep breath. “Good,” I squeaked.

“Yeah? I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I admitted.

“You on your way?” He sounded genuinely happy so...maybe he wasn’t sick and tired of me.

I was going to spend the weekend with him and was meeting Nova for a spa day. I’d thought go to the gynecologist on the way to Los Angeles...get birth control pills.

“Yes.”

“Dinner still with me, right? You won’t stay with Nova?”

“No. Just the day at the spa.”

“I can’t wait to see you, baby. Be at my apartment by seven, no later. Okay?”

I’d been to his apartment several times now and had my own key and all that jazz. I’d had absolutely no insecurities about our relationship. But now I was pregnant and a mass of insecurities *and*...most probably hormones.

“I love you, sweetheart and I can’t wait to see you.”

“*Amor mío*, do we any plans for the weekend?”

He was silent for a moment and then said, “Nothing special.”

Good! I wanted a quiet weekend, so we’d have time to talk, so I’d have the time (and the courage) to tell him I was knocked up.

I blinked back tears, a hard lump forming in my throat. I wanted to tell him about the baby, but I was scared he’d reject me if I did.

“You okay, Isa?” He asked, sensing my change in mood.

Yes,“ I replied, my voice thick.

“Baby, you’re upset. What’s wrong?”

I’m hormonal, pendejo, because you knocked me up!

“Nothing. Allergies,” I lied.

He bought it.

I drove straight to Hotel Bel-Air, handed the keys to my Jaguar I-Pace to

the valet and hurried inside. After a long holiday season, I needed the break...and especially now as I was with child. I put a hand on my stomach, feeling queasy—not physically but emotionally.

The soothing ambiance of the Hotel Bel-Air spa was just what I needed. Soft, calming music played in the background as I settled into one of the plush pedicure chairs alongside Nova. A delicate scent of lavender wafted through the air, and the trickling sounds of water from a nearby fountain lulled me into a state of relaxation.

“Now, I need to know everything about the murders...and the sex... actually let’s change the order of that. Sex first, murders after.”

I laughed as therapists began working our feet that were soaking in a scented water bath.

“The sex was...is...amazing,” I confessed. “The relationship is...well, complicated.”

“Aren’t they always,” Nova chimed, and her therapist grinned and nodded.

“They did a global study and found that women who are without children and a spouse are the happiest,” my therapist told us.

“I don’t know about that, Val,” Nova’s therapist murmured, “I just broke up with my boyfriend and I’m *not happy* being single.”

“Andy, you broke up. I didn’t know that,” Val exclaimed.

“Why did you break up?” I asked, leaning back, and immersing myself into this female rituals of getting waxed, washed, and polished.

“He wants to move to Texas,” Andy continued as she scrubbed Nova’s feet.

“Andy, you can’t move to Texas...it’s...weird out there,” Val said shocked, splashing some water out of my bath.

“That’s what I told him and...he moved...alone, went to Texas to be a cowboy or whatever.”

“I say good riddance,” Val assured her.

Nova grinned at me. “Relationships are always tricky. What’s so tricky about yours?”

I took a sip of my cucumber water. “Your first clue is that I’m not drinking champagne.”

Nova’s eyes widened. “*Isa*. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” I drank some more water and took a deep breath. “I just found out a few hours ago. One time, we did it without a condom one time and here you go.”

“You’re happy about it?” Nova put a hand on mine.

“Yes,” I smiled and then frowned, “But I have to tell Gordon and it makes me nervous. The thing is he proposed to me...while the murders were taking place.”

Both Val and Andy gasped at the word murders.

I nodded at them. “Did you hear about the murders of this tech CEO and—“
“In the mountains?” Andy cried out. “I read about it. She was killed by her daughter?”

Mila had pleaded guilty to second degree murder, and I took great pleasure in telling Nova and our two therapists about the murders in Golden Valley Resort.

“You solved the case,” Nova said proudly.

I wiggled my eyebrows. “I kinda did, didn’t I?”

“Isn’t discussing nail paint after all that you’ve been through a bit too banal?”

I chuckled. “Trust me, after all that drama, discussing nail colors sounds like just the lighthearted conversation I need.”

After our pedicures we went by the pool. The gentle rustle of palm trees

and the calming sound of the fountain in the background of Hotel Bel-Air created an atmosphere of tranquility. We sat under the shade drinking juices—mine was something passion fruit and hers was something vodka.

Nova, with her raven-black hair and piercing green eyes had always been my anchor. She could always read me, sometimes even better than I did myself. “We’re alone now so tell me why you’re afraid of talking to Gordon about the baby?”

“He hasn’t talked about marriage or moving in...and he had...you know in Golden Valley Resort.”

“He’s madly in love with you, Isa.”

“I don’t know anymore. Even though he says it.”

“Has he done anything to make you feel insecure?”

“No. It’s just...” I sighed. “When he proposed to me it was a beautiful, intimate moment. But since then, nothing’s official. I’ve dropped hints, tried to discuss our future. But he...he just seems so distant. And now...” I took a deep breath, “I’m pregnant.”

“Trust him, Isa. Relationships are about trust.”

Did I trust Gordon? Yes, with my heart then why was I worried about telling about the baby?

“He seems distracted...and busy. I don’t know Nova. I’m afraid I’m behaving like the child he accused me of being in the beginning.”

Nova took a sip of her drink. “Maybe he’s just overwhelmed?”

“Have you met Gordon? He doesn’t get overwhelmed.”

Nova looked at me with a determined expression. “He loves you. I’m sure of it.”

I nodded, my emotions a chaotic swirl. “You’re right, I need to face this. I just hope it ends with us moving forward...together.”

Nova squeezed my hand. “No matter what happens, remember you have people who love and support you. I’m here, always. And I don’t think Gordon is going anywhere.”



Chapter 45

★ GORDON

Sitting in my office, surrounded by blueprints, paperwork, and the aroma of fresh coffee, I was absorbed in the details of an event that was far removed from my usual business dealings.

“You sure you want to surprise her?” Raya asked me for the hundredth time.

I nodded. “Her parents approve. You know she’s always said that because she plans other people’s weddings, she doesn’t want to plan her own. This is my wedding gift to her.”

“You’re giving her a Scottish wedding as a gift for the wedding?”

Was I out of my mind? This was an enormous risk. She’d probably knee me in the nuts and walk out on me when she found out that the weekend surprised I planned for her was our fucking wedding.

We’d booked the church in Lanark and the whole fucking inn there for all of Isadora’s family and friends; and my family (that were not from Lanark) and friends.

We would be at least two hundred people for this impromptu wedding. Everyone had been invited to attend a wedding celebration with strict orders to not talk to Isadora about said wedding. Her family, who loved a good prank, thought this was just the sort of grand gesture Isadora would appreciate. Now I wasn't sure if they were playing a prank on me and Isa would put my balls in a blender, but it was the chance I was taking.

"I've never seen you nervous," Raya mused. "Never ever. Not even before a board meeting after a bad quarter. But you're nervous now."

"I'm *fecking* petrified," I admitted. "What if she hates it?"

"She won't hate it. Is she already in LA?"

I nodded. "She's spending the day with Nova who's been texting me that Isadora is feeling neglected, and I need to make her feel better. Fuck me! I've been so busy planning this infernal wedding that I've ignored my bride."

I ran a hand through my hair and Raya chuckled.

"Wow, the great Gordon Mackenzie on his knees."

I smiled as well because it *was* ridiculous. But what was even more weird was that I enjoyed feeling like this because it meant that I was *feeling*, and it felt bloody great.

I laid down the blueprint of the house that I had had an architect design. It was our home by *her* lake in Golden Valley. "What do you think?" I asked, watching Raya's eyes scan the designs.

She took a moment, her fingers tracing the lines of the drawing. "She'll love it," Raya assured me. "This is her dream house. How did you put it together without her input?"

"I asked the architect to talk to every member of her family about everything Isa had ever said she wanted in a house. Fuck! I don't know what

I'm doing. Honestly, I've never been this sure of fucking up as I am right now. I should tell her we're getting married. I should propose to her..."

"You're proposing to her tomorrow evening in Scotland," Raya reminded me.

"Right...tomorrow? Will she be too tired after flying for eight hours?"

Raya threw her hands up in the air in mock frustration. "You're like a mother hen. No, she won't be tired. She's twenty-four. Remember when you were that age? I rubbed my face with my hands. "Actually, no. It was such a *fecking* long time ago."

Raya put a hand on my shoulder. "Everything you're doing for her is romantic, loving, and thoughtful."

I chuckled, "Isn't that what marriage is all about?"

Raya smiled. "It certainly is. Okay, what is this?" She pointed to the large windows and the terrace overlooking the lake.

"That's right off of the master bedroom. You can wake up in the morning, walk out and jump into the lake for a swim...or go left and jump into the heated pool. She apparently asked her parents to build a pool at home so she could do that," I explained. "They said no thank you. Isa uses the Golden Inn pool regularly."

"And you have a wonderful view of a tranquil lake." Raya leaned back, looking thoughtful. "It's perfect for Isa. She'll love it, especially knowing you've put so much thought into it."

I felt a rush of excitement and anxiety. "This isn't just a wedding present. It's a promise. A future. I want her to know I won't take her away from Golden Valley...that we'll live there and in LA."

"Good otherwise you'd be in trouble with the family," Raya warned me.

"Tell me about it! Literally everyone has told me not to do that, including

the fucking Sheriff while she was taking my statement.” I sat down and picked up my cup of coffee. “Speaking of which, any news from the Mila front?”

Raya nodded. “I spoke with the DA—“

“How did you do that?:

“I have my ways!” She prevaricated and then laughed. “Vega has friends everywhere.”

“This is Caro?”

Raya nodded. “Gets confusing. We call her Vega, and the Santos’ call her Caro, because Aurelio calls her Caro.”

“Are they back together again?”

Raya shrugged. “For now. They’ll be attending the wedding...together, we think. Declan is flying the family.”

“Yeah, I talked to Dec. Decent of him to offer his plane.” I picked up the box that held the wedding rings and opened it. *With this ring...*

“What’s the news about Mila?”

“Right. First things first, the DA asked me to tell you that you need to do better background checks on people. First Chloe and now Mila,” Raya teased, but it struck home.

“Trust me it’s not sitting well with me either. I have two people from my team in prison. At least Chloe was committing fraud...Mila? I literally have no words.”

I had to inform the company about Mila’s departure and also address the numerous questions and gossip that had been circulating and was now gradually fading away. It had been a whirlwind of news, from revealing Adel’s daughter’s identity to Tanya being Marcus’s daughter, Mila’s

involvement in Jeff and Adel's deaths, and the SEC investigating Isaac for insider trading and fraud. A lot had unfolded in a relatively short span.

"She's going to accept a plea next month, and she's getting thirteen years. She'll probably do seven."

"Just seven for killing two people?"

Raya shrugged. "The clinical psychologist appointed by the state evaluated her and diagnosed her with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, coexisting with traits consistent with psychopathy."

"I had a psychopath in my close circle. Excellent."

"With a fixation on you, apparently. She was going to hurt Isadora next because she stole you away from her."

I shuddered at the thought and remembered when Mila had a gun to Isadora.

"And who inherits Adel's fortune now?" I wondered.

"Not much of a fortune left I'm afraid. She invested in crypto and lost a lot of money," Raya informed me. "According to the DA after they pay off debtors there's enough to give her a proper burial, but that's about it."

Isaac had thrown a memorial for Adel and the attendance had been sparse. At the end of your life, you realized how many friends you'd made and Adel, alas, didn't have many.

"I'm glad there is no long drawn trial," I admitted. "I'd hate for Isadora to testify. I still can't believe Mila had a gun pointed at her."

Raya laughed then. "But Isadora kicked her ass."

"Aye, she certainly did." My future-wife was a fucking warrior princess.

That afternoon as I went through all the details again, I nagged Paloma who only replied with thumbs up emojis now. Her way of saying it's all good and I'm too polite to ask you to stop bothering me. And then I nagged my sister.

I sent her the hundredth text message of the day: *Flowers? Did you book the flowers? For the bouquet and the tables decorations?*

Yeah, these were words Gordon Mackenzie had never thought he'd ever type as a question.

My sister's reply was prompt: *If you send any more messages about the bloody wedding I may kill you when I see you and widow your bride before you're married. Now, feck off.*

Me: *So, good on flowers?*

She replied with a middle finger emoji.



Chapter 46

★ ISADORA

“Hey, baby.” Gordon pulled me into his arms as soon as he opened the door for me. His mouth finding mine, hungry, like he was starved. His hands were touching, squeezing, holding. “You have a key. You don’t have to ring the doorbell.”

He picked up my suitcase and ushered me in. His apartment was a canvas of understated luxury, high ceilings with delicate chandeliers, walls painted a gentle eggshell hue, accentuated by pieces of art that bore strokes of deep blues and rich golds.

I liked it very much. As different as we were in so many ways, in interior décor, we were quite similar. I liked a minimalistic design, partly because my parents were like that, as were my brothers. The Inn and Resort were *not* minimalistic and overdesigned in many ways, but that was what our guests wanted and what those properties stood for.

He kissed my mouth again. “You want a drink?” he asked, nibbling at my lips.

I hugged him close, everything felt right when we stood like this, body to body, heart to heart.

“Some wi...actually some water to start with.” Damn! I couldn’t drink wine. He was going to know something was up and that was okay because he’d ask, and I’d tell him. *Right?* Nerves were screaming inside me.

“Are you okay?” He stroked my cheek.

“I’m fine. Do you mind if I unpack first?”

He carried my suitcase into his bedroom, looking pensive. Once there, he pulled me into his arms and dropped onto his bed. I lay atop him in my navy blue midi dress that wouldn’t fit me in a few months, I thought haplessly.

“You’re so beautiful.” The way he looked at me, I knew that he loved me.

Insecurities made me ask. “Do you love me?”

“More than life itself.” He kissed me then and as it was with us from the start, the kiss became heated, and I melted against him.

Breathing deeply, he pulled away. “We need to eat.”

“We do?” My lips explored his jaw.

“Yes.”

One of my hands found its way between us and cupped him over his jeans. He groaned. “Food will get cold.”

I looked up at him. “Food is more important than a bang?”

He smiled at me. “I’m getting you ready for...the...ah...bang.” His hands were under my dress, cupping my ass over my panties, squeezing.

He rolled me over, so I was on my back. Gave me a brief kiss and told me to hurry up.

I unpacked the few things I had brought with me. Gordon had emptied half his walk-in closet and dressers for me. The space was enormous enough that I

could move all my things over. His closet was large enough to host my shoes and bags.

I'd dressed with care in a blue midi dress with a sweetheart neckline to show off the girls. My makeup was light. Nova had put it on me before I left the spa. My hair was blow dried and fell around my shoulders like a wavy dream.

But it was my eyes that caught my attention. My brown eyes were bright. Sure, I was nervous, but I was also deliriously happy. I was pregnant. Gordon and I were going to have a baby. *I had to tell him. Fuck!*

I stepped into the open plan living space that led to a balcony with a view of the city lights, but it was the dining area that drew my focus. A grand table lay before me, its mahogany sheen reflecting the soft glow of the numerous candles that surrounded an elegant centerpiece of crimson roses and white lilies.

He'd gone all out.

Dinner itself looked straight out of a gourmet magazine. Delicate crystal glasses housed a deep, burgundy wine that I immediately recognized as one from our trip to Napa. The plates bore a beautifully presented meal: a succulent piece of salmon topped with a herb-infused butter, an array of roasted vegetables, and a side of creamy risotto drizzled with truffle oil.

"Wow," I remarked. "What's the occasion?" *Was he going to ask me tonight?* That was it. That's why he'd gone to all this trouble. Okay. I could wait. I'd wait. Once he proposed properly, I'd tell him I was knocked up. *Perfect!*

"Wine?"

"Oh no," I made a big production of saying no and adding, "Nova and I had so much champagne all day that I need a break."

So, I was not going to tell him about the kidney bean in my belly. He didn't seem to think anything was strange about me not drinking. It wasn't like I was a lush but a glass of wine with dinner was usually something I did. I grew up in a family where we drank wine and appreciated it.

Gordon reached out, capturing my hand, his thumb caressing my knuckles. "Angel," he began, his voice laced with emotion, "I've planned something really special for this weekend. Just the two of us."

A slow smile spread across my face. He was going to ask me this weekend! I put a hand on his cheek. "Tell me."

He bent to kiss me. "I miss you so much...the workweek is so damn long." He pulled me onto his lap, holding me, nuzzling my hair with his chin.

I clung to him. Happier than I'd ever been. Love was the anchor that steadied my world, and with Gordon, I felt securely moored in its embrace.

He looked at me like I was the most precious thing in the world. "I can't move fulltime to Golden Valley. You understand that right?"

I nodded. Was he breaking up with me? No, no. He was taking me away for the weekend. Fuck! This was confusing, and I was confused and afraid and... damn. What had happened to the confident Isadora who'd flirted with Gordon? I knew the answer. That Isadora had not been in love and this one was and that made her fearful of losing it.

"I know. You have a company to run."

He kissed my mouth. "I'm so lucky to have you. So, fucking lucky. But I'll make some changes so I can work from Golden Valley...probably do a Friday to Monday in Golden Valley and the rest of the week here."

I worked on weekends...well if he was changing his schedule so would I. I'd delegate more. I had an excellent team.

"Then I'll keep my weekends work-free," I promised him.

“No, baby, I don’t want you to feel you have to change things. I can help you at the Inn. Follow you around like a puppy while you make wedding dreams come true.”

Oh sí, I was the lucky one, not him. “More like a big cat than a puppy. But I want to work less and spend more time with you, with the family. Will you get bored at Golden Valley? There are no night clubs and eventually you’ll tire of having sex with me and want to do other things with our evenings.”

He laughed. “First, I would never ever tire of making love with you. Second, I want peace and quiet on my weekends after a long week at work. I want...need...you.”

I hugged him tight. He was moving in with me. That’s what this was. “I’ll hire an architect...we have one we use for the family and start working on blueprints for our house.”

He stiffened and drew back immediately. “Ah...what’s the rush?”

Dios mío, he was giving me such mixed signals I was getting emotional whiplash which I was sure was not good for me while I was *enceinte*.

His lips found the pulse beating at the base of my neck. He picked me up and carried me to bed.

That night after we made love, I lay next to him, feeling the world was right, and I was wrong. I should’ve told him I was pregnant. The last thought as I fell asleep was to wake him now and tell him, which I didn’t do.



Chapter 47

★ ISADORA

The early morning sun was barely breaking the horizon when Gordon and I arrived at a private airstrip, where a sleek jet stood waiting. It was a vision of luxury, with its silver polished exterior gleaming in the dawn light. The logo on its tail, a graceful falcon, gave away its elite pedigree.

Gordon took my hand, his fingers intertwined with mine, the grip reassuringly tight. “Ready for our adventure?” he asked with that mischievous glint in his eyes.

I nodded, unsure. This morning nausea hit me hard. My Google enquiry told me that morning sickness was a misnomer, and it could be all day sickness, depending upon how lucky you were.

“I just wish I knew where we were headed.”

“That, baby, is the surprise,” he winked.

As we stepped onto the plane, the interior took my breath away. Plush leather seats in a soft cream color were organized in a face-to-face layout. Rich wooden panels lined the cabin, and the ambient lighting created a serene

atmosphere. The cushions and blankets neatly laid out hinted at the long journey ahead. Every little detail screamed luxury.

Once we settled, a flight attendant approached with a champagne flute, her uniform impeccably tailored. “Champagne, ma’am?” she offered with a bright smile.

I hesitated, feeling the familiar churn of nausea I recognized over the past few days. “Just tea, please,” I replied, avoiding Gordon’s inquisitive gaze.

“You alright, Isa?” Gordon asked, concern clear in his voice.

“Just a little queasy,” I admitted, trying to downplay my symptoms. “Probably the early start.”

He frowned, his brow creased in worry. “Are you coming down with something?”

“I drank too much yesterday with Nova,” I repeated the lie, “Probably this is a delayed hangover.”

He didn’t look like he believed it, but he didn’t prod me further.

I tried to rally my spirits. “Is it going to be cold where we’re going? Because I didn’t bring cold clothes.”

“We’ll buy whatever we need,” he reassured.

Once we were in the air I felt lethargic, my eyes closing on their own accord.

“I’m exhausted.” This was true and what my doctor had warned me about. First trimesters could be a drain on the energy.

“There’s a comfortable bed. Why don’t you take a nap?”

He led me to the interior of the plane where there was *indeed* a bed. Golden Valley was a wealthy farm, and we did charter planes when we went together as a family, but we didn’t do this kind of opulence. Now, Gordon was

wealthier than all of us put together, maybe this was how the *very, very, very* wealthy lived.

He helped me undress and tucked me in. “If we’re going somewhere cold promise, we’ll find the warmest, coziest coats when we land.”

He chuckled, leaning in to plant a gentle kiss on my forehead. “Whatever you need, it’s yours.”

“Gordon?”

“Yes, *m’eudail?*”

“I love you.” I felt his lips against mine as my eyes closed on their own volition.

When I woke up, it was to Gordon’s insistence that we’d arrived at our destination, and I needed to wear a seatbelt.

Feeling disoriented I let him dress me and sit me down. He got me a glass of orange juice because I felt inordinately thirsty.

As I drank the OJ I looked out of the window. “Where on earth are we?” There was snow, mountains, and lakes outside.

“Scotland.”

I gaped at him. “You brought me to Scotland for the weekend?”

He gave me a shy nearly boyish smile. “Yes. Is it an okay surprise?”

He was bringing me to see his parents. Fuck my insecurities. This man was mine. “Oh, it’s the perfect surprise.”



Chapter 48

★ GORDON

The sleek black Jaguar XJ purred to life as our chauffeur drove us from Glasgow to Lanark. Isadora, in her usual inquisitive manner, stared out of the window, soaking in the Scottish landscape. Her fingers were tangled with mine like we were children, holding hands. I felt a rush of contentment, being in my homeland and with her by my side.

“See that?” I pointed towards the Clyde Arc, the iconic curved bridge in Glasgow. “Locals call it the *Squinty Bridge*. It’s one of the newest landmarks.”

“It’s stunning. I love Europe because of this old and new juxtaposed together.”

We drove past grand Victorian buildings and the tall spires of Gothic churches. “You’re right. Glasgow and Scotland’s architecture is a blend of the old and new. It’s constantly evolving, yet deeply rooted in its past.”

Isadora’s gaze drifted to the University of Glasgow. “That looks like Hogwarts!” she exclaimed.

I chuckled, “Aye, it’s one of the oldest universities in the English-speaking world. Many brilliant minds walked those halls.”

She leaned into me, and I wrapped an arm around her. “Tell me about your parents,” she whispered, her eyes closing.

She’d slept the entire flight. I got work done and checked on her often; but she was completely out. She was tired, and I wondered if she wasn’t well. I kissed her forehead to check her temperature and found it to be normal.

“My *da*, Alistair, was a mechanic, and my mum, Elsie, was...is a baker. Well, now she bakes at home instead of the Lanark bakery. They’re both retired.”

“You grew up with the smell of fresh baked goods.” She cuddled into me.

“You okay?”

“Why?” she mumbled.

“Because you’re falling asleep again and you just slept hours. Jet lag you think?”

“I’m just sleepy. But I’m listening to you. I love to listen to you. You know you have a soothing Scottish accent.”

I tilted her face, and she opened her eyes to look at me. Sometimes her raw beauty slammed into me, surprised me. I kissed her mouth.

She leaned her head back on my shoulder.

“My sister Ginny and her husband Ian are elementary school teachers,” I continued, stroking her back, listening to her even breathing.

“And you’re the prodigal son?”

I chuckled. “Somewhat. Yeah.”

“And you take care of them.”

“Of course. We take care of each other. We’re family.”

“That’s nice,” her voice was faint now. “Tell me about your nephews.”

“Graham is seventeen and Douglas is fifteen. I’m close to them. I try to spend as much time as I can with them when I visit, which unfortunately hasn’t been as often as I’d like,” I admitted.

“What was your childhood like?”

“Idyllic.”

As the cityscape faded, giving way to the lush green countryside, I began narrating stories from my childhood, of family picnics by the River Clyde and hikes up the Campsie Fells.

“The beauty of Lanarkshire is subtle,” I mused, looking at the rolling hills, “It grows on you. By the end of this trip, you might not want to leave.”

“With you by my side, I could be convinced.”

She yawned and then I felt her weight change. She’d fallen asleep. I closed my eyes as well. I was eager to be home. Lanark was where my roots lay, a quaint village replete with cobblestone streets, traditional stone houses, and welcoming smiles. When I left to go to university in Glasgow, my parents had been proud.

I’d insisted that they let me buy them a house when I first started making money. They were adamant about not taking anything from me, but I convinced them. It was a similar fight with my sister, but she understood my need to give, to share. I had so much, I wanted to help my family, my village. So, whenever the village was fundraising, Ginny called me first.

They’d like Isadora. I knew that. How could they not?

During the Zoom call with the family when I told them I wanted to get married in Lanark, they’d been touched.

“I thought you’d want a fancy wedding in the states,” mum said, wiping tears. “And your bride, she’s okay with marrying in a small village?”

“Ah...well...she doesn’t know we’re getting married. It’s a surprise.”

They went from being touched to confused in seconds.

“Are you out of your *fucking* mind?” Da wanted to know. “Is the girl even interested in marrying you? You not kidnapping her are you?”

I sighed. “Her family is coming over from California, Da. I think it’s safe to say it’s a consensual marriage.”

Ginny had laughed. “My god, Gordon. You fell for a woman so hard you’re going to plan a wedding?”

“Imagine how I feel,” I chuckled. “I need help. Mum, Isadora’s mother Paloma will be in touch; and Ginny, Isadora’s sister-in-law Maria will contact you. I hope between all of us...we can make this wedding happen.”

“Wait.” Ian raised his hand. “We ain’t doing no wedding without a stag party. When the fuck will we do that?”

I grimaced. “Mate, we won’t have time.”

The plan was to get there on Friday. Get married on Saturday. And then whisk Isadora away to Prague, which I’d been told by her mother was a city she’d always wanted to visit.

“I’m disappointed in you, Gordon,” Ian muttered, shaking his head.

“And what about the poor girl, she doesn’t get a hen do?” Ginny demanded.

I raised my hand to silence the next person who was going for my metaphoric nuts. “The party on Friday night will have to do.”

Ian and Ginny shook their heads in disappointment. “We’ll make the best of it,” Ginny muttered.

I’d started planning the wedding right after Christmas when Arsenio gave me his blessing albeit unnecessarily. And now the day was here. I hoped she wasn’t falling sick. I wanted to marry her and not postpone. I was fucking dying to marry her.

She nuzzled me then, shifting her face, resting her cheek against me. I

kissed the side of her head, marveling at the miracle that this brilliant woman was mine.



Chapter 49

★ ISADORA

The moment I stepped into Elsie and Alistair’s house, the familiar scent of freshly baked bread enveloped me. The cozy living room was adorned with vintage pieces and family photos that showcased years of cherished memories.

Elsie, with her silver curls and infectious laugh, hugged me tightly, making me feel immediately at home. “Ah, Isadora! We’ve heard so much about you!” she exclaimed.

Alistair, a tall, rugged man gave me a hearty handshake. “Welcome to our home,” he said warmly.

“Thank you so much.”

The adjoining room echoed with chatter, and as I walked in, Ginny and Ian greeted me. Their sons, Graham, and Douglas, were quick to introduce themselves.

I’d always thought we were a big hug and kiss family but so were the Mackenzies.

I was whisked away into the kitchen, which was like the one in the main house in Golden Valley. Large and spacious with a farm style dining table and plenty of chairs. This was a place where the family gathered to cook *and* eat.

I was worried about how I'd react to food because my stomach was still uneasy, but I found the aroma that filled Elsie's kitchen was mouthwatering. Maybe my morning sickness...would stay in the mornings. I hoped so.

As we settled down at the rustic dining table, Elsie began placing an array of dishes before us.

First, there was a hearty Scotch broth, rich with lamb, barley, and a medley of fresh vegetables. The soup warmed me from the inside out.

"Beer?" Gordon asked as there was Scottish beer on the table. I shook my head. "I can open a bottle of wine for you."

"It's fine. It's too early for me to drink and the jetlag is making me woozy."

I ate tentatively and groaned with delight after eating the soup. "My god, this is fantastic," I exclaimed. "You have to meet my mother. Between the two of you I'm sure we can get the whole Scottish-Mexican fusion cuisine going."

"You cook, dear?" Gordon's mum asked.

"I do," I said. "Not as well as my mother or brother. Aurelio is the best cook in the family."

Next, she served the main course: haggis, neeps, and tatties.

"Haggis?" I looked at Gordon.

"Give it a try," Graham grinned.

"Haggis?"

Gordon served some for himself and then told me to close my eyes. When I felt a fork close to my mouth, I opened and took my first bite and was

genuinely surprised. The haggis, with its peppery and nutty flavor, paired wonderfully with the sweetness of the turnips and the creaminess of the mashed potatoes.

“Wow. I thought it would be gamey but...this is amazing.”

I added some of the fresh salad made of crisp lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and sprinkled with a tangy vinaigrette to my plate along with freshly baked oatcakes that were the perfect balance of crumbly and chewy.

Elsie flushed with pride and Ginny grinned, “Buttering up the future mum-in-law I see.”

Gordon glared at her when she said that, and she immediately looked contrite. I felt my heart constrict. Did he not want to marry me? Why did he bring me here then?

“I like your girl Gordon,” Alistair remarked, “I like that she eats. Remember that girl he brought home...she ate like a *fecking* bird.”

“That would be the supermodel he was once married to,” Ginny explained.

I smiled and nodded. “Yes. She’s very beautiful.”

“And skinny,” Gordon’s mum said, shaking her head as if that was a bad thing. This place was great for my ego because with my voluptuous body type there was no way I’d ever be called skinny.

“Can we not bring up my ex-wife in front of my current girlfriend?” Gordon raised his glass.

Well, at least he was calling me girlfriend, so all was not lost.

For dessert, Elsie served cranachan, a delightful concoction of raspberries, whipped cream, toasted oats, and a generous splash of Scotch whisky. It was both sweet and slightly boozy, an absolute treat to end the meal. I only had a small bite not wanting to go near hard liquor.

“Where do you live?” I asked Ginny.

“Next door.” She pointed to her right.

“I can imagine spending endless summer days out by the lake, basking in the beauty of those shimmering waters,” I said wistfully.

Would Gordon and I be together this summer? Because we’d met several months ago but we only began dating what...a couple of months ago. It was going all too fast, and no one would blame him for slowing down, slamming the brakes. By then I’d be six months pregnant, ready to pop by September.

“Gordon surprised us with it. I mean...a house by the lake. We’re very fortunate,” Ginny shared, her voice filled with gratitude. “He wanted us to have our own piece of paradise.”

“He’s good with surprises.” I glanced at him with love. “He gave me one this morning by bringing me here.”

Ginny grabbed my hand. “I’m so thrilled to meet you. We’re all so happy to meet you. Gordon has been telling us about you for months now. He told me how you met and how he kept pushing you away because of his age...men can be so daft.”

“Yep! Downright daft,” I agreed.

“You love him.”

I smiled. “Immensely. Oceans deep and madly.”

Ginny took a deep breath, her eyes moist with tears. “I’m so happy for my older brother that he found you. He’s never had that...you know what Ian and I have, what our Da and mum have. I’ve wanted it for him so much. And now, you’re giving that to him.”

It was obvious that the bond Gordon shared with his family ran deep. They laughed, teased each other, and shared stories. The love and respect they had for one another made me think of my family. The accent and cuisine may be

different at my mother's kitchen, but the sentiments and emotions were identical.



Chapter 50

★ ISADORA

After lunch, I followed Gordon up the modern curved staircase that had a view of the lake. Upstairs in the wide hallway on a dresser were photos of Gordon and Ginny when they were children, the whole family and probably Gordon's grandparents.

He opened the *guest* suit, and the beauty took my breath away. The room had large floor to ceiling windows that opened onto a patio. There stairs from the patio down to the lake. You could just walk out and jump into the lake on a summer day.

"This..." I trailed off, searching for the right words, "is what I want in our house by our lake."

He wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me close. "We'll get there," he whispered, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. But there was an evasive look in his eyes. Every time the topic of building our home came up, he subtly changed the subjects.

I sat down on a couch and looked at my suitcase. "I need to unpack."

"I'll do it," Gordon said and inclined his head to a box on the bed.

“For me?” I asked and when he nodded, I rushed to the box. “I love presents...especially when they’re a surprise.”

On top of the box was Nova’s fashion line’s logo. “Thank you.”

“Open it.” He put my clothes away in the closet and dresser.

Inside the large box was a garment bag. I unzipped it and what met my eyes left me genuinely breathless. Nova, who had always had a keen understanding of my taste and physique, had crafted a masterpiece.

The dress was a deep, rich shade of emerald. The bodice was elegantly tailored to my curvy frame, with intricate lace detailing around the neckline, which subtly transitioned into off-shoulder sleeves. The waist was cinched, accentuating the smallest part of my torso, before flaring out gracefully into a flowy A-line skirt that stopped just above my ankles. Delicate silver embroidery danced across the fabric, reminiscent of the traditional patterns I’d grown up admiring.

Nova had expertly balanced modern design with the timeless elegance of my roots. The dress felt like a piece of home, a bridge between my heritage and the recent memories I was building in Scotland. Holding it up against me, a rush of emotions welled up.

“She made this for me,” I whispered. Gordon slid his arms around me and pulled me close to him, my back to his chest.

“Yes, she did.”

“It’s stunning.”

“You’re going to look beautiful in it tonight.” He looked at his watch. “Darling, you better start getting ready because the party is starting at six whether we like it or not.”

After getting some rest on the plane and during the drive, and with my nausea now gone, I was looking forward to dressing up for the party.

“Will there be dancing?” I asked.

Gordon opened the closet and pulled out a pair of beige pumps that would not only go well with the dress but were perfect for dancing.

“You’ve been snooping around my back to put this together.”

“Guilty as charged. I wanted to surprise you.” His chuckle warmed my heart.

He pulled out a large jewelry box from the closet and walked up to me. Now if it was a small box, the light blue color would mean it was an engagement ring from Tiffany. But since it was a larger box...this looked like a set of jewelry. I hid my disappointment. It didn’t look like Gordon was going to propose to me and I needed to stop waiting like a lovesick fool.

Inside the box were exquisite diamond drop earrings and a matching bracelet. They sparkled, much like the tears forming in my eyes.

“They’re beautiful.”

He cupped my face. “You deserve the world, *m’eudail*. And I intend to give it to you.”



Chapter 51

★ ISADORA

The party was taking place in Ian and Ginny's place. This meant that I needed to just walk a few feet in the brisk Scottish February cold. Still, Elsie wrapped me up in a big coat after she oohed and aahed over my dress and jewelry.

I was glad that Gordon had brought the dress because everyone was dressed to the nines, and I hadn't packed any party wear.

Elsie wore a beautiful black dress with pearls and both Gordon and his father wore suits...though Gordon wasn't wearing a tie. He was in his signature suit without tie look, which I loved. He still looked like a thug in a suit, but now he was *my* thug in a suit.

Ginny's spacious living room had undergone a significant transformation, with the patio doors opened to extend the room with heaters and a tent. The theme, which the wedding planner in me recognized as a winter wonderland, was my favorite. The room was adorned with white lights that cast a gentle glow. Frosted pine branches were elegantly placed along the walls and doorways, intertwined with silvery ribbons. Just outside, near the terrace's

edge, a stunning ice sculpture formed two swans creating a heart shape, their frosted wings shimmering under the lights.

Round tables, covered in icy blue cloths, were surrounded by chairs with white velvet cushions, all arranged around a dance floor. Each table featured centerpieces composed of white roses, feathers, candles, and crystals. Strings of crystals hung over the dance floor, catching, and reflecting the light.

I delighted in taking it all in, appreciating Ginny's impeccable taste. Every detail was exquisite, from the glistening snowflake confetti on the tables to the white and silver balloons floating near the ceiling. It felt like stepping into a snowy forest glade, yet we remained cozy and warm.

I squeezed Gordon's arm. "Wow! Ginny went all out."

He smiled down at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You like it?"

"I love it."

I leaned into him when a familiar sound caught my ear—the joyful laughter of my younger brother, Aurelio. My heart leaped, and my pace quickened.

Ginny's front door opened, and I was met with the most wonderful and utterly unexpected sight: my entire family stood outside, from my parents to my siblings, all wearing broad smiles.

"*Mija!*" my father, Arsenio, exclaimed, pulling me into a tight hug. "Did you think we'd let you have all the fun without us?"

I was speechless, eyes misting with tears. The love, warmth, and sheer surprise of it all threatened to overwhelm me. Gordon had orchestrated this. He'd pulled off the surprise of a lifetime.

Introductions were made, and I discovered that Maria and Ginny had worked together to plan this party.

"But...why?" I was incredulous.

"Because," Maria put an arm around me, "you plan everyone's

anniversaries, birthdays, weddings...we wanted to do this for *you*.”

“Where are you all staying?”

“In a very cute inn.” Drago put his arm around me and gave me a hug.

“You’re here?”

“I was invited.”

I looked through the room and went about hugging everyone, Mateo, Raya, Dec, Esme, Daisy, and Forest. Their babies had already been pulled into the Mackenzie family riot of children of various ages.

“You good?” Alejandro asked as he gave me a hug.

“Yes...just overwhelmed.”

Ginny clinked her wine glass with a fork and both the music and conversation went down.

“Welcome Santos family. *Slainte*.”

“*Salud*,” the Santos family cried out as Gordon’s Scottish family repeated Ginny’s toast.

The music shifted, and *Unchained Melody* by The Righteous Brothers started playing. A smile crossed my face as I remembered the first time Gordon and I had danced to this song at Maria and Alejandro’s surprise engagement party.

Gordon moved away from his sister and came into the middle of the room.

My heart sang. Oh, he had planned a surprise engagement party for me. He knew how much it would mean to me if someone else planned a party for me instead of the other way around.

Dios mío! I couldn’t accept his proposal without telling him about the baby. I licked my lips and cleared my throat.

Gordon looked pensively at me, a ring box in his hand.

“Wait.” I held up my hand. I walked up to Gordon, grabbed his hand, and

walked with him into the kitchen. I popped my head out into the living room where there was pin drop silence, “You should all continue to party. I need to have a quick conversation with Gordon and then we’ll be right back.”



Chapter 52

★ GORDON

Fuck! She didn't want to marry me. She didn't like the surprise. She smiled at me. "Is it a nice ring?" she inclined her head toward the box in my hand.

"Well, you may have missed your chance to see it, lassie."

She took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay. You remember when we were at the resort and people were dropping like flies."

"Two people, so not flies and yes, I do remember." I narrowed my eyes and leaned against a kitchen counter. I saw movement around the kitchen door. "Graham, get the *feck* out of here and mind *yer* own business."

I turned back to Isadora.

"So...we had sex in the shower. You remember?"

I nodded. Yeah, it was amazing sex and...we didn't use a condom. Isadora was feeling queasy and not drinking wine. *Fuck me!*

I looked at her, my eyes wide.

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant?"

“Enceinte. With child. Eating for two. Estoy embarazada.”

I couldn't feel my legs. I couldn't hear anything because there was a ringing in my ears. “You're going to have a baby? We're going to have a baby?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Yeah. And I've been so scared that you didn't want to marry me.”

She began to cry, uncontrollably. I hugged her. “Baby, don't cry. Oh, please don't cry.” I looked at her and wiped her tears.

“I'm a mess, even waterproof mascara can't hold out to ugly crying,” she despaired.

“You look beautiful.” And she did, the most beautiful woman in the world. “I've been planning...this and...*feck*, I wanted to do this in front of the family but I'm doing it here.” I opened the box and showed her the ring. She gasped.

“Wow!”

I smiled at that.

“That wow doesn't make me an inexperienced woman, does it?”

I laughed. “No. It makes me a lucky son of a bitch.”

She touched the ring then and whispered, “It's the ring I'd want.”

“I know,” I confirmed, “I did my research.”

The ring's band was crafted from polished platinum, its smooth surface interrupted by a delicate filigree pattern that weaved around the band, reminiscent of intertwining destinies. Tiny diamonds were embedded within the intricate carvings, glinting softly with every movement. But the true showstopper was the centerpiece. A breathtaking, oval-cut sapphire that radiated a deep, mesmerizing blue, echoing the depths of the ocean and the vastness of the night sky. The gem was surrounded by a halo of micro-pave diamonds that enhanced its vibrant hue, making it stand out even more.

I dropped to one knee, holding out the ring. "Isadora," my voice was filled with emotion, "I told you I wanted to give you the world, to fill our days with surprises and love. I don't want to wait another day. Marry me tomorrow. Let's embark on this lifetime adventure together."

"Tomorrow?" she asked and took the ring. "I mean, yes, I'll marry you... but tomorrow?"

"Yeah." I stood up and slid the ring on her finger. "Will you? Because it's all set. The church, the reception, the honeymoon."

She gaped at me. "You planned a wedding in two months?"

"Six weeks," I corrected her. "I had a lot of help. You ready to have a Scottish wedding?"

She nodded and then smiled mischievously. "Will my father and brothers have to wear kilts? Will you?"

"Aye," I said.

"Now, I'd give money to see you all in kilts. They say you wear no underwear when you wear that skirt. Is that true?"

I kissed her. "Do you mind if we give the good news to the families?" I requested.

She kissed me and then as if a thought struck her. "Do I even have a wedding dress?"

"Of course."

She nodded as understanding dawned. "So, Nova knew? Oh, she must have all but died when I was wondering if you were dumping me when we were at the spa yesterday."

"She's coming later tonight with your dress," I assured her. "You told her you were pregnant?"

She nodded. "I'd just found out and...I was scared you'd changed your

mind because you never asked me to marry you.”

“Well, you said I had to ask your father who’s *oh so very traditional*.”

Isadora bit her lower lip. “Ah...right. Did you?”

“Yeah, I did. You know what happened?”

Her eyes twinkled. “I can guess.”

“He tried to pretend he gave a shit and then burst out laughing.”

“So...this is like revenge for that prank?”

I dropped a sweet kiss on her lips. “Yes.”

“I should play more pranks on you if this is how you retaliate.”

“I can’t wait for your pranks, darling...for the rest of our lives.” I held out my hand, and she placed hers on mine.

“For the rest of the lives,” she promised.

As soon as we came out all conversations ended, and silence fell in the room.

“I said yes,” Isadora announced holding her ring finger up. “And,” she looked at me and I nodded, “I’m pregnant.”

The room erupted in cheers. Our families converged, a mingling of cultures and backgrounds. In that perfect moment, surrounded by love and laughter, everything felt just as it should be.



Chapter 53

★ GORDON

“Isn’t it considered bad luck for the bride and groom to spend the night together before the wedding?” Isadora pondered as we settled into bed after a memorable evening.”

I don’t want to sleep alone tonight of all nights. I want you close.”

She lay on her back, naked. I supported my head on my elbow and put a hand on her stomach. It was slightly round, but that was Isadora, not our baby—but I could imagine her belly swollen with my child.

“I was scared that you stopped loving me.”

I looked at the remembered pain in her eyes and kissed her. “How can I stop loving you? I’m going to love you until the day I die and even past that because you’re it. Since I saw you that day at Raya’s house it’s been you.”

“Really?”

I deepened our kiss, desperate to convince her that this...that she was everything to me. “I have something to show you.”

I took the iPad that was charging on the bedside table and flipped through it until I came upon the blue print of the house I wanted to build for her.

“This is for you.”

She took the iPad and stared at it. She flipped through the blueprint, increasing the size of certain areas of the sketch of the house. “This is incredible. You even have a patio right onto the lake so I can go for a swim when it’s not freezing.”

I felt relief swamp me. “I’m glad you like it. I’ve been so *fecking* scared that you wouldn’t. That you’d think I overstepped.”

She looked at me stricken. “I’m a horrible, horrible person.”

I raised my eyebrows. This was not the reaction I expected.

“No, you’re not.” I was unsure why her eyes were filled with tears. “Please don’t cry.”

I hoped these were hormones. Was it too early for hormones? She was just eight weeks pregnant. Forest mentioned that Daisy cried all the time when she was pregnant. I couldn’t stand it when Isadora cried.

“Baby don’t cry.” I pulled her into my arms.

She wailed now. “Hey, hey, Isa. Come on, it’s a happy time.”

She sniffled, and I wiped her tears. “You love me very much.”

“Moon mad for you.”

The moonlight streaming in through the window made her look ethereal. *Ethereal?* I was so far gone for her, it was embarrassing.

“Gordon,” she began hesitantly, biting her lower lip as she did when she was contemplating something big, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

I took her hands in mine, stroking circles with my thumb to ease her worry. “Anything, my love.”

“Anything? What if it’s a horrible thing? Will you stop loving me?” Now her eyes were clear and there was a sparkle in them.

She was up to something. “I’ll never stop loving you.”

“What if...I told you I had sex with someone else?”

My grip on her tightened at the thought and I realized that love made you possessive. “Didn’t happen.”

She pushed me down and rolled on top of me. “What do you mean by that?”

“You love me too much.”

She grinned and then kissed me. “I still have a confession.”

“Hit me.”

“I’ve been thinking terrible things about you, and you were planning our engagement party and wedding. And then you had an architect draw up plans for our house. I’m a horrible person.”

I smacked her bottom, and she flinched. “Ouch.” And then she considered the spank and rubbed herself against me. “Do it again.”

I laughed and did as she asked.

“Ever done BDSM?”

I should be prepared for her strange questions, but she still managed to surprise me. “Like in a club?”

“There are clubs?”

“Yes. Mateo used to go. I know he and Raya scene.”

“Eww.” She made a face. “I don’t need to know what my brother is doing in such places. Have you been.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

I pulled her onto me, so her face was close to mine. “*And* it’s not my scene. I like monogamy and simple vanilla sex.”

“But I liked it when you spanked me,” she said thoughtfully.

“Big gap between a smack or two and going balls and chains.”

I rolled us so she was beneath me. I slid down her body and kissed her stomach. “Our baby is in here,” I said reverently.

Her hands played with my hair. “You’re happy about the baby.”

“More than happy,” my voice was thick with emotion. “Elated, over the moon. We’re going to have a baby!” The realization brought a grin to my face, the prospect of us starting our own family filled me with a warmth that was indescribable.

“I was so nervous about how you’d react. I wanted to tell you sooner, but...”

“Shh,” I murmured, kissing her belly again. “It’s perfect timing. A proposal, a wedding, and a baby. I feel blessed.”

“I’m worried about this baby thing. I’m going to get fat and *mean*. I saw Daisy when she was pregnant, and she was either bitchy or she was crying. What if I’m like that?”

I abandoned her stomach and found my way between her legs.

“Also, how long do you think before the house is done? I need to put together a nursery...and we should have one at your place in LA and the house. So, we can travel with the baby. I can’t believe I got pregnant from that one time. Aren’t you—“

I suckled her clitoris, and she fell silent, gasping, writhing.

“You did that to shut me up.”

Instead of replying, I pushed two fingers into her, and she lost her train of thought again, which was fine by me.

After, as she was falling asleep, I held her close.

“I love you,” I whispered to my future wife and felt a surge of gratitude. Life had given me so many gifts, and I knew there were more to come. This time, I’d embrace everything with open arms the way Isadora had taught me.

THE END



Continue the story with the bonus chapter: ***Gordon and Isadora's Scottish Wedding***. We have men in kilts...*all* the men in kilts!

Coming soon, *Twisted Love*, the last book in the *Golden Knights* series. Orion and Vega's story has been brewing since the first book! You can read the blurb and pre-order on Amazon.

If you liked A Golden Christmas, don't miss the age-gap, marriage of convenience holiday romance: ***The Temporary Wife*** from Maya's new series ***Once Upon a Time***.

Author's Request

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *The Temporary Wife*, the first book in the *Once Upon A Time* series. I hope you enjoyed Atlas and Liesel's journey to find love as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'd love to keep in touch with you beyond this last page.

Interested? I have a newsletter and am on social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) where I share updates, sneak peeks of upcoming work, and occasional giveaways. It's a great way to stay updated.

I appreciate your support and would love to continue this journey with you. Hope to see you around.

Happy reading!

Maya

P.s. Please do not forget to *rate and review* *The Temporary Wife*, as this is how other readers can find my books.



Also By Maya Alden

The Wrong Wife

An Arranged Marriage Romance

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A Golden Christmas

An Age-Gap Holiday Romance

Gordon & Isadora's Story



The Temporary Wife

An Arranged Marriage, Age-Gap, Holiday Romance

Atlas & Liesel's Story



About the Author

MAYA ALDEN HAS A PASSION FOR WEAVING TALES OF LOVE
AND DESIRE.

With a background in literature and a heart filled with hope, Maya pours her emotions onto the pages of her novels, capturing the essence of true love and the power it holds to transform lives. Combining unforgettable characters, sizzling chemistry, and heartfelt emotions, Maya's stories will whisk you into a world of passion and enchantment.

Maya invites you to join her on a journey of love, laughter, and happily-ever-afters that will leave you with a sigh and a smile.

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