



Falling FOR THE
**BILLIONAIRE
ROCKSTAR**

KATHY ASHER

Falling For The Billionaire Rockstar

An Enemies to Lovers Best Friend's Brother
Romance

Kathy Asher

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Contents

[Introduction](#)

[1. LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR](#)

[2. BILLIONAIRE EX-ROCKSTAR](#)

[3. FIRST ENCOUNTER](#)

[4. CHANGE OF PLANS](#)

[5. CONFUSION STARTS](#)

[6. BILLIONAIRE KNOWS HIS BUSINESS](#)

7. CONFUSION PREVAILS
8. MORE CONFUSION
9. IDENTITY REVEALED
10. BEGINNING OF RELATIONSHIP
11. FINDING LOVE
12. HE CARES FOR HER
13. EX MOVES ON
14. HAVOC ON SOCIAL MEDIA
15. ESCAPING ATTENTION
16. PRETEND DEAR, PRETEND
17. SAM IS PISSED
18. HELL BREAKS LOOSE
19. STILL FAKING?
20. REAL LOVE
21. SOME EXPLAINING TO DO
22. THE TOUR
23. THINGS BEGIN TO SETTLE
24. EVERYTHING FALLS INTO PLACE
25. HAPPY ENDING

Introduction

When I ditched my groom, I never expected a run-in with my bestie's bad brother.

Sparks exploded as Alex and I clashed. I didn't know this billionaire ex-rockstar could be so fiery.

With gossip swirling about me running from my wedding, Alex suggested we pretend to be a hot new item.

Stranded in the city, watching my ex move on, I agreed to his proposal.

Behind closed doors he shows me his smooth moves and a soft side he hides from the world.

I started really falling for his rockstar love. Now I worried what would happen when our sexy sham ended.

All I want to do is break free and follow my heart, rules be damned.

Our fiery fling didn't fly with my bestie and she threatened to kick me out.

But if this broody billionaire could give me the love I'd been waiting for, I am willing to risk it all, even my friendship with his sister.

Chapter One

LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR

Olivia Sanders

I knew I couldn't do this. I had known since the day he proposed to me, the day I said yes. I knew I was selling my soul to the devil, but I kept up the act. But who was I doing this for, really?

"Thank you," I mouthed softly to my stylist.

She had been so committed to making me look like the perfect bride since our first meeting, and calling off the wedding suddenly would make me feel bad for her. Was I doing this for her? Marrying away my life and freedom just so someone's heart wouldn't get broken?

Mother had always said my good heart would do me some harm. This was more than harm; this was bondage.

Standing before the mirror, I took another long, hard look at myself and this burden of a dress I had on.

The morning sunlight that streamed through the dressing room windows had cast a warm glow upon the ivory lace of

the wedding gown. The dress was perfect, and I would have no doubt loved the world to see it.

But too bad for them, my mind had been made up.

This didn't stop my heart from pounding a discordant rhythm against my ribcage, though. The weight of societal expectations pressed upon me like an unbearable burden, and I couldn't wait to let it off my shoulders.

“Hey, bride-to-be!”

Samantha's voice pierced through my thoughts, and amid everything, I found myself shrieking the minute she called me “bride.”

Maybe it's because I had plenty of time to rehearse the fake excitement. Greg made sure of that. First, he ensured our proposal was very public—in one of New York's high-society restaurants. And then, he threw an engagement party unannounced with only company CEOs and executives present. I must admit, he displayed a great deal of confidence by not even considering the possibility that I would say no.

“Hey, girlie!” I responded, smiling ear-to-ear as I threw my hands open for a hug. I loved Samantha, especially for how she knew how to light up my space even without knowing it. We had known each other since I moved to New York and had been best pals ever since.

“You look stunning, girl. I so wish I were you right now.”

“Oh, come on.” Eager to talk about something other than my dress, I asked her, “How's the crowd?”

“As expected.” This sent us both laughing. Talk about why we're besties again. “There's a whole crowd of people waiting to witness the Greg and Olivia union.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in her information. Behind my eyelids, I pictured the congregation, wild chatter as they turned their heads from side to side, their eyes searching.

I pictured the growing impatience on their faces as they waited and, finally, the disappointment. None of it was my fault, really. I didn't have a choice.

“Earth to Oli?” As I heard the snap of her fingers along with her voice, I blinked my eyes open. Samantha was still standing in front of me, her eyes searching my face. Then, a wry smile curved her lips as she leaned back and crossed her arms. “You’re nervous, aren’t you?”

I nodded, although I wasn’t really nervous. It just seemed like a better excuse for my dazed expression. “Honey, it’s your first time getting married. You’re meant to be nervous, excited, maybe even losing your shit, all while trying to look stunning. But remember, you need to take time to enjoy every single moment of it.”

I smiled at her words, but deep down, my heart sank. I wished I could relate to what she was saying. I wished I could embody the clumsy little bride she thought I was. However, all I felt at that point was determination.

But there was still a bit of fear that lingered.

“Samantha?” I finally spoke, surprising both myself and her.

“Yeah?”

“Would you ...” I trailed off, taking a deep breath in as I paused to articulate my thoughts. By the time I looked up again, she was visibly worried. I smiled brightly as I placed my hands on her forearms, gently rubbing them. “Hey, don’t get the wrong idea. It’s nothing serious. I’d just like to hear your opinion on something.”

“Okay then, what is it?”

“What would you do if you began to feel like the life, you’re living right now isn’t yours?”

Her eyes narrowed as she reeled her head backward to look at me. “You mean like imposter syndrome?”

“Well, no, not exactly. What I mean is ...” I released her arms and turned away from her, returning my gaze to the mirror and taking in the reflection that stared back at me—two complete strangers. “What if you were so suppressed that you had to *become* that person in order to survive? And now that you’ve realized that you’re capable of fighting back instead of just surviving, you can’t seem to find yourself anymore.” I

looked at her, my eyes searching into her soul. I wanted to know if she understood anything I was saying.

Her bright eyes had now gone cold and somber as she listened to me. She understood. “And so you begin to feel like you’re lost into that person you created to be submissive to the situation you’re trying to fight back, and it’s holding you back.”

She nodded, absorbing my thoughts, and coming up with the perfect answer. It was one of the reasons I loved her—she always understood me and had a way of thinking deeper than I would.

“I’d kill the bitch.”

Her answer caught me off guard, and I burst out in laughter. She chuckled lightly. “No, but seriously, the fact that I realized I’m not where I should be means that I’m not exactly lost. In fact, I’m far from lost,” I explained.

She reached for a lipstick on the table, gazing into the mirror as she rubbed it over her perfectly shaped lips. “Instead, you’re simply moving into another phase, one that is for you, and it’s scary. If you’re determined, you’ve got to kill that bitch called fear.” She closed the lipstick and placed it down as she smacked her lips. “Hurry up, there’re so many guests already waiting.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

She pulled me into another warm hug, and I hugged her back, sinking into the warmth of her embrace as my thoughts cleared and the answer rang loudly in my ear. I had to fight my fear.

And kill the bitch.

I watched as she walked out of the dressing room, waiting until her receding steps faded away in the hallway. Then I picked up my phone and checked the time. I was already ten minutes late. A message chimed in, and I opened it.

I took a deep breath as I read the contents of the message.

I got up and lifted my gown as I walked toward the door, my chest swelling with each step. I reached for the door and opened it before stepping out into the hallway. I had expected my bride's maids to be waiting in there. Glancing left; I saw bright light streaming through the entrance of the building. Glancing right, I spotted the main church building and my bridesmaids waiting at the entrance. I sighed, stepped out, and closed the door behind me.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and formed the best smile I could muster. Then I opened my eyes and chose the left path.

I walked as fast as my feet could carry me, my heart thumping as I clutched my gown tighter and raced to the entrance. An unnerving feeling lingered as if someone might come out and catch me running away from my wedding. It tugged at my limbs, tempting me to change my mind.

Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps I could handle it. At least I'd be rich, right? Yet happiness would be elusive. I would never be happy being married to that evil creature.

The warmth of the midday sun washed over my skin as I stepped out of the church, my steps quickening with the realization that my plan might actually unfold. Walking into the street, I searched for a red Toyota. When my eyes fell on one that was parked in front of some other cars across the street, I pulled out my phone and opened the message I had received earlier.

After confirming the details of my Uber, I nodded and walked to the car. Slipping into the back seat, I adjusted my dress to fit into the car. I looked up to find my driver leaning over his armrest, his eyes darting around in confusion. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly fine. You can start the journey now." I didn't even bother to meet his eyes. I was scared he'd see the fear in my eyes, understand what was going on, and decide to take me back to my soon-to-be husband, who would likely be standing confused at the altar.

I didn't want to imagine how the rest of my life would be if my plan failed and everyone found out I tried to run away.

The driver nodded before turning back and starting his engine. I sighed in relief as I watched the church roll past my window. There was no turning back now.

I rolled up the window and settled into my seat. The cold air from the air conditioning blew onto my face, drying the quiet tears on my cheeks.

When I was a good mile away, I finally allowed myself to look through the window. However, I still wasn't safe. At least half the country knew who I was. Scratch that. Half the country knew who my fiancé was.

I watched my city fade from view, memories slipping away with it. It was the place I had grown to love and cherish, where I had learned to become independent and navigate life's challenges, even as a woman.

It was also the place where I met a man who wanted to strangle every last ounce of freedom from me with a noose just the size of my finger. And now, I was fleeing not just from that man but also from that place.

"Can I use your phone?" I asked.

The driver's confused eyes shot to the rearview mirror, where mine were already waiting. We held each other's gaze for longer than I thought necessary before he nodded and adjusted in his chair. His hand appeared, holding the black metal between his fingers.

"Here you go," he said.

I took the phone from him and lifted my own phone, which I had been holding onto since I got into the car. Unconsciously, my eyes searched the top left of my screen for the airplane icon.

Opening my phone, I scrolled through my contact list. I didn't have to scroll far to find the number I was looking for, so I quickly dialed it into the driver's phone before bringing it to my ear.

I wasn't actually running, but I did intend to stay in hiding for a while. It wasn't that I was scared of Greg, but rather, I feared the media.

Greg belonged to the most influential family in New York, and he was a strikingly handsome man, starring in every ad and gracing the pages of every noteworthy magazine. His image loomed over the city on billboards, and women loved him. I was aware that many would have given anything to be in my shoes.

Because they told me—literally.

I knew that the news of his bride ditching him on the day of their wedding would hang thickly in the air for a long time. My dearly beloved Gregory Hathaway would not be so happy about it, but the media, in particular, would be even more displeased. They would come for me like a bull to a red cloth.

So, I needed to keep a low profile for as long as necessary, rebuild my life, and avoid making the same mistake of getting into anything serious with any man until I was certain. In the meantime, I was determined to stay away from men entirely.

Love would have to wait a little longer.

The line beeped, and a familiar slurry voice echoed into my ears. "Hello?"

"I didn't see you at my wedding today," I said. I didn't see anyone, but I was certain he wasn't there.

"Did you expect me to come?" he asked.

"Well, I actually didn't, but right now, I need your help with something."

"Already? I'm still working on your passport."

"Yeah, this is about that. I might need the documents a little earlier."

There was silence, and then I heard him sigh deeply. I imagined him pinching the bridge of his nose as he always did. "When?" His tone was tense.

"Well, I need it in ten minutes ..."

“Olivia, for the love of God,” he cut off, letting out a soft huff before he spoke again. “I’ll have it done in twenty.” The line went flat.

I pulled the phone from my ear and deleted the number before returning it to the driver. Then I checked the time on my own phone. I had just two hours left. It was time to initiate phase 2 of my plan.

Chapter Two

BILLIONAIRE EX-ROCKSTAR

Alexander Steele

I've never liked influential old men.

They tend to be loud, rude, and resistant to criticism, even when it's constructive. More importantly, many of them don't like young, influential men.

However, recognizing the mutual need in running a successful business, I've learned to overlook the pride and filth that often escape their lips each time they speak and focus on my own interests.

As the balding man across from me continued speaking, his eyebrows scrunched up, his arms flailing vigorously, and his bulging belly pushing against his tight suit as he struggled to contradict something I had just said, I simply remained still.

Beside me, my secretary shifted endlessly on her chair since the man began speaking. I could feel her struggle against her thoughts as she tried to stay composed, following the guidance I had given her.

She shifted again, this time closer to me, her lips resting only a breath away from my ear as she whispered. I smiled and nodded in response to the information I'd received before standing to my feet while the man was still in mid-sentence.

“Well, this has been a very resourceful meeting. I thank you all for your time and attention. Unfortunately, I would have to take my leave now as I have other pressing matters to attend to.”

The old man chuckled. “These fresh bloods always run away once someone begins to tell them the truth they don't want to hear. I miss the good old days when one would get a little more challenge in meetings like this. If you bring a pitch, at least be willing to defend it.” He directed his words mostly to the other men of his caliber, and they all joined in, nodding and concurring.

I initially planned to ignore him because I truly did not have the time to address him. However, when I caught my secretary's eyes, she was visibly glaring this time. She believed in me and my work, and she wouldn't tolerate all my effort being treated like trash.

Turning back to the man who was still looking at me, his eyes bright with triumph, I asserted, “You want a challenge, Mr. Pekker? Under my supervision, my company has achieved in ten years what yours couldn't do in fifty. I don't know about you, but that's challenging enough for me. If I were in your shoes, I'd take notes from me.”

The light in his eyes vanished, and I took it as my cue to leave. I shook hands with the people close to me as I began to take my leave, the smiles in their eyes showing their support for me finally silencing the man.

My secretary was beaming. She walked briskly beside me as we made our way toward the elevator, holding up her tablet as she ran me through the day's itinerary for the hundredth time that day. I couldn't blame her. I had a bad habit of mixing up schedules.

“So what's next, Layla?” I asked, pressing the elevator button. The chime sounded, and the gold-plated metal doors

slid open, revealing the empty cubicle behind them.

I stepped in first, Layla following in lockstep.

“Well, you have a flight to catch in about thirty minutes,” she said.

“A flight in thirty minutes! I thought my only travel arrangements were for New York tomorrow afternoon?”

“Well, Mr. Steele, you called me at nine this morning, asking me to shift your flight to this afternoon because the shareholders were being impatient with you.”

“Oh yes, I did. Well, have Derek bring the car over.”

“Already done, sir. I’ve also sent the ticket details via email.”

“Why aren’t you coming with me again?”

“Well, I’m supposed to represent you, sir, at the launching.”

“That’s today?”

“Sir.”

“I know, I know, I should start writing things down and setting reminders.”

The doors slid open, and we stepped out of the elevator, walking past the busy foyer as we headed for the entrance doors.

The warm afternoon sun fell on my face as I walked through the doors, causing me to squint a bit. I searched for the familiar black sedan and found it parked just outside, with Derek, my driver, waiting at the door.

“I trust the meeting went well, sir?” Derek said, opening the passenger door for me.

I nodded as I smiled and got into the car. I turned to Layla, who stood outside, her tablet cradled to her chest. “You’re not coming?”

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t be able to make it for the launching if I did, sir.”

“Well, how do you intend to get there then?”

“Uber.”

My eyes narrowed as I tilted my head to the side. “Wait here. I’ll have one of the company cars come to pick you up.” She nodded, and Derek closed the door before circling the vehicle.

“Good luck, sir,” she said just as I rolled the tinted window up.

Derek swiftly entered the car and started it. As I felt the car begin to move, I took my phone out of my suit jacket.

“Hello,” I said, raising the phone to my ear.

“Yes, I’m on my way. Please send a car to pick up my secretary at the foundation. All right, thank you.”

I placed the phone down and sank into my chair.

My phone chimed again, its vibration pulling me back to life. I picked it up and read the notification on the lock screen. It was an email from Layla containing details of my travel and accommodation arrangements, along with my contact person who would stand as my secretary.

I opened the mail, and my eyes fell on the attached file containing all the documents. I let out a soft sigh; I was too exhausted to go through any of that.

I placed the phone down and sank back into my chair. My eyelids felt heavy, and I saw no reason to fight them. I drifted off into sleep.

My phone began to ring loudly, and I groaned, lifting it to my ears as I picked up the call without even bothering to check the caller ID. What’s a guy gotta do to get some damn sleep?

I snarled over the phone.

“Well, that certainly is no way to answer your mother.” The voice was sharp and thick, sending recognition coursing through every vein in my body as I let out a heavy sigh.

“Mom, how are you?” My voice was much calmer.

“You know, if you really did care how I’m doing, you’d stop by the house to check every now and then. It’s not like we live in different cities.”

“Mom, you know how busy these past couple of days have been. I’m trying to expand and—”

“Yes, yes, your work, which you cherish more than the woman who birthed you, I’m aware.”

I rolled my eyes as I sighed. “I’ll come see you as soon as I return tomorrow.”

“Good then. You leave for New York in about twenty minutes, yes?”

“How did you—”

“That corporation was your father’s and then mine long before it was yours, honey. I know everything that’s going on in there down to the minutest details. Plus, you’re my son, although you seem to forget most times.”

I heaved another sigh. Mrs. Nina Steele was definitely a force to be reckoned with. “Well, if that’s the case, then you know I’m already on my way to the airport.”

“Well, yes, I do need you to tell me things like this sometimes. I need to know when my son’s leaving my jurisdiction.”

I scoffed. She knew every detail about movements yet still wanted me to inform her. “Mother, once again, I’m very busy.”

The line fell silent. Inhaling deeply, I looked through the darkened window on my right. The car was speeding over a bridge, and I could see the beautiful body of water beneath us. I reminisced about when I was a little boy, rolling my window down quickly and leaning out as I peered at the glossy waves that moved in calm torrents.

“Is there something you’d like me to get you?”

“Well, yes. Actually, it’s someone, and I want you to meet her, your aunt Margaret.”

I groaned internally. Aunt Margaret was my father's first sister—a brute with words and terrible pain in the ass. My mom didn't like her either, but recently, they'd joined alliances to set up blind dates for me each chance they got.

At first, it was amusing. Aunt Margaret was in surplus of *eligible females* as she fancied herself some sort of matchmaker. All I had to do was show up on our date and let my charms do the work. Talking them into sleeping with me was like child's play. And by morning, I'd be long gone.

My mother always considered women who were easy to lure to bed uncouth and unworthy of her son, regardless of their status, background, or even her prior approval of them.

At first, Aunt Margaret couldn't understand why my mother always asked her to cancel any other plans made for the girls she brought. However, my mother refrained from disclosing the true reason out of respect for a woman's dignity.

Aunt Margaret eventually figured it out. I became aware of it after the fifth person I propositioned to bed politely turned me down, using the exact same words as the others, as if they were following a script.

So, imagine my happiness when I found out Aunt Margaret was moving out of the country after her retirement. The two women actually thought they could overcome their geographical barrier and continue their little charade.

I knew it was only a matter of time before their efforts would dwindle and eventually subside, and it did. I'd almost even forgotten about those days—well, until a minute ago.

“Why, Mother?” I asked, exhaustion trailing my voice.

“What on earth do you mean why? She's your aunt, and you both share fond memories of each other since your dad's passing. She misses you and would be thrilled to see you,” she said in a singsong voice, but I was familiar with her game.

“So you mean to tell me that this isn't some front to get me on a fancy restaurant table with a girl I've never met before.”

“Well, I don't know the full details of her reason for wanting to see you. All I know is that she's expecting you, and you *will*

be there because I told her you would.”

“Mother, I doubt that I have the time.”

“Well, make it then. I’ll send you her address through text. See you tomorrow, honey,” she said, and I heard the click as the line fell flat.

“Hello? Mother, I—” I slammed the phone on the seat beside me, groaning. I felt the car pull to a slow halt, and I looked through the window to see the busy entrance of the airport.

“We’re here, sir,” Derek said, and I turned to meet his eyes staring at me in the rearview mirror.

“Yes, Derek, I can see that,” I said and reached for my suitcase as he got out of the car and hurried over to my door, pulling it open as I stepped out.

I looked around and noticed the sun setting slowly as evening descended over the sky. I lifted my wrist and peered down at my watch. There wasn’t much time left. Adjusting my jacket and dusting it off, I walked into the airport.

Chapter Three

FIRST ENCOUNTER

Olivia Sanders

I stood just at my room door, my eyes resting languidly on the huge white fabric that lay sprawled on my bed, the red sheets making the white gown pop even more. It was a really pretty dress, but it wasn't mine.

It never was.

I took one last look at my room, memories flooding into my mind, leaving tears stinging my eyes. I fought back the urge to cry. There was no time to show weakness now. I had made my decision, and I did not regret it.

My phone chimed in my jacket pocket, jerking me out of my thoughts. I pulled it out quickly and read the message from Samantha.

After I asked her to leave the dressing room, I sent her a text giving her the details of my plan and asking her to stall for me a little so I had enough time to change and leave before Greg came knocking at my door.

I expected her full support, but I was still surprised when she replied with a thumbs-up emoji.

Sam: Greg knows. He's pissed, and I think he sent his bodyguard to look for you. Everyone else is still confused.

I sighed as I returned my phone to my pocket and reached for the handle of my suitcase. It was exactly as I'd expected. Greg would be the first to question my delay and figure out my absence.

With his fame at stake, he would try to play it cool while sending Trench to come get me quickly. God, I hated that six-foot mass of rubbish, and I knew he hated me too. He made it clear to me on several occasions that he didn't find me suitable for his boss, and each time, I wondered why he was delusional enough to think his opinion mattered.

But now, my escape plan was banking on that very opinion. Because it meant he would not be in a hurry to find me, giving me enough time to make it to the airport. I pulled out my phone and checked if I'd received any messages from my agent.

Nothing, I groaned as I tapped my feet on the floor impatiently. I shook my head and headed downstairs as an idea popped into my head.

I had been planning my escape for over a week now, but the original plan was supposed to take place after the wedding to reduce the publicity and embarrassment.

But standing in that wedding gown earlier and listening to Samantha talk made me change my mind. If I allowed the wedding to happen, I would only be sabotaging myself. And then, I'd remain caged in Greg's grasp till he decided he was done with me. I had to seize my opportunity immediately.

The original plan involved my agent handling my passport and other legal documents. He would call me when they were ready, and we would meet at a coffee shop downtown where he would provide me with the documents and a new phone. I had only seen him once and I hoped I would remember his face. I had

taken his number from a YouTube-recommended site. . He was a teenage boy to my surprise, and even if then I had only needed it for a vacation.

It was easy to trust him. He was easy-going, but I was desperate, and he sounded legitimate after our first conversation, so I didn't think twice before paying him in full. However, now, as I stood at my door, anxiously waiting for my phone to chime, I began to think back on why that might have been a bad idea.

My heart raced as I thought of the possibility of being duped by some teenager online. If that was the case, then that meant I was fucked.

I had nowhere else to go, and my time was running out. If I remained there, Trench would eventually come knocking, and it would be game over for me.

I groaned as I grabbed the door handle and pulled the door open. I was going to go to the coffee shop, and if the agent didn't eventually come, I'd at least be in a safe place where I could reevaluate my plans.

Just as I stepped out, my phone began to ring. I reached for it faster than I could blink, my heart racing as I picked up the call and answered, "Yes?"

"Change of plans. I won't be able to make it to the coffee shop on time," he said.

"Where would we meet then?" I asked.

"At the airport. It's risky, so I need you to listen very carefully," he replied.

My chest swelled, and I felt my hands tremble. *Risky?* Everything about today was risky. Meeting him would be the least of my worries. Yet I was still frightened, and the thought of ending that call and getting back into my gown crossed my mind in a microsecond.

"Miss Sanders?"

I shook the thought off. "I'm listening."

“Good. Head to the airport immediately after this call and find the MM2 terminal. I’ll be in the waiting area, sitting alone and dressed in a gray suit.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “That’s all? Gray suit, sitting alone?”

“What other description do you need?”

“Look, I don’t know, but what you gave is pretty vague, okay?”

“I’m about six foot two with blond hair. May I remind you that I don’t have the time to go into details about my appearance?”

“Fine then. I’ll just call you when I get there.”

“After this call, I’m going to need you to delete my number and all call logs and throw the phone through your window.” The line went flat before I could even respond.

I let out a heavy sigh as I grabbed my suitcase and walked out of my house.

Goodbye, New York.

My Uber pulled up in front of the airport, and I got off quickly, walking to the trunk and pulling out my suitcase before slamming the lid and rushing into the airport.

I hated being unable to contact him. My mind was a foggy mess, and I was hellbent on getting the fuck out of town. The main lobby was filled with people and chatter, the noise making it even harder for me to think.

I looked up at the signboards that held the terminals on them, and my mind immediately went blank.

“Fuck.”

My eyes fell on one of the signboards that had MM2 written boldly on it. I tilted my head to the side as I studied the signboard while trying to replay the agent’s instructions in my head.

I'd been so focused on what he'd looked like that I didn't pay attention to the information he'd given me before that. Shaking my head and heaving a sigh, my fingers tightened around the handle of my suitcase as I headed for MM2.

I was grateful when I walked in and found the waiting area a little scanty—a few families clustered together on different seats, some couples. But only one man sat alone, and he was wearing a gray suit.

I sighed in relief as I made a beeline toward him. He looked up, and I was able to catch the features of his side profile. He sat cross-legged with a briefcase on the chair next to him.

He looked about the height, and his blond hair was gelled neatly. His suit looked expensive, and light glistened at the edge of his polished shoe. Either he was really good at his job or just doing this for fun. Rich people always have weird hobbies.

My mind flashed to Greg. He was hot on my tail, and I didn't have time to question the reason for this man's choice of occupation.

Finally, the man looked at me, and his eyes brightened as he got to his feet and offered me a warm smile. My heart stopped, and there was suddenly not enough air in the building.

His fine green eyes reminded me of the emerald bracelet Sam had gotten me as an engagement present. His fair skin appeared untouched by the sun, and his lips, which were small and pink, seemed begging me to bite them.

He moved with such grace as if he owned the fucking airport. With each step toward me, I found it even harder to breathe.

I shook the thought off immediately as I remembered the first day I met Greg, who charmed me in a similar way. In the end, it seemed that was all men were: good looks and graceful features.

Despite his unyielding smile, which didn't waver as he approached, revealing a set of perfect white teeth, I didn't

reciprocate. He walked toward me, and as he finally stopped, he stretched out his hands.

“You’re a little late. It’s nice to meet you.”

I fought back the impact of his voice on me. It wasn’t that hard when I considered what he’d said. While I was the one who had made the impromptu change of arrangements, saying I was late when he had called me literally five minutes ago was just insane.

“Is that it?” I asked, ignoring his outstretched arm and gesturing toward the suitcase in his other hand.

His smile finally faltered as he looked around and withdrew his hand. “Is this *what?*” His voice, less friendly now, still retained its impactful effect, albeit stronger.

I let out a labored breath. “On the phone, you sounded like you couldn’t spare an extra second to provide me with the correct details for this meeting. I’ve made the effort to get here, and now you have time to play dumb?”

His eyes furrowed, and he reeled back as if I had just recited a Greek poem. “Look, I have never spoken to you a day in my life. You’ve been talking to my secretary, though I don’t understand how you could mistake our voices.”

Realization hit me—I had been speaking to his secretary all this time. That explained a lot, particularly why his voice had an effect on me, making me want to grab his neck and place my lips on his, savoring that sexy voice.

Olivia!

I returned my focus to his confused gaze. “Well, your secretary should’ve filled you in already, so why are we still here talking?”

His gaze darkened, his smile vanishing completely. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Give me the documents.”

“I can’t fucking hand them over to you in the waiting area of a goddamn airport!”

It finally dawned on me why he'd been acting like he didn't understand what we were talking about, and I felt stupid. What we were doing was sensitive. Risky, as his secretary had called it. It would be dangerous for him to give it to me in such an open area. Our little interaction had already drawn enough attention to us.

Scanning the room, I spotted an executive lounge at the far end. It was perfect for our transaction. I looked back at him, who was now glaring angrily at his phone. He noticed I was looking at him, and he held my gaze.

"Fine then, follow me," I declared, grabbing my suitcase and starting to walk past him. After taking a few steps, I felt his fingers grab my forearm, the cold touch digging into my skin.

I snapped my head back and glared at him, but he was already glaring at me.

"Now, just who the fuck do you think you are?" he sneered.

"What?"

He effortlessly tugged my arm, and the strength of his powerful arms lifted me off my feet, pulling me toward him as if I were a piece of cloth.

His glare was intense, and his face was only inches from mine. Despite the confusion and fear welling up in me, I dared to hold his gaze.

"I will not tolerate your disrespect. How dare you act so rudely and ask me to *follow* you?" he asserted.

As my haze cleared, I realized my situation. I stood captive to a man I had paid almost a fortune to run a job for me, and now this same man was demanding respect.

Was it because of my gender? It seemed like the only plausible reason.

My palm met his face faster than I could stop it.

Chapter Four

CHANGE OF PLANS

Alexander Steele

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. The pilot has turned on the ‘fasten your seat belt’ sign. Please ensure that your seat belts are securely fastened and all electronic devices are turned off as we prepare to land. On behalf of the entire cabin crew, I’d like to welcome you to New York City, and I hope you enjoy your stay.”

I walked into the waiting lobby of the airport. It was scanty as most of the passengers were still waiting to collect their luggage. I peered down at my watch and smiled when I realized I still had some time.

My eyes locked on an empty row of seats at the far end of the room, and I made my way toward it while I pulled out my phone from my pocket. I turned off airplane mode, and it chimed continuously as messages started flooding in. I patiently waited until they were all received before opening the one I thought was most relevant.

Layla: The meeting is in an hour. I’ve already messaged your contact person to meet you in five minutes. Please go

through the attached file from my previous email. Good luck again, sir!

I chuckled at the message. She knew I wouldn't have bothered to open the message till I got to the airport. Taking my seat, I located the email and then opened the attached file.

To my surprise, it was a picture of my contact person's ID card. Although the image was blurry and her features were barely discernible, I could make out her jet-black hair and slender appearance.

Glancing at the name, I noted that she was Russian. I smiled at this. Layla knew about my fear of Russian women, stemming from a movie we had watched during an office movie night. She had gone out of her way to find the one Russian girl in New York just to help me stay focused.

It's not that I'm promiscuous—that's a very strong word. I'm just very fond of beautiful young women, as long as they're not Russian.

I gave up on trying to pronounce her name as another text came in from my mother.

Mrs. Steele: Make sure to take something to your aunt. She's really excited to see you.

I let out a soft sigh as I read the message. I knew my mother wasn't going to give up, but I did have hope she'd give it a rest eventually. But from the way she was going about it, I was sure they'd set up another blind date.

I sent a text to Layla, asking her to cancel my return ticket. There was no escaping it. If I left New York without seeing Aunt Margaret, she would just hunt me down, and then I'd have to answer a query from two old and very annoying women.

I looked up at the time. It was way past five minutes, but I didn't bother because I really wasn't in a rush. I looked at the briefcase on my left.

All I had to do was do a quick presentation, explain my pitch, and then leave the contract for the company to consider

and eventually sign. It wasn't tedious work, but it wasn't exciting either.

My eyes moved to the TV. On it was a quite ostentatious wedding invitation video. I recognized the groom; although I'd never done business with him before, Gregory Hathaway was a well-known name in the world I lived in.

The bride, on the other hand, was absolutely stunning, and her radiant smile warmed my cheeks. "Lucky chap," I murmured to myself before returning my attention to my phone.

Twenty minutes passed before I began to get anxious. I looked up to see if perhaps she'd come to look for me but somehow hadn't found me.

I scanned through the area in front of me, making a headcount to see if there was anyone new sitting in front of me. Passengers from my flight and others had joined us at a point, but most of them had left already.

Then I turned to my left and saw her standing next to me. I wasn't sure at first. She dressed formally with her hair tucked under a cap and a mask on. I could only tell her hair was black from the strands that fell over her face.

I didn't understand why she had a suitcase, but Layla had mentioned her having something for me. She hadn't gone into detail, so I wasn't expecting something big.

She was looking at me, her icy blue eyes running over me as if she, just like me, was wondering whether she had found the right person. Deciding to confirm, I stood up and walked over to her.

I saw the conflicting emotions that played on her pretty features as I got closer to her. I couldn't make much of it, but I could sense she was grappling with internal struggles.

There was a familiarity to her that I couldn't quite figure, so I decided to shake it off. She wasn't very beautiful, and she looked like she was some sort of spy or covert operative.

I smiled. Very Russian.

I hoped she wasn't as stern as she looked, so I offered her my best smile as I approached her. However, she turned out to be worse than stern—she was rude, confusing, and packed a mean slap.

I couldn't believe it when her palm hit my face, leaving a sting as my head turned to the side. I couldn't entirely blame her; perhaps grabbing her like that was a bit over the top.

Nevertheless, it didn't change the fact that a woman on my payroll had slapped me in the middle of a waiting lobby of an airport. Everyone heard it because, by the time I looked up, everyone was staring.

I was confused and angry, but I wasn't going to give her the reaction she desired. I took a deep breath and straightened my suit. She defiantly raised her chin, and her eyes darkened as she braced herself for my next move.

However, there was no move. Clearing my throat, I walked right past her and toward the exit. Screw the fucking contract. A part of me wished she would call after me and try to apologize.

But she never did.

I sat at a private table in a restaurant down the road from the airport. My eyes narrowed on my phone as I glared at the contact name. In my five years of working with Layla, I had never found a reason to lash out at her.

However, the anger and embarrassment boiling in my veins were too intense to overlook. This was her fault. I had paid her to find someone to stand in her stead as my secretary, guide me through my itinerary, and point me in the right direction.

It was a simple job, and hiring a Russian seemed entirely unnecessary. I understood it wasn't fair to attribute what had happened to the woman's nationality, but I couldn't think of another reason why someone on my payroll would lay a finger on me.

In this case, it was five fingers, and I hated that it still stung after so much time had passed.

I tapped the dial button and brought the phone to my ear. The line cracked open on the third ring. “Mr. Steele, I wasn’t expecting you to call so early. Is the meeting already over?” Layla inquired.

I remained silent, still debating whether I should end the call and walk out of the restaurant. However, I felt the need to set an example. I was never the kind that tolerated tardiness or disrespect, and I had made her an exception—look where it got me.

“Layla.” My tone was harsh, the kind I used in meetings or when I was with someone who I didn’t consider worth the pretense of kindness. This was my actual self—stern and unfriendly. From the quiver in her voice, I knew she’d gotten the message.

“Is there a problem, sir?” she asked.

“*Is there a problem?* Yes, Layla, there is, in fact, a problem. What on earth were you thinking sending that mannerless wrench to me?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t fucking *sir* me. You had one job, Layla, to find someone competent enough to accompany me to the meeting, and you picked the most unruly of them all. Did you not take time to look at her portfolio?”

“Sir, I promise, I took my time to pick her out. She was the best I could find.”

“Well, it’s a shame that’s your *best*. I’m terribly disappointed in you, Layla.”

She started to speak but trailed off, and I knew I had gotten to her. Maybe a little more than I intended, but I didn’t care.

“Reschedule my meeting with the company and book a room for me, and get rid of the fucking Russian. I want someone else at my door as early as eight tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if you’re so worried about me losing focus, if you have such little trust in me, then get me a man.”

“Yes, sir.”

I sighed as I ended the call, then tapped the bell at the center of the table. Sinking into my chair, I waited for a waiter to come, handing me a menu.

Waving my hand at him, I said, “I’ll just have the special.” He nodded and made to leave. “Also, can I get a refill?” I lifted my emptied wine glass to him, and he nodded again, then hurried out.

By the time my dinner was finished and everything was settled, Layla had sent me the details of the new room. I ordered an Uber, paid for my food, and then stepped outside to get into the waiting car.

Chapter Five

CONFUSION STARTS

Olivia Sanders

I sat across the kitchen island from Samantha, my elbows propped on the concrete as I held my temple in frustration. “I just can’t fucking believe this.”

“Hey, you need to calm down. I would’ve hit him too, and the fact that he walked away means he’s a little bit reasonable.” She reached for my shoulder and squeezed it lightly.

“How long do I have to wait? He hasn’t contacted me since then.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know you’ve retrieved your number.”

“Well, he could at least try to contact me.” I stared down at the phone that rested on the slab. I had gone straight to the nearest phone hub and gotten a new phone with the hopes that my agent would reach out to me.

Or at least his secretary.

I didn't feel bad for what I did; he'd gone too far by grabbing me like that, and to be fair to me, I was in a pretty anxious state already. I'd expected that he would consider various options and try to reach me.

Unfortunately, I had deleted his number, making it impossible for me to contact him. I considered looking for the video I'd found his number on, but I didn't know which video it was; I had come across it on a coworker's phone.

"I'm confused, Sam, and I'm in the fucking dark right now."

"I know, but you've already gotten this far. We just have to come up with a plan to keep moving. But in the meantime, you've got to slow down."

"I can't slow down. I need to contact him. Perhaps I can get to the coffee shop and start looking for him there."

"And what makes you think you'd find information about him in some vague coffee shop?"

"Exactly. Maybe it's not as random as we think it is. I mean, why *that* shop? Maybe his office is close to it."

"Honey, remember the reason you're in this situation in the first place is because he couldn't get to the shop on time. I doubt it's close to his office."

"Fuck!" I grabbed my hair as I looked up. "I mean, why did he have to be such a fucking asshole? I was so close. All he had to do was hand me the damn briefcase."

"Hey, look. At least he showed up, which means he's not a con. He's probably still angry, but he'll come through."

"Wait a minute!" My eyes brightened as I got off my stool and headed for the sitting room. Samantha followed me, a curious gaze studying my every move.

I reached for her laptop and logged into my Gmail account. "What are you doing?" She took a seat on the couch next to me.

"Maybe, if I can log into my account, I can find my search history, and I'd be able to find his office address."

“If there was an office address in the first place, why didn’t you go there before?”

“Because Greg had his bodyguards on me like fucking hound dogs. I think he knew I was planning something. I even had to stop using his Wi-Fi to browse.”

“Jesus, Oly, why didn’t you tell me all this before?”

“I mean, you had your breakup and the whole fundraiser. I didn’t want to heap my problems on yours.”

“That’s absolute bullshit.”

“I’m sorry, I really am. But I had to take care of myself this time around, and I didn’t want to drag you into it.”

“I understand, but you need to know that I’ll always be here for you no matter what I’m going through, okay?”

“Thank you, Sam.”

I scrolled through my search history until I found the site where I’d gotten the agent’s contact. Reading the ad poster that popped up on the first page, my eyes scanned for the office address. When I found it, my heart sank.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“What’s wrong? You can’t find it?” Samantha asked, peering into the computer.

“I found it. It’s located in the business district.”

“Good then. We’d go there first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I can’t, Sam. The business district is filled with Greg’s partners and shareholders—people I’ve been introduced to and had dinner with. I can’t even walk out your door for more than five minutes for fear of being recognized.”

She took in a deep breath, her face going flat with disappointment.

“What do I do now, Sam? Every second I spend here, I feel like Trench or Greg are going to come bustling in through that door.”

“Hey, none of them know where I live.”

“Oh, Sam, you keep forgetting it’s Greg we’re talking about here. If he wanted to find out where the woman who styled your hair lives, it wouldn’t take him more than a day.” I tossed the laptop aside and sprung to my feet as I began to pace around the room.

I was running out of time, ideas, and options.

“Look, I see the sense in what you’re saying, but worrying about it won’t make it any better. Besides, Greg has his hands full already.”

I looked at her, my questioning gaze searching her face as if I could find answers written on her forehead. “What do you mean he’s got his hands full?”

She chuckled. “I don’t think you realize how much of a shithole you’ve trapped him in. There were multiple TV channel representatives covering that wedding. Don’t let me get started on social media coverage as well.”

She reached for the discarded laptop and pulled it to her. “The whole city and beyond watched him wait like a fool at the altar for a bride that never showed. Everyone’s talking about it now. I’m talking about news headlines, podcasts, blogs, even memes.”

“Oh my gosh, how is this supposed to make me feel better, Sam?”

“It means you have more time to plan and re-strategize.”

I sighed as I considered her words. I sat beside her and watched the results that came under her search: *Greg Hathaway dumped at the altar*. And truly, it was bad.

But that was a good thing.

His entire family would move all their focus to covering up the incident and saving their name. Knowing them, they were probably planning some ostentatious event to distract the public. In the worst-case scenario, they would marry off his younger sister. Either way, I was no longer the main focus. I could actually rest easy. I let out a long sigh as I relaxed on the chair.

“Oh, good lord, I need a glass of wine,” I said.

“A glass? Baby girl, you need a bottle, and so do I.” Samantha exclaimed, jumping up from the couch. She headed for the kitchen, returning soon after with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

She placed the glasses on the table, opened the wine, and filled the glasses. I grabbed mine, swallowed it in one gulp, and then returned it to the table.

“Easy now, babe. You don’t want to go drunk texting the wrong people.” She raised an eyebrow at me, and I laughed, knowing exactly what she was talking about.

But no amount of intoxication on this God’s green earth would ever make me text Greg.

“Wait a minute. Since you can’t go to the business district to find the agent, how about you try calling him?” I brought my glass down from my lips. “I told you, I deleted his number already.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Where did you get the number from in the first place, Olivia?” Her voice seemed to convey a deeper message than her words, and it took a while for me to understand what she was saying.

My eyes widened, and a bright smile curved my lips as I placed my glass down and reached for the laptop again. “Oh my gosh, that’s right. His agency!! Why didn’t I think about that?”

“What would you do without me?”

“Absolutely nothing, Sam.” I chuckled as I returned to the former tab and copied out the number from the poster. “Let’s call him with your phone in case he’s still holding a grudge.”

She nodded and pulled out her phone from her back pocket, handing it to me before taking a sip from her glass. I called the number and placed the call on loudspeaker, setting the phone on the stool between us.

Each suspense-filled ring had me at the edge of my chair until someone finally picked up.

“Hello,” came a lady’s voice. I turned to Samantha, who had the same puzzled look on her face as me.

“Um, hi, hello. I was hoping to make some inquiries about a job that was supposed to be delivered earlier today.”

“Have you not received it till now?”

“Well, no, that’s why I called.” There was a long silence, and I had to tap the phone to see if she’d ended the call, and we both somehow missed it.

“What’s your name, please, ma’am?” the voice finally spoke.

“Olivia Sanders.”

“I’m speaking with Olivia Sanders?” There was a weird recognition in her voice, and I was instantly reminded of how famous I had become over the past couple of hours. I reached to end the call, but Samantha stopped me.

“Can you get the documents for us or not? We’re running on limited time,” she said.

The woman cleared her throat. “Give me a second, please.”

“Well, according to our logs, your agent is already on his way to give you your documents. He left in the afternoon. There might be a delay, which is why he hasn’t gotten to you yet.”

“Actually, we did meet, but there was a slight issue, and I wasn’t able to get the documents.”

“A slight issue?”

“We got into an argument.”

“Well, that isn’t reason enough for him to leave without giving you the documents. Please be patient, and if by tomorrow you haven’t received it, then call back.”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t have until the next day, but I decided against it. “Thank you.”

“All right then,” she said before ending the call.

I turned to Samantha. “What do we do now?”

She raised her glass of wine. “I guess we’ll wait.”

My phone began to ring beside me, and I jumped before reaching for it. I paused as I looked at the caller ID before turning the phone to Samantha so she could see who was calling.

“Greg?” Samantha asked.

I nodded and held my breath, and I knew she was holding hers too.

“Answer it,” she said.

Without needing further encouragement, I accepted the call and immediately put it on loudspeaker. “Hello.”

“Look, I don’t know where the fuck you are or what kind of game you think you’re playing with me, but it’s not funny. Get your ass back here now!”

“Or what, Greg?”

“*Or wha*—I am your fucking husband.”

“No, Greg, I walked out before any marital vows could be made or broken. So, in case you didn’t get the memo, you’re my ex.”

“Don’t do this, Olivia. Do you know how much pressure I’m under? It’s bad press, can’t you see?”

I scoffed. “Look, I didn’t intend to throw you under the bus like this, but to be fair, I begged you for a simple wedding.”

“I’m a fucking Hathaway. Simple weddings don’t exist in my family, Olivia! Why can’t you just understand that?”

“We’re living in two different worlds, Gregory. I’m tired of being your picture-perfect partner. I want something real.”

“You know that has always been your problem. You say you want something real, but all you do is dream, and the world you claim to live in is full of fantasies and delusions. I could’ve given you everything.”

“I didn’t want everything, Greg. I wanted you!” I yelled. “Why is it so difficult for you to understand that I belong to

nobody?”

I chuckled at this, feeling the noose that tightened my chest finally loosening. I was finally getting the closure I needed—a chance to speak my mind freely, a chance to say goodbye.

“The problem is, you belong to everybody. Your family, your shareholders, your golf club buddies, the entire fucking city. You belong to everybody but me, and I just couldn’t have that.”

My words were met with a long silence, thick and deafening. I waited so long for him to say something that I began to hear the thumping of my heart and soon Samantha’s, and if I had waited even longer, I might have heard his, too. But I didn’t.

“Goodbye, Greg.”

Chapter Six

BILLIONAIRE KNOWS HIS BUSINESS

Alexander Steele

My Uber pulled up in front of the hotel thirty minutes later. I looked through my window to find the tall building glowing in the darkness. I picked up my suitcase and thanked the driver before stepping down from the car.

I called Layla, and she picked it up immediately. “I just got to the hotel. I trust you were able to reschedule the meeting?”

“Yes, sir. I explained to them that there were complications at the airport, which was why you could not make it. They seemed very understanding and made no complaints.”

“Good, and my temporary assistant, did you get a replacement?”

“Yes, I sent him the details of your location already. He should be there first thing in the morning.”

“He?”

“You asked that I get you a male assistant instead, sir.”

“I was only ...” I trailed off, rubbing the bridge of my nose as I let out a labored sigh. “Look, Layla. I am terribly sorry for the way I spoke to you earlier. I should have respected you regardless of the circumstances. No one is above mistakes. The former assistant was uncouth, but I should not have gotten mad at you for it.”

“There was no former assistant, sir.”

“What?”

“Well, there was, but you never met her.”

“What in the name of God are you saying, Layla?”

The call was getting longer than I had expected it to, so I began walking into the hotel. The glass entrance doors slid open, revealing a foyer awash with golden lights from the massive chandelier that hung above.

I looked around, taking note of the little intricate details that made the building a welcome sight. I made mental notes as I inspected the atmosphere.

“Well, I called her to address the complaints you had laid on her, and she told me she was unable to make it to the airport because she fell ill and had even called in sick.”

I stopped, trying to make sense of what she was saying. “Then perhaps someone sent a replacement.”

“I thought that as well, so I called our head branch over there. They didn’t send a replacement, which was an error on their part, but still, no one was sent to you, sir.”

“So, who the hell slapped me at the airport?” I tried to remain calm, but I was visibly vexed. It was one thing that someone on my payroll had embarrassed me in public; it was not hard to deal with. But a total stranger. And I walked away? I inhaled deeply. New York is a big city, and the chances of me meeting that woman again were very slim. Plus, she looked like she was traveling.

My eyes widened as it all began to make sense to me. The confused discourse, her impatience, the suitcase, her rudeness,

her reaction when I grabbed her. We had somehow confused our identities with the people we were supposed to meet.

Either that or the lady was just deranged.

“Once again, Layla, I am sorry for how I spoke to you. Please, I’ll need a change of clothes by morning.”

“On it, sir. I’ll send the new details of your meeting now.”

“Thank you.” I ended the call and walked to the reception.

The lady behind me offered me a small smile, which I returned briefly, as I slid my phone back into my pocket. “Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes, I do. Alexander Steele.”

She returned her focus to the computer in front of her, and her face lit up with a smile when she looked at me again.

“Room 316, business suite,” she said, addressing a staff member who had approached us. He offered to take my briefcase, but I waved him off. He nodded before guiding me to the elevator.

The doors slid open as we reached my floor, and he briskly walked out. I followed him, still noting the décor and architecture.

There were three chandeliers, much smaller than the one on the ground floor, lined up on the corridor, casting hues of light on the cream-colored walls, and my eyes focused on the red rug under my feet.

The man stopped, and I looked up at the door, with the number 316 boldly written on it. He placed the keycard above the door, and as the locks clicked open, he stepped aside.

I thanked him as he handed me the card. “Enjoy your stay, sir,” he said, and with that, he was gone. He did not even ask for a tip.

I entered the room and closed the door before making a beeline to the bedroom. I took off my suit jacket and dress shirt before slumping on the bed and drifting off to sleep.

The next day came quicker than I wanted it to; I groaned as rays of the early morning sun seeped through the slightly parted white silk curtains.

I was about to turn over and return to sleep when my phone began to ring. “Oh, for the love of God,” I exclaimed, flinging my pillow aside as I got out of bed.

“Where the hell is my phone?” I tried to locate the sound, but it seemed to come from everywhere. Eventually, I found it in the dining area. I picked it up and looked at the caller ID before answering the call.

“Layla.”

“Good morning, sir. Just calling to remind you that your meeting is at ten this morning. Your assistant is already on his way.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear and glanced at the time on my lock screen—it read 8:45. I sighed, realizing that the fatigue from the night before had prevented me from going through the email she had sent. She knew this, which was why she was calling.

“All right then.” I ended the call and returned to my room, already fully dressed and ready to leave when I heard a knock on my door.

I opened it to find a man with blond hair and green eyes, clad in a gray suit, wearing an awkward smile. “And you are?” I asked.

He stretched out his hand quickly. “Anderson Carter. I am the assistant assigned to you. A pleasure to meet you, sir.”

I studied him for a moment before walking back inside. “You were supposed to be here thirty minutes ago.”

He walked in and closed the door. “I apologize for that, sir. There was a gridlock on my way here.”

“Are gridlocks common around this time?”

“Not exactly, sir. You don’t have to be worried. I’ll make sure we get there on time.”

I turned to look at him again. “Are you my assistant or my driver?”

“Your assistant, sir,” he said, the light in his eyes dying as he realized I was not intending to go easy on him.

I took a step closer to him so we were standing uncomfortably close. “So, tell me, how do you intend to ensure that I get there on time?”

There was a long silence, and I watched him fidget as he looked for what to say to me. “Did I say something wrong, sir?” he asked finally.

I shook my head in disapproval. “What’s my itinerary?” I walked away from him and headed to the table where my laptop was.

He jumped back to life as he pulled out his tablet from his cross bag. “Yes, um ... so first, you’re supposed to meet with them for breakfast at ten. After that, the tour of the company is scheduled before the meeting, which would be at one p.m.”

“Are the first two absolutely necessary?” I asked, closing my laptop and standing up as I grabbed my watch.

“Well, yes, sir. If we’re looking to build trust with our associates, then it will be best to attend the breakfast and tour.”

“What’s your name again?”

“Anderson, sir.”

“Anderson, you and I are not going to get along well. Wipe that smile off your face.”

His smile dropped, and I walked past him and out of the room.

He hurried behind me, struggling with his bag and tab. “Can I ask why you think so, sir?”

“Because we do not build trust by clinking glasses over a plate of steak. We build trust by increasing sales and adding effective resources to the partnering company.”

“Well, I thought—”

“Well, you thought wrong. The only thing you’ve done is put me in a position where I have to sit at a table with self-opinionated old men who are more interested in how to fatten their pockets than they are in the development of the company.”

“Well, perhaps you could just act like you actually enjoy their company.”

I stopped abruptly, and he stumbled, trying not to bump into me. “I am a businessperson, not an actor. If we attend breakfast with them, I can assure you, I will only end up gaining rivals. It might be good for sport, but it’s too early for that.”

“So, what should I do then?” he asked.

I groaned. “I might as well assist myself, Anderson. Call in and tell them that due to a traffic jam, I will not be able to join them for breakfast. However, I will be there for the tour.”

“Yes, sir, so where are we going now?”

“I need to do a quick survey of the environment and see if I can get to know more about the firm from their neighbors.”

Anderson tapped the elevator button, and we watched as the doors slid open before stepping in.

“I think we’re going to get along quite well, Mr. Steele,” the CEO said.

I turned to him in surprise; he stood upright, a devoted smile on his lips. A small smile crept onto my lips as I turned back. “I guess we’ll see,” I responded.

“That was an amazing pitch. I really look forward to doing business with you,” he added.

I smiled at the CEO as he spoke; he stood to his full height and stretched out his hand.

I studied him as I got up. He seemed only a few years older than me, which explained why he was in full support of my proposal and excited to jumpstart immediately.

The rest of the shareholders were much older men and women, and they were displeased because I had cut off every avenue they could use to profit from the project.

“I look forward to it as well,” I said as we shook hands. Then I turned to Anderson, who was standing next to me. “It’s time to go.”

He nodded and followed me as we stepped out of the office. “That was amazing, sir. Those guys were doing everything they could to trap you, and you were like a corporate 007, dodging their bullets and your comebacks. I feel really inspired to work with you, sir.”

“Did you say I was a *corporate 007*?”

“Yes, you know, like James Bond, but ...” he trailed off as I raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps I should’ve used a more professional term.”

I chuckled. “I actually like the term.”

His face lit up again.

I inhaled deeply as I turned to him and grabbed his shoulders. “You’re a brilliant young man, Anderson. I must admit I underestimated you.”

He smiled brightly as he nodded. “Thank you so much, sir. That means a lot coming from you.”

I nodded. “Now get lost. I’ve got other business to deal with.”

He nodded, and I headed for the exit where my car was waiting. I pulled out my phone as I got into the car and scrolled through my contact list. I found the number I was looking for and called it.

The line clicked on the fourth ring. “Took you long enough,” I said.

“What do you want from me?” the familiar sound of my sister’s voice slurred into my ear.

I smiled. “Well, that’s a really nice way to greet your big brother.”

“If you don’t state your business in the next three minutes, I’m ending this call.”

I chuckled at her play at meanness. I knew she was happy I had called. “I’m in New York.”

There was a long pause. “You better not be playing with me right now.”

“I arrived last night and had some business to clear up this morning.”

“And you’re just telling me this now?”

“What part of ‘I had business to address’ don’t you understand, Sam?”

“It is Samantha for you, stranger.”

I laughed. “Still a drama queen as always, I see. All right, *Samantha*. Where are you?”

Chapter Seven

CONFUSION PREVAILS

Olivia Sanders

It was midday, and the sky was clear, bright blue, with golden hues of sunlight washing through it like a painting. I sat on Sam's balcony, holding a mug of coffee, observing a bird perched on a telephone wire.

It was a picture-perfect day, the kind where you could simply sit, let the atmosphere envelop you, and enjoy your tea as it eased your muscles, leaving a smile on your face.

However, in my case, I was far from at ease, and my lips were contorted into a thin line. It's hard to appreciate beautiful moments when you constantly feel like a fugitive on the run.

I had gotten the closure I needed with Greg, but he was an impulsive creature, and this also made him unpredictable. I was scared that if I relaxed too much, he would come after me.

I didn't know exactly what would happen if he did. It wasn't as though he had any right to bundle me and take me back to his mansion; I was a lot freer than I felt.

But then again, he was an impulsive creature. Besides, I was never really one to stand my ground around strong, influential men whom I thought I had once loved.

Plus, there was the fact that I had to stay under the radar and out of public sight. He had borne the brunt of the incident for the most part, but all of a sudden, before midnight that same day, the tables began to turn.

It started with a couple of random Twitter girls sharing their thoughts on the incident, and I can tell you, I hadn't impressed them.

I didn't exactly mind; I didn't know them, and apparently, the rest of the world didn't either. I knew this because way into midnight, the comments and likes on the videos were still bearable. I should've expected what happened next.

By morning, the Hathaways bought into the idea, and suddenly, I was all over the Internet. Somehow, people had completely ignored the fact that there was a bride who walked away from *the* Gregory Hathaway, and I liked it that way. But all it took were a couple of high-end influencers to paint me scarlet red with a topping of shit brown, and my name was on the tip of everyone's tongues.

This included radio and TV shows.

Of course, they found my social media accounts. My followers dropped like someone poked a hole into a ziplock plastic bag filled with water, but ironically, my DMs spiked. And they were not pretty.

Sam tried to keep me from going absolutely batshit crazy, explaining that the Hathaways were behind it, and the evidence was clear. I bought into the idea as a desperate attempt to console myself.

But both of us knew the truth.

The Hathaways hadn't bought the opinions of every single person in my DMs and people's comment sections. Just the opinions of the people popular enough to influence them.

The rest were completely free and very vulgar.

It's not like I hadn't expected this when I walked out of the church, leaving one of the influential men in New York City standing stupidly at the altar. But the reality of it all was still very shocking.

I raised my cup to my lips again, but the hot, dark liquid didn't meet my lips even after I pushed my head backward and led it all the way.

I brought the cup down and peered into the empty ceramic. I groaned before pushing my feet to the ground and getting off the chair.

Samantha had left the house in the afternoon of the day before to meet her brother, who had just come into town for business. I waited for her all evening, and when she didn't return by midnight, I called her.

"Hey!" There was blaring music in her background, and she was screaming.

"Are you at a club right now?"

"Yeah, I'm here with my brother."

I raised my eyebrow even though I knew she couldn't see me. "Your big brother took you to a club?"

"Yeah, well, we visited my aunt's, and she got him pretty riled up, so we came here to blow off some steam."

"I'm guessing you're not coming back home tonight?"

"Why not? It's still—oh shit, is that the time?" There was a brief silence before we spoke. "His hotel is close by, so we're probably going to knock off there."

My eyes narrowed. "Just to be clear, this is your *brother*, right?"

"You better fling those slutty thoughts with that ring on your finger. You'll meet him tomorrow. He's really sweet."

"Yeah, I bet he is."

"See you tomorrow, Oly. Lock the doors."

"Yes, Mom." The line clicked, and the call ended.

I pulled the phone away from my ear and looked down at my fingers, where the silver band still choked my ring finger. You'd think someone you've dated for three years would know your ring size.

Samantha was right—why the hell did I still have it on? I pulled it out with a bit of effort and slammed it on the kitchen island.

As I placed my mug under the coffee pot and topped off my coffee, my eyes caught the glint at the edge of the silver band, which was back on my finger. I fucking hated how much I was actually involved with Greg. I was over it, or at least I thought so. But some memories still lingered, and some things were hard to part ways with. And if you look on the bright side of it, that ring could buy me a new life in some distant country far away.

And no, I'm not exaggerating. It's an expensive ring.

I took another sip of coffee as I walked out of the kitchen. Earlier, I had stepped onto the porch because the house was becoming suffocating, with my thoughts and paranoia putting me in a chokehold. However, after getting some fresh air, I felt better.

Entering the sitting room, I dropped my mug on the coffee table before picking up my laptop from where I'd left it earlier, checking to see if I'd received any email.

My eyes skimmed through the hate messages and other relevant emails as I searched for a specific name. Yes, people went as far as finding my email to make sure they got my attention, and I wouldn't say they didn't.

The person I was searching for was my agent. He hadn't reached out since that day, and I was tired of calling his office. There wasn't anything they could do, and they also hadn't heard from him. It wasn't part of their job to run another set of papers for me. Except I was going to pay for it. And fuck if I was going to fall into their tricks twice.

But I couldn't even settle for the fact that it was a scam because I met someone at the airport. No matter how much I

tried to convince myself that he was deliberately annoying as part of the scam, I'd slapped him, and he had walked away. There wasn't enough statistical information on God's green earth that could've predicted the situation going like that.

But then again, what sort of man walks away after being slapped by a woman he'd never met before at an airport? And it was a pretty mean slap; even I was as shocked as everyone who turned to look at us.

I let out a frustrated howl and slammed my laptop. I had thought about everything over and over again, and no matter how much I tried to tweak my paranoid thoughts, I couldn't shake off the feeling that I'd screwed myself over.

I grabbed the TV remote and tapped the power button. The blank screen came to life, and I saw a familiar picture pop up on the screen. In the picture, I was smiling like a clown with my head buried in the crook of Greg's neck, while he displayed a more presentable smile on his face.

It was as though he'd been trained to look perfect for any picture. The picture faded away to reveal two women sitting on plush multi-colored sofas in their brightly colored studio.

One had a look of amusement as though she could see me through the screen. The other had a nasty scowl; she opened her mouth to speak, and I turned the TV right back off.

I wondered how long it was going to take until they were tired and the news of my takeoff died down. It wasn't like I was the first bride to walk away from her wedding. I'd actually gotten the inspiration from a trending video online, although, at that time, it was only a mere afterthought.

However, I knew my eloping was the least reason for my crucifixion. Those I paid attention to hardly gave a fuck about that. Their major concern was that I, someone from a backwater city in the forgotten parts of New York, was handed a new life on a platter of gold and chose to walk away. If only they understood the true cost of that life and how liberating it was to be a nobody compared to being a fucking puppet.

Maybe then they would understand that I took a really bold step walking out of that church.

I had considered it several times, setting my phone where the light hit right and getting behind it so I could rant and share my side of the story. However, that was hardly the kind of girl I was.

Not because I was shy, but because I wasn't fucking stupid.

I wasn't going to give Greg the satisfaction he wanted—to let him know that he'd gotten to me and give him a false sense of victory over a war that didn't exist. My major problem was getting out of the fucking city.

Lord knows what could happen if I ever crossed paths with my agent again.

Just then, I heard the click of locks and the opening and shutting of the door. I waited until the shuffling of feet reached the sitting room before placing my mug down again.

I was already expecting an extra person, so I wasn't surprised when I turned on my seat and met a tall figure standing behind the much shorter Sam. Then I found his face.

I could spot that blond hair and those bright green eyes in the thickest of crowds. It was my agent. I sprung to my feet, eyes glaring wildly and teeth almost baring.

It took him a while to piece the puzzle that was my face together. I waited for him to, and when his face lit up with recognition, I was certain it was him.

In that instant, I completely disregarded the fact that he had just walked in with the owner of the house, that he was Sam's "brother who'd just come into town." It wasn't the first time she had tried to hide her talking stages from me.

But right now, that was the least important shit on my mind. I allowed all the hate and anger that I had been suppressing to fester inside me before finally opening my mouth to speak.

"You motherfuck—"

Chapter Eight

MORE CONFUSION

Alexander Steele

I glanced at my watch for the fifth time, feeling the hot afternoon sun wash over me, with sweat gliding down the side of my face. I whipped a handkerchief quickly from the pocket of my jeans and dabbed it on my face.

The brown plaid sweater I was wearing made matters even worse. I looked into the main building of the restaurant Sam had chosen for us to meet up. Inside, people were eating, chatting, and laughing, seemingly unbothered by the heat that surrounded those of us who had opted to stay outside.

It was not as if I willingly chose to subject myself to this discomfort. I would have preferred to be indoors as well. On a normal day, I would not even find myself at a restaurant offering the option to dine on the patio.

However, it had been Sam's preference since we were little kids, and considering I had not seen her in almost two years, I thought it would be good to play the role of the sweet big brother. Still, I was not sure it was going to last.

“What the hell are you doing sitting in this heat?” her voice came from behind me, and I turned sharply. She was much more prepared for the weather than I was.

Her slim frame was covered with a bright purple floral gown, her hair tied into a neat bun, and she wore remarkably few accessories. I got up and hugged her. She was shocked at my gesture at first, but eventually, she hugged me back.

I had to admit, I missed her.

“I was waiting for you. I thought you liked sitting outside,” I said as we pulled away from the hug.

“Yeah, maybe when I was sixteen and lived in a less hot city,” she deadpanned.

My face dropped. “So, you’re telling me that I’ve been sitting under this scorching sun in a sweater for nothing?”

She remained silent for a moment before bursting into a fit of laughter. “Oh my gosh, the one time you try to be a sweet person and it backfires on you? Aww, poor child.” She pouted as she rubbed the back of my head.

I snapped her hand away. “What was I expecting, trying to be nice to the devil incarnate.” “Aw, come on, you know you love me. Now, let’s go inside before you melt into a pulp.”

She began walking into the restaurant, and I followed her. The smell of pastries and freshly roasted meat invited us in as soon as we walked through the doors, the cold air-conditioned air serving as a balm to my burning skin.

“Now, doesn’t that feel better?” A mischievous smile crept on her lips as we settled into a booth. “Yeah, gloat all you like. I am never doing anything remotely nice for you again,” I said, snatching the menu from the table.

“Is that sulking I hear? Oh, how the mighty have fallen.” Amusement trailed her voice, and I knew she was having a fun time at my expense.

“You’ve grown taller since I last saw you, bulkier too.”

“Yes, yes, I am now a very handsome-looking young man. Wish I could say the same thing for you.”

She scoffed. “We both know I’ve always been the better-looking one between us.”

“I would appreciate the use of past tense in that statement. What’s good here?”

She eyed me before motioning to a server. She came quickly, a smile plastered on her face as she crossed her hands in front of her. “Welcome. What would you be having?”

“I’d like two specials, please. One with less spice,” she said.

The server nodded and turned to leave.

“So, how’s New York been treating you so far?” Sam asked, turning back to me.

“It’s been manageable. I mean, if you don’t consider a total stranger assaulting me at the airport.”

“What? Why?” she flared.

I shrugged. “I believe she got me confused with someone else.”

Her eyes narrowed. “*She?* And you have no idea who this woman is?” She looked ready to tear a hole in the said woman’s chest.

I chuckled in an attempt to ease the tension. “It’s nothing to worry about. There was a slight misunderstanding, but that’s over with.”

“That’s such bullshit. She was lucky I wasn’t with you. Why didn’t you ask me to come get you anyway?”

“I already had someone for that. I wanted to finish up with work first before contacting you.”

Her eyes dimmed at this, and she leaned away from the table. “Good to know your priorities haven’t changed.”

I sighed. “Look, that is not what I meant. I just wanted to get everything out of the way first so I’d have this time to spend with you.”

“That’s bullshit, Lex. I am your sister. I don’t expect you to cancel your plans, but at least I should know when my brother

is coming to my damn city. I'm sure you had this trip planned for over a month and I'm only finding out a day after you arrived."

My phone began to ring on the table, and I was thankful for the great timing. However, my happiness dropped when I saw the caller ID. "It's Mom."

"What? No, don't pick up!" she was whispering as if I had already picked up the call.

I raised an eyebrow. "Why should I not?"

"I'm not ready for any discussion around marriage this afternoon."

The corner of my lips quirked up at this. It pleased me to know that I was not the only one under my mother's radar. I picked up the call and placed it on the loudspeaker before dropping it on the table between us.

"Hello, Mother," I said in a singsong voice, ignoring the glare Sam was shooting at me.

"You seem particularly happy today."

"Well, you wouldn't guess who I'm with right now."

The glare grew into sign language, which I presumed to be death threats but generously ignored.

"Is your aunt Maggie there with you?"

"Oh, even better, I'm seated at this lovely restaurant with your second child, who I must remind you is just as single as your first." My face lit up as Sam gave up in her attempts to stop me.

"Samantha? Is she there with you?" Mom asked.

I looked up at Sam, who was now just trying to wish death upon me with her eyes. I smiled as I nodded at the phone.

"Hi, Mom! Good to hear from you again," Sam greeted.

"Have you been ignoring my calls, Samantha?"

"No, I haven't. These last few days have just been really busy for me, especially with my friend's wed—um, event."

“Well, busy or not, I’m glad the both of you are together. That means you should both be able to visit your aunt Margaret later in the day.”

“Mom, I—”

“I am not listening, Samantha. It’s just a harmless visit. Your aunt is not happy that you have not gone to visit once since you moved to New York. You are going with your brother,” she said, her tone firm.

It did not bother me; I had accepted the situation long before I got to New York. Sam, on the other hand, was not comfortable with it.

Our food came soon after, and we ate while catching up on each other. A lot had changed in two years, but I was happy that she had stayed out of trouble—at least for the most part.

“You got a tattoo!” I screamed, my eyes still on the road as I maneuvered through the speeding cars.

It was officially my third day in New York, but I knew Sam would not have it if I told her I had to return to work, so I decided to just go along with the plan.

After lunch the day before, we had agreed it was best to visit our aunt immediately to avoid having to stay overnight, given that it was already evening by the time we were done.

We got into Sam’s red sedan and reached Aunt Margaret’s house on time. The visit was not as uneventful as I expected; I would have ignored our aunt habitually if I were the center of attention.

After listening to her attack Samantha for the first thirty minutes of our stay, I excused us both and promised to come back again before I left New York—alone. Aunt Margaret was not happy about this, but fuck did I care.

After that, I took Sam to my hotel. We changed and headed out to a club to ease the mood. The next morning, we drove back to her home, and she insisted that I meet her friend.

“It was an impulsive decision, but I don’t fully regret it. It’s a really nice tat,” Sam said.

“I can’t believe you right now,” I replied.

“Oh, pull up in front of that white house with the picket fence,” she instructed.

I obeyed her and studied the house as we got down. It was a nice, cozy-looking place with freshly painted walls.

We made our way inside, and I followed her to the sitting room. I saw a head from behind the couch; it turned, and the lady smiled at us—a pretty smile.

The smile faded immediately. Her eyes met mine, and she sprung to her feet. I tilted my head to the side as my eyes narrowed. There was no way.

She opened her mouth and started spewing the most vulgar insults I had ever heard my way, and that was when I became certain that it was her. What were the odds that I would meet the same woman who had slapped me at the airport only two days ago in my sister’s house?

I was torn between anger, hatred, and confusion. Samantha had successfully calmed her down and was now trying to clarify that I was not her agent.

What agent? I did not take time to process it. I turned quickly and walked out of the house.

“Lex! Lex!” Samantha called out as she ran after me, grabbing me before I could get into the car. “Look, there is no way I’m going back into that house with that woman in there,” I spat angrily.

“Oh, come on, she’s my best friend, and you’re my brother. There’s obviously been some sort of misunderstanding here, and being the only one who has heard both sides of the story, it’s my job to clear it up. So, how about you come back inside, and we’ll do just that?”

I stared at her for a moment.

“Please, Lex, I’m your sister. Are you really not going to come into my house?”

“Fine, let’s get this done with,” I grumbled before following her inside.

Sam sat me on the sofa opposite where the lady sat with her arms folded. “Now, I need to go inside and change. Try not to rip each other’s heads off while I do that, okay?” She waited for a response, and when there was none from either of us, she rolled her eyes and stepped inside. The silence lingered a little longer, and I soon grew tired of it.

I leaned closer in my seat. “Look, I’m sorry about what happened the other day. I shouldn’t have grabbed you—”

“You don’t get to talk to me until Sam comes here and makes sense of all this.”

I scowled. “I’m trying to make amends here.”

“As you should, but I need to understand the situation first.”

I reeled back on my chair, visibly disgusted. “*As I should?* You are the one who hit me.”

“I thought you were trying to make amends a second ago? Look, you obviously have a huge problem with your ego, and honestly, I’ve had enough of men who can never see their wrongs and truly accept them.”

“I still don’t see what wrongs you’re talking about, and you know that’s big talk coming from a woman who thinks it’s right to just go around hitting men.”

“I don’t—you know what? I’m done.” She tossed her throw pillow aside and walked out of the sitting room.

I sat there, completely dumbfounded.

Chapter Nine

IDENTITY REVEALED

Olivia Sanders

Sam caught up with me before I could make it to my room. She rushed over and grabbed me, her fingers sitting firmly on my shoulders as she held me in place.

I was still boiling with rage. I couldn't understand why I was so angry at the man who sat in the living room. Sam had made it clear that there was a misunderstanding, and I had calmed down and was ready to listen.

But each time he spoke, I became angry again. I was oddly reminded of Greg, and I instinctively fought back. Perhaps I was scared of reverting to the shy little girl who was almost married off to a man she didn't even love.

Either way, the man had an ego that pissed me right off.

"Hey, hey, what's happening in there? I walked away for a second."

I sighed deeply as I turned to her, trying to calm my nerves. "Tell me, Sam, how do you really know that man?"

She heaved a sigh as she let go of my shoulders. “Look, I know what you’re thinking, but I can assure you. Lex is my brother, and yes, he’s the same man you met at the airport.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So what’s the correlation? Why was he acting like he was there to see me?”

“Because coincidentally, you both were waiting for people you’d never met before and had no idea what they looked like. He thought you were an assistant assigned to him to help him plan his movements for a business meeting he came for.”

I tilted my head to one side as I tried to process what she’d just said to me. “So he thought I was someone who worked for him?”

She nodded.

I replayed as much of the airport scenario as I could remember in my head. It all began to make sense, and I realized how much of a bitch I had been. I was going to blame it on my paranoia and the fact that I was in a tight spot, but there was no point to that. The only reasonable thing to do was apologize.

“Shit.” I turned around and headed for the sitting room, Samantha following closely behind me.

“Why were you guys arguing just now?” Samantha asked.

“He tried to apologize, and I went full-blown Karen on him. I’m such an asshole,” I explained.

“Hey, don’t pressure yourself too much. These past two days have been really hard on you. You’re handling it better than even I would. It’s understandable that you’re irritable right now.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know all of that, does he? You’re only talking like this because you’ve been with me and you understand.”

“Don’t worry, he’s my brother. I’ll talk to him.”

I sighed before stopping abruptly.

She reached the stairs before realizing that I wasn't next to her. Turning back, she let out a sigh and asked, "What is it, Olivia?"

"I just ..." I trailed off, closing my eyes as I steadied my voice. "I feel like everything that's unfolded these past two days is changing me. I mean, the man I loved just set the whole city against me, knowing fully well how defenseless I am. And now, I feel like everyone's out to get me. I've become overly defensive and a fucking prude. I swear, as I spoke to your brother just now, all I could think of was Greg."

Sam paused for a moment, and I waited for her response, anticipating either a critique for choosing a path I couldn't stick to or offense at my indirect characterization of her brother as an asshole.

Instead, she smiled. "Trust me when I say this—any woman in your shoes would not be as quick to admit all that the way you did." She walked to me and placed her hands on my shoulders again, rubbing slowly.

"And that is why I love and respect you because you're an honest woman who sees things for what they are, which is why I'm confident that, with time, all of this will pass. You just have to be a little patient. I'm here for you." She pulled me into a hug.

I hugged her back quickly as I fought back a tear. We stayed like that for a moment before pulling away from each other.

"Now, let's get this misunderstanding settled once and for all. It's lasted too long already," Sam said.

"All right." I followed her down the stairs and into the sitting room. It was empty.

"Lex!" Sam called, but there was no answer.

I turned to her. "Do you think he's in the bathroom?"

"Nope, he's gone," she said casually before grabbing the grocery bags she'd come in with and walking into the kitchen. "Don't worry, he'll be fine. I'll talk to him."

"No, actually, I'd like to be the one to apologize."

She popped her head through the kitchen door, and I watched as her odd stare slowly turned into a teasing smile. “You think my brother’s fine, don’t you?” She wiggled her eyebrows.

My face contorted into a mix of shock and disbelief. “What are you even—you know what, I’m not even going to entertain you this afternoon.” I raised my hands in surrender and walked back up the stairs.

“Admit it, you’ve got a crush on my brother! You slutty little thing,” she called out, laughing heartily.

I chuckled as I walked up the stairs. To be fair, he was a very fine man.

I walked into my bedroom and grabbed my phone. If Sam’s brother wasn’t my agent, then what the hell happened with my actual agent? He’d made no attempts to reach out to me, and his coworkers didn’t know his whereabouts either.

What if it was all one big scheme? Every time I called the company, the woman sounded way too relaxed. Wasn’t she supposed to be worried that a coworker had gone MIA all of a sudden. I was at my wits end. Max wouldn’t like that I was contacting his company but there was no way to go about this. She offered his number instead.

They were a licensed company but Max was running an illegal business on the side. I scrolled through my contact list, searching for their number. I decided against it. She was just going to tell me the same thing she’d been telling me for the past two days.

I rang the line she’d given to me instead. According to her, it was my agent’s private line. He didn’t pick. I tried the line again and again.

Finally, the line clicked. “Hello.” It was a woman’s voice, calm, but I could sense the frustration in it.

“Um, hi. I was hoping to speak with the owner of the phone.”

“Max isn’t here,” she said simply.

I paused for a moment, expecting her to give me more information. When she didn't, I spoke, "Well, where is he?"

"In the hospital. He got into an accident two days ago on the way to the airport. It's pretty serious."

I bit back a gasp and cursed under my breath. "If you're with his phone, then you'd have the other things he was with on that day, too, right?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

I bit my lower lip. It was an insensitive thing to ask, but I really needed to know. "Do you happen to be with a package, specifically some documents?"

"According to eyewitnesses, he was holding a package, but the papers went flying when he got hit."

I'd presumed he'd been in a car when the accident happened, but he'd been hit directly. My documents were lost for good. "I'm so sorry about what happened to your ... um ..."

"Brother."

"Oh, okay, I hope he gets better soon, and thank you for telling me this, really."

"Sure. Now, please stop calling. I'm really busy."

"Yes, I got that." The line went flat. I flung my phone to the bed and rubbed my temples as I sighed deeply.

What was I going to do now? I was stuck in a city where I couldn't even move freely because I'd become an unwanted sensation and in the worst way possible.

"You look stressed out." I turned sharply to find Sam standing at my doorway with a plate of cream buns in her hand. I sighed as I relaxed my shoulders and walked closer to her. I picked up a bun.

"Just got off a call with my actual agent," I mentioned while bringing the snack to my mouth. I took a bite, making sure not to let the filling spill as the sweetness burst into my mouth.

“Wait, he finally answered?” She dropped the plate on my dresser.

I shook my head. She waited for me to finish with the bite I took before speaking. “*She* answered.”

“She?”

“His sister. Apparently, he got hit by a vehicle on his way to meet me.”

She hissed, her eyes scrunching as if she were experiencing physical pain. “That’s dark.”

I nodded, taking another bite.

“What about your documents? His things should be with someone.”

“Apparently, they got lost during the accident.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me. And the company, what are they saying?”

“I didn’t call. I doubt they’d be of any help. From what I understand, each agent works independently. Losses aren’t the company’s liability.”

“Well, there’s no way you’re asking a hospitalized man for your money back, and someone’s got to do something,” she flared.

I looked up at her. “Honestly, Sam, I’m just really tired at this point. I’m happy I was able to reach him at least. Now, I can stop feeling stupid for getting scammed.”

She nodded in understanding, picking a bun and handing it to me. “Cream bun?”

I smiled as I took it from her. “Can you give me your brother’s number? I need to get that out of the way as quickly as possible.”

She smiled. “Sure, I can give you my brother’s number.” She retrieved her phone from her back pocket.

I rolled my eyes while taking a bite of the bun and turned around to pick up my phone. She shared the number, and I

proceeded to dial it.

“You’re calling him already?” Sam asked.

I nodded.

“I’ll give you both some privacy then.” She smiled as she began closing the door.

“Take the buns with you. I did a lot of work to fit into that ridiculously tight wedding gown. I’m not letting it go to waste.”

She laughed, grabbing the plate and closing the door.

“Hello?” The voice made me jump. I didn’t realize when he answered.

“Oh, hi, it’s Olivia, Sam’s friend.” The line was silent. “I wanted to apologize for how I behaved this morning, but by the time I came back, you were already gone.”

“Okay then.”

“No, wait! Look, I know we got off on the wrong foot, and it’s totally my fault. I want to make up for it. Perhaps we could meet up?” What the hell was I asking all of a sudden? This was supposed to be a simple apology.

“There’s no need for that.” His voice was firm.

“Please, I insist.” There was a long pause, and I had to check if he ended the call on me. He hadn’t.

“When and where should we meet then?” His voice was easier. I felt warmth spread in my chest.

“If you’re free after today, I’ll send you the address.”

“All right, I am. Free, that is.”

“Great, I’ll send it now.”

He hummed his response, and I ended the call. A smile crept across my face as I lowered the phone from my ear and tapped the message icon under his number.

I caught a glimpse of the ring on my finger and paused. I took a deep breath before dropping my phone and stretching my arm so I could take a good look at the ring. It was a pretty

ring. I could still remember the mixed emotions that coursed through my veins when Greg slipped it on my finger.

I'd known, from that very moment, that I'd made a mistake. Everything seemed a bit rushed, and I was still skeptical about his feelings for me, but I accepted it. I thought I'd get over it eventually.

I pulled the ring off my finger, making a mental note to visit a pawnshop on my way to meet Sam's brother. I slipped the ring into my purse and picked up my phone again.

Well, I guess I did eventually get over it.

Chapter Ten

BEGINNING OF RELATIONSHIP

Alexander Steele

After walking out of Sam's house that afternoon, I couldn't concentrate. At first, I thought it was because of the anger churning in my chest, so I found the nearest to numb my emotions with a drink.

I was already in my third mug of beer when I realized that I'd been looking at the TV screen, trying to watch the match that was playing, but I still couldn't focus. I was no longer angry, but I couldn't stop thinking about the woman from Sam's house.

I've always been good at reading people. It's why it was easy for me to take over my dad's company after his passing and grow it to its current state. At first, people didn't believe in me, and who could blame them?

After I finished my master's, I opted not to attend business school, instead pursuing my dream of becoming a singer. I started a little band, gained significant popularity, and, for the longest time, that's how people knew me—Lexanda from LynchStreet. So it was crazy to think that someone like that

would be able to handle a multi-million-dollar company, but my dad had entrusted it to me, and there was no changing that.

But aside from my degree in business administration and my charming good looks, what really allowed me to grow as a businessperson was my ability to see beyond the mask.

Everyone wears a mask; seldom do people reveal their true thoughts.

However, the lady was different. She didn't have a mask, but she was trying to wear one, failing miserably. People like her are those who have gone through the deepest depths of pain and still survived.

So even though I was pissed off at her little outburst at Sam's place, I could sense that she was simply struggling to wear a mask she'd forged last minute. Because she felt that was the only way to protect herself from the pain again.

I didn't know shit about her. Heck, I didn't even know her name. But the reason I couldn't concentrate was because I felt bad for leaving her alone there even after this.

I felt a sudden urge to go back to Sam's house and pull the lady into a hug, reassuring her that she was safe and didn't need to wear a mask. There are only very few people on this earth who don't wear masks, and she was one of them.

And we need to protect one another.

I shook my head as I brought the mug to my lips and took a generous gulp. What the fuck was I even thinking? It was probably the beer making me think such stupid things.

She had slapped me, insulted me, and made it uncomfortable for me to be in my own sister's house, and now I was here having a fucking monologue. The last thing I needed was to ever see her again.

And if I did, it wouldn't be to hug her.

I took one last angry swig before pulling out some money from my wallet and slamming it on the table. I picked up my phone to book an Uber when it suddenly began to ring.

It was an unknown number. I answered the call and brought it to my ears.

“Ridiculously tight wedding dress. I’m not letting it go to waste.” I was shocked at how I had already become familiar with the voice. I heard Sam laugh in the background, and I was certain who it was.

I contemplated ending the call and blocking the number. Whatever she had to say, I didn’t want to hear. But I didn’t do that. I couldn’t. I sighed in surrender as I brought the phone back to my ear.

“Hello?”

The aroma of coffee seeds, scones, and old books filled the air as I walked into the bookshop. I thought it was weird that she had chosen such a place for our meeting spot. Usually, people would choose a restaurant or a place with a larger crowd.

Apart from the barista who looked up at me as the bells above the door chimed and offered me a smile, there were only three other people in the entire shop. And it wasn’t even a very big space.

But I wasn’t complaining. I liked the ambiance. The major lighting of the room was dim, and the theme of the shop was brown—khaki-colored walls, white tiled floors, beige round tables, coffee brown leather seats, and mahogany shelves.

On each table was a slim reading lamp, which made sense because the golden-brown fluorescent light was way too low for anyone to read comfortably. I made my way to a table at the far end of the room, as per Olivia’s request. I wondered if she was deliberately trying to seem mysterious.

“You must be new around here?” A light voice called out as soon as I’d gotten comfortable on my chair. I looked up to find the barista now standing beside me, a ginger smile brightening her small, round face.

“Oh yes, I just came into town for a quick business trip.”

She nodded. “I thought so. You don’t look like the type who drinks coffee or reads books,” she said lightly.

I smiled as I squinted my eyes in thought, then I looked back at her. “So tell me, what type do I look like?”

She shrugged. “The kind who drinks whiskey and obsesses over contracts.”

I chuckled. “Well, *obsessed* is a strong word, but you have a keen eye, I’ll give you that.”

She chuckled. “So, are you waiting for someone, or do you just want to explore a new identity?”

“Unfortunately, I’m too boring for the second option.”

She smiled softly. “No one’s too boring to explore themselves. You just haven’t tried yet.”

I wondered how she would feel if she found out I used to get on stage in front of a crowd of screaming people and sing at the top of my lungs. I was glad I was only popular in my niche.

“So what can I get you while you’re waiting?” She lifted her pen and notepad.

“Oh, I’ll just have a coffee. Black, no cream. And a slice of gingerbread.”

She nodded as she scribbled on her pad. “One cup of cappuccino and a slice of gingerbread coming right up.” the barista winked at me, and I couldn’t help but smile at her wittiness as she walked away.

The bells chimed again, and my eyes shot straight to the door. For a second, I could’ve sworn the Grim Reaper had walked into the store, scanned it, and decided I was the one going to die that day.

Olivia wore a pair of black jeans under a black jacket, her face concealed by black sunglasses and a black cap, with equally dark hair running down the sides of her face. Making a beeline for my table, she sat down.

She took off her glasses and looked at me with those beautiful blue eyes. “Russian spy or freelance assassin, I can assure you I don’t have the information you need.”

She rolled her eyes. “Haha, a tremendous sense of humor.” She looked around as if she really was scared of being caught. The barista walked back to our table and placed the coffee and bread.

“Thank you,” I said.

The barista nodded and turned to Olivia, blinking rapidly. “Um ... what would you like to have?”

“Nothing, really. I won’t be here long,” Olivia said.

The barista nodded and was about to leave when I placed a hand on her elbow, saying, “Actually, I think she’d love this gingerbread as well.” I ignored the look Olivia was giving me, and the lady nodded again before walking away.

“I see you’ve made yourself quite comfy here,” Olivia commented.

“What can I say? The barista is really sweet,” I replied.

She chuckled, her smile brightening her face. There was an awkward silence, and then she leaned forward. “Look, I just want to say that—”

“Hey, we were both confused that day, and that’s why we acted the way we did. Let’s just put all that behind us and just restart, like that day never happened. I’m Alexander, Alexander Steele.” I stretched out my hands.

She took it and smiled. “Olivia Sanders.”

The barista returned and placed Olivia’s order on the table. Olivia picked the bread up first and took a generous bite. “Mmm, this is really good.”

“It is?” I chuckled.

She nodded at my plate. “You should try it.”

I leaned in closer to the table and took a bite. It tasted like heaven with a spicy tang. “So Olivia, mind sharing what happened with your fiancé?”

She nearly choked on her bread, and I could tell my question caught her off guard.

She took a sip of her coffee. “What? How did you know I was engaged?” Her eyes went wide with fear as she asked, and I knew she was seconds away from masking again.

“Well, yesterday you were wearing a really pretty ring on your finger, and now it’s no longer there. You don’t exactly fit the ‘going home to meet my husband’ description. You told me you were done with my kind of men, and just now, you used past tense.”

She tilted her head to the side as she studied me. I watched as she relaxed slowly. “Are you some kind of detective?”

I smiled. “Well, I do a lot of detecting at my firm, but no, I don’t work with law enforcement.”

She grabbed a tissue and dusted her mouth. “Well, maybe you should.”

Just then, a girl walked up to us, beaming as she looked at me with her phone in her hand. I could recognize that look anywhere. My cover had been blown.

“I’m sorry to disturb you guys, but did you used to sing in a band called LynchStreet?” Excitement trailed her tiny voice. Olivia turned to me, her expectant eyes waiting for my answer.

I sighed. “Well, yes, I did—”

“Oh my gosh, Lexanda! I knew it was you. I can’t believe it. I’m literally your biggest fan. I cried when you announced that you were leaving, and honestly, the band hasn’t been the same without you.”

I smiled at her. She wasn’t the first person to tell me that in the exact same sequence. It’s like they were all programmed.

“Can I get a picture?” she asked.

“Sure, why not?” It was Olivia who spoke. I turned to her, shocked, as she stretched her hand out to the kid. “Here, I’ll help you.”

“Thank you so much. I really ...” the girl trailed off as she turned to Olivia, and I sensed her mood change.

Olivia seemed to understand what had gone wrong as she retracted her hand quickly and snatched her glasses from the table.

“Wait a minute ... you’re that gold digger who left her husband at the altar.” The girl scoffed before turning to me again. She looked like a totally different person as her gaze darkened. The mask was off.

The girl turned back to Olivia, who was now trying to conceal her face. “Is this why you left Gregory Hathaway? So you could run off with some underwater, forgotten wannabe artiste?”

I wasn’t offended by this. I was still focused on Olivia.

I wanted to help her, but I didn’t want to escalate things. A few other people had entered the shop, and I was glad they hadn’t noticed the girl’s little charade. “Oh, this is going to blow the Internet to space.” She lifted her phone.

Without a second thought, I grabbed what was left of my bread and flung it at her hand. She jumped, and her phone fell to the ground. “You fucking asshole! You’re so going to get me a new phone.” She was shouting now, and everyone stopped to look at us.

Olivia got up, and before I could stop her, she was sprinting past the entrance door. I got up quickly and grabbed my phone. I felt the girl’s hands on my arm. “Hey! Where do you think you’re going?”

I turned to the girl, my glare boring straight into her eyes and making her shrink. “Get your hands off me!”

She snatched her hands away from me, and I ran outside. The street was filled with passersby. I looked left and right in search of her black jacket and long hair, but I didn’t find her.

Then, I heard a faint sob in the distance. I followed it quickly and turned into a curb to find her leaning against the wall and crying. She looked up at me and tried to run away again.

I caught her quickly and pulled her into my arms, half expecting her to fight me. She didn't. Instead, she melted into my arms and began to cry softly.

“Hey, it's okay. Let's get you home.” I patted the back of her head. “Let's get you home,” I repeated in a gentle hush.

Chapter Eleven

FINDING LOVE

Olivia Sanders

I slid the key into the lock of Sam's front door, the clicks of the locks breaking the silence that had accompanied Alexander and me on our way. After my little breakdown in his arms, he didn't say another word. He ordered an Uber and got into the car with me.

Now, he stood towering behind me, his eyes drilling into the back of my head as if trying to pierce through and understand my thoughts.

The truth is I was not thinking.

I had not run out of the bookshop out of fear of being caught or embarrassment due to the girl's accusations; after all, she was just a kid.

Instead, I imagined what it would be like if I were in Alexander's shoes, hearing that I was a gold digger who abandoned my husband at the altar.

I wondered about all the vile things going through his mind as he watched me with that blank look of his. Even when he

finally intervened, it was only when the girl wanted to get a recording of the scenario.

I concluded that he must be disappointed in me, likely feeling disgusted to be in a video with me and tagged as the next victim of a gold diggers scheme. I didn't blame him; I would be disgusted, too. That was why I ran.

I didn't expect him to come after me, find me, and pull me into his arms, enveloping me in his sweet scent and even sweeter words. For the first time in a very long time, I felt safe.

I pushed the door open and looked around for Sam. The absence of her car in the driveway was already enough to announce that she wasn't home, but I still wanted to be sure.

"I don't think she's home. Her car is not parked." I relished the sweet sound of his voice, feeling the tightness in my chest ease. It felt like it had been years since he last spoke to me.

I turned to him. "Yeah, I guess she isn't." There was an awkward pause, and neither of us met the other's eyes. "Would you want to come in? I don't think I want to be alone."

He looked up quickly and nodded. "Sure, I would love to keep you company till she comes back."

I offered a small smile before stepping aside so he could walk in, and then I closed the door behind him.

"Here, let me help you with that," he said as he reached for my jacket and slid it off my back.

"Thank you," I said.

He nodded before hanging it. "Would you like some tea? Does Sam have tea?"

I smiled at his kindness. "She does, but right now, I would just like a glass of wine."

"Oh, well, that does sound like a better idea than tea right now." He smiled, and I chuckled. "Where is—"

"Don't worry, I'll get it."

He nodded, and I walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and pulled out a glass of red wine. I walked to the cupboard and found two wine glasses before returning to the sitting room.

“Will you drink with me?” I asked.

He looked up at me, a charming smile stretching his lips and making my heart skip a beat. “There are two things in this world I can never say no to—good wine and beautiful women. And here there is both,” he replied.

I smiled. “You think I’m beautiful?” I asked as I placed the glasses on the table and filled them before sitting next to him on the couch and handing him a glass.

“You don’t?” He took the glass.

“Well, after everything that girl said, I—”

“I don’t believe her.” His voice was firm.

I looked up at him, my eyes wide and teary.

“She has gotten her facts from a bunch of trolls online. Some of them may not even be real people, just parody accounts. It would be silly to believe anything she said.”

I remained silent, searching for what to say and how to say it.

“But you are here, sitting right next to me and very real. If you would tell me, I will listen.”

“And why would you believe me? Just because I’m sitting next to you now?”

“Because I love my baby sister, and if she’s on your side, then I know it’s a side worth staying on.” His words were so pure and true, his eyes holding mine with such sincerity that I couldn’t help myself.

I started speaking, telling him everything—how I met Greg as a receptionist in the firm I was working in and how he visited every day after that until, finally, he was all I could think about.

I shared how he convinced me to quit my job after our third date, and by our fifth, he proposed. I explained how I had no say in the wedding arrangements because they had already been planned before he proposed.

I went on to describe how Greg started giving me almost no attention, sidelining my opinions and existence in general, only taking me out when he wanted to showcase me to his friends and partners.

I recounted how, on the eve of our wedding, his mother told me that I was worthless and the only reason she was letting me get married to her son was because I was pretty, which was good for PR. Greg stood there and said nothing.

Alexander never interrupted, never judged; he just sat there and listened till I was done. He placed his glass down and reached for my palms, holding and squeezing them.

“You are not just pretty, Olivia. You are strong, sincere, and very smart. And the fact that you did not let any man take that away from you makes you even more admirable. Anyone who says differently is blind. Greg may try to fight you with publicity and those dumb memes, but I want you to understand that you are no longer alone, Olivia. I’ll fight with you. I’ll make sure the rest of the world gets to see just how wonderful you are.”

The world seemed to move slowly as we sat there, holding onto each other with our eyes locked. I couldn’t tell if it was the wine or if I genuinely wanted to stay in that moment forever.

He leaned in closer without pausing to check my reaction, hesitating, or fumbling as his lips got closer to mine and met. I kissed him back with the same energy, parting my lips and humming as he drank me in. I felt his cold fingers on my cheeks as our kiss deepened.

He reached for my waist, pulling me closer to him, and I wrapped my hands around his neck. His scent intoxicated me as his arms wrapped around my lower waist.

He pulled away from the kiss to look at me. “I don’t know how any man would be able to let you go, but I won’t say I’m not glad.” He smiled at his joke, and I rolled my eyes as I interlocked our lips again.

I felt his palm slip beneath my shirt, his firm grip on my bare skin making me bite his lower lip. He smiled against my kiss as he ran his lips above the skin of my neck.

His warm breath tickled my skin as he looked for the perfect place to plant his lips. I ran my hand through his hair, tilting my neck so he could get better access.

His grip around my waist tightened, and he tugged me closer as his lips met the bridge between my neck and shoulder blade.

I moaned as he pressed his lips firmly on my neck and sucked tightly, a sharp pain shooting through me and fading away quickly as he continued marking me.

My hands around his neck tightened as I pulled him closer, and he kissed the spot when he was done, continuing to trail kisses up my neck and to the side of my face.

“Olivia,” he breathed, his breath hot on my ear.

“Yes?” I whispered as I bent my head to look at him. On his face was a look of rhapsody as his eyes searched mine.

“I don’t think I can help myself.” His tone was serious, a mixture of plea and demand.

“I don’t want you to.”

He reached beneath me, his hands groping my ass as he lifted us both from the couch. I planted my lips on his again as he led us up the stairs.

“Um, Olivia?”

“Yes.”

“I have no idea where to go from here.”

I laughed. “The room to the left, Alex.” His name felt so refreshing, rolling out of my lips so softly.

He led me to my room and laid me on the bed, his lips never leaving mine as he got on the bed with me. I reached for the hem of the shirt, and he leaned back so I could pull it over his head.

I couldn't fight back the gasp that escaped my lips as his bare chest came into view. He had the body of a Greek god, his muscles sculpted to the finest details. I ran my fingers over his chest, feeling my wetness soak my underwear.

"You're so beautiful," I said.

He leaned down so our lips were inches apart, his thumb sliding tenderly over mine. "Then what would I say about you?"

"If you really think I'm as beautiful as you say you do, then I want you to show me."

He leaned back and reached for his belt; I heard his buckle as he undid it before the sound of the zipper filled the space between us. It took me a while to realize that I, too, needed to take my clothes off.

I pulled my shirt over my head, and we both slid our jeans off, dumping them on the floor. He reached for the side of my belly, his hands sliding up slowly and reaching behind me to find my bra strap.

He released them and took my bra off slowly, his eyes glowing as he studied me and bit his lower lip. He groped my breasts gently and kneaded them in circular motions as he kissed my neck.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and pushed myself into him, rubbing my pleading wetness against his rock-hard cock, teasing him through the fabric of our underwear. "I want you so badly right now, Alex."

He laid me on my back and pressed himself against me. I reached for his briefs and pulled them downward, and he helped me take them off completely.

Then he took mine off and got between my thighs again, grabbing the back of my head and pressing my forehead

against his. His blue eyes held mine, staring into my soul as he pressed his cock against my swollen lips.

I let out a sharp gasp as he pushed into me, feeling him breach my walls, sliding in slowly and then filling me up. I tightened my legs around him and pushed my hips forward.

He began to thrust into me, groaning as he placed his lips on mine, and I breathed in the air of his lust. His thrusts intensified, and I whipped my head backward as I bit my lower lip.

I couldn't say anything. There were no words to be said, just the sounds of our passion merging. He lifted me so I was sitting on his lap, continuing to slide in and out of me like it was destiny.

We continued for hours, switching positions as he rode me through different waves of pleasure until my climax burst through me like a raging waterfall, leaving me weak as I fell back into his arms.

We lay still for a moment, our breaths in sync as fatigue wrapped around us like a blanket, and we fell asleep.

Chapter Twelve

HE CARES FOR HER

Alexander Steele

I woke up to the scent of lavender and coconut, a much better replacement for the weird air freshener the hotel had been using. I smiled inwardly.

But wait a minute, when were they able to come into my room and change the fragrance? Or was it already changed by the time I got back?

What time did I get back? *Did I go back to my hotel last night?*

I decided to get some more sleep, hoping the fog that blurred my memory would clear by the time I woke. I tugged the sheets closer and turned on my side. My eyes popped wide open as Olivia's face came into view. I bit back a yell as I sat up straight. I regretted doing that immediately.

I felt my universe spin as my hangover hit me with a raging force, the memories of the passionate night I had shared with her sinking in at the same time.

I groaned as I flung the sheets off my body and shoved my leg to the floor. I found my nakedness in the mirror that hung opposite me.

“Fuck,” I muttered as I scanned the room for my clothes. I found my briefs, grabbed them, and slipped them on quickly before picking up my shirt and jeans from the floor.

I crept to the door and then took one last look at Olivia as she slept, her graceful features highlighted by the rays of sun that seeped in from the window. The most beautiful woman I have ever seen. A small smile curved my lips as I pulled the door open and slid out quietly.

I finished dressing up in the corridor, my head splitting even as I struggled not to move with too much energy.

I walked downstairs and peeked through the window blinds to check if Sam’s car had returned to its usual parking spot. It had not; she was not home.

I let out a heavy sigh, one less person to deal with. I was not sure how I was going to explain to her why I had spent the night in her best friend’s room.

I walked into the kitchen, hoping to find a remedy for my headache. I searched through the kitchen till I found all the ingredients I needed to make a quick hangover soup.

By the time I was done, Olivia walked into the kitchen, an oversized shirt draped over her small figure. She walked with her eyes almost closed, and I knew she was in pain.

Her eyes widened as she saw me, and she wrapped her hands around herself. “You’re still here?”

I chuckled. “Should I have left?”

She blinked, realizing how it sounded. “No, no. It’s just, when I didn’t see you, I thought ...” she trailed off, her cheeks flushing.

I poured some soup into a dish and handed it to her. “Here, it will help with the headache.” She looked up at me before reaching for it. “Careful, it’s hot.”

She sat in front of the kitchen island and began to drink her soup. I poured myself a plate and sat opposite her. We ate in silence, the sound of our slurping filling the tense air between us.

I sighed deeply. "So, about last night."

She looked up sharply as if she had been holding her breath, waiting for me to speak.

"I just want you to know that, although I don't regret doing what we did, that was not my intention when I led you home yesterday," I said.

She nodded, saying, "Yeah, I mean, you're my best friend's brother. I know you were just looking after me."

I added, "Exactly. We both had a little too much to drink, and things got steamy between us."

She took a spoonful of her soup. "So, it's never happening again, right?" There was a hesitation in her voice, and I knew she wanted me to say it would just as badly as I wanted to.

But we were both adults. We had to take responsibility for our actions and not ignore the consequences. So, as much as I wanted to reach across the table and pull her into another steamy kiss, I knew there was only one right thing to do. "No, it won't," I replied.

She nodded. "All right then."

"And you don't have to worry about Samantha. I'll tell her," I said.

Olivia offered me a small smile, the kind a mother would offer an overzealous child.

"She's my sister. I'm pretty sure it would be less awkward coming from me." I let out a sigh as I chuckled before nodding.

"Great, I had absolutely no idea how I was going to tell her," she said, giggling lightly before returning her attention to her soup. "You said you don't regret it?"

"Not a single moment of it," I replied.

She smiled as she held my gaze, our eyes sending secret messages to each other, messages too heavy for words.

I nodded at her plate. “You would want to finish that before it gets cold.”

She blinked before looking down at her soup as she tried to hide her reddening cheeks. “It’s a really good soup.”

“It’s my dad’s recipe.”

She looked up at me in surprise. “Your dad taught you how to make hangover soup?”

“Funny story. When we were teens, Sam and I would sneak out and go to parties a lot. This one time, we got so drunk and woke up the next day feeling like we had slammed our heads into a truck. My dad noticed and took us to the kitchen while my mom was still busy with other chores, and he made us pay him five dollars each to learn how to make the soup.”

“Did you pay?”

“It was that or let our mom find out, and neither of us wanted that. Hangover soup was the first thing I ever learned to make.”

She chuckled. “Your dad sounds amazing.”

“He was.” I returned to my soup, and by the time I looked up again, her eyes were wide with remorse.

“I’m so sorry. Sam doesn’t talk much about your parents, so I didn’t know.”

I reached for the back of her palm, which rested on the table. “It’s fine. He lived a really good life with no regrets.”

She nodded before looking down to where my hand rested above hers. The sound of Sam’s car pulling up on the gravel caught our attention, and she snatched her hand from beneath mine.

We finished with our soup in silence and waited till the front door opened and closed. Sam walked straight into the kitchen and paused as she saw us.

“Well, what a speedy development. Yesterday, you were clawing at each other, and now you’re breaking bread together?”

“Where were you yesterday?” I asked, eager to shift her attention.

She gave me a knowing look before walking to the fridge. “I had to work overnight.”

“You must be tired. Go freshen up. I’ll make you something.” Olivia stood up and took her plate to the sink.

“Is that Daddy’s hangover soup? You folks got drunk, too? How the tables turn,” she said, shaking her head as her eyes lit with amusement. I saw her give Olivia a sly look before heading up the stairs.

I stood up, saying, “Well, I have to leave now. I have some business to deal with.”

Olivia nodded, and there was one last awkward silence between us before I walked out. I grabbed Sam’s keys. I needed a reason to come back. A reason to see her again.

Since my partners had decided to jumpstart the project, my stay in New York automatically increased. At first, I wanted to go back and work remotely, but I changed my mind and decided to stay longer. I had promised to stand by Olivia, and I intended to stick to that promise.

Anderson greeted me as I stepped down from Sam’s car and tossed the key at a valet before walking into the office.

“Good morning, sir. I was so glad when you called to tell me you were coming in today. I already thought I wasn’t going to see you again,” he rambled as he took my suitcase, and we walked to the elevator.

“You know, Anderson, you make it sound like we’re in a relationship, and it’s really creepy.”

“You know, now that you mention it, it doesn’t sound so creepy to me.”

I glared at him from the corner of my eyes, and a mischievous smile curved his lips as we got behind the metal

doors and watched them slide closed.

“All I’m saying is, it’s good to have you back, sir.”

“So, what’s been happening while I was away?” I asked.

He stretched his hand forward so I could look into the tab in his hands. “We’ve followed the blueprints in your original pitch, but for now, we’re still in the preparation. Not a lot of progress has been made.”

“Well, not a lot of time has passed, so we’re still on track,” I replied as the doors opened and we walked into my office. “Have the accounts department run an audit on our budget. Make sure there were no unauthorized additions. Then ask the technical department for a report. We need to know if they could complete this project within the given time and, if they can’t, how long they would need.” I circled my desk and took a seat.

Anderson lingered a bit in my guest area.

“Is there something you’d like to share with me, Anderson?” I asked without looking at him.

He jerked to life and walked to my desk. “Well, the thing is, it’s none of my business, but—”

“If it’s not your business, then why are we discussing it?” I looked up at him finally.

He straightened. “Because, sir, ultimately, it is going to be my business and the business of the entire corporation, too. I’m not just talking about New York.”

I studied him for a brief moment before sighing. “Well, go on then.”

He lifted his tablet and handed it to me. I took it from him and looked at the picture he had opened for me. It was a picture of me and Olivia in the bookshop, laughing as we ate.

I smiled at how beautiful she looked in the picture. Then, I caught myself quickly. “You’ve had people follow me?” I looked up at him.

“I don’t even have to, sir. That picture is the most trending topic across social media as we speak. And I’m hoping you at least know why.”

“She walked out on her fiancé, big deal.”

“Big deal? She’s bad for PR. Our luck is that people are too focused on slamming the girl, and you’re blurred out from the angle the picture was taken.”

I looked at the picture again. I already knew it was impossible that that kid took the picture, and then I noticed it. From the angle where I was sitting, the only person who could have taken it was the barista. And I thought she was a nice person; she wore her mask very well.

“First of all, who I get entangled with is nobody’s business. Secondly, things like this die down with time. There is no reason to panic.”

“I wish I could believe that, but look.” He took the tab from me and then returned it after swiping it to another picture.

“What am I looking at?”

“That’s her fiancé—well, ex-fiancé. He posted that picture three hours ago of him and his new girlfriend on a date. This stuff is going to drag on longer than you think.”

I glared at the man in the picture, his sick smile evident as he held onto the waist of some washed-down woman. “What a prick.” I dumped the tab on my desk and reached for my phone.

“Um, who are you calling?”

I ignored him as I scrolled through my recent calls and tapped the ID I was looking for. I brought it to my ear and waited as it rang.

“Hello?” The voice was cracked.

“Hey, Olivia, are you okay?”

Chapter Thirteen

EX MOVES ON

Olivia Sanders

After Alexander left, I felt an awkward air settle in the house. Even though I had confidently told him that I would tell Sam about what happened, I didn't know how.

We shared absolutely everything, and if it were any random man, she would have been the first person I would tell, but this was her brother. We had barely known each other for up to forty-eight hours, and I had already managed to have a one-night stand with him.

But was it the most intense sexual encounter I had ever had in my life? Yes, without a fucking doubt.

I knew backing out was not an option. Even if I tried to ignore my promise to Alex, there was still the fact that she had walked into us drinking hangover soup. She would have questions, and I didn't want her to ask before I told her.

I heard her footsteps plummeting down the stairs like she was being chased as she screamed my name repeatedly. I shut my eyes and braced myself.

“Where the fuck are you?” She ran into the kitchen and found me still sitting there.

“Look, before you say anything, yes, I slept with your brother,” I burst out.

Was that the best way to tell her? Absolutely not. Did I feel better that I told her, at least? Maybe a little.

Her face contorted into a look of disgust. “Gross, who my brother sleeps with is none of my business, Oly, and I like to keep it that way.”

“Really, so you’re not pissed at me?”

“Of course, I’m pissed with you. But I can’t even be mad at you right now because there is something else you have to see.”

My entire body tensed, waiting for an explosive episode. She looked at me with a bland face, shaking her head “What thing?” her eyes dropped. “Wait ... where’s your phone?” She scanned the kitchen.

“I left it in my room. Why?”

“Hold up, so you haven’t seen it?” She ducked her phone behind her.

I eyed her suspiciously. “What am I supposed to have seen?”

“Fuck, I don’t want to be the one to show you this.”

“Sam, you’re scaring me now. What the hell is happening?”

She sighed before handing the phone to me. I had already caught a glimpse of Greg’s familiar stature before taking the phone from her. Next to him was a woman I had never seen before.

I read the caption: *They say old wounds heal with time. Guess this wound was not deep enough. I am actually glad that door closed. It allowed me to find the true love of my life. One who will not walk away.*

I scoffed as I handed the phone back. “So what? He’s moved on, and so have I.” I swallowed, fighting back the tears that stung my eyes, denying their existence. “Am I supposed to be

moved by a couple of refurbished quotes? I've got a life to live."

Sam just stood there, the pity in her eyes telling me that she was not buying my bullshit.

I shrugged. "I at least hope he treats this one with some respect ..." I trailed off, the tears breaking through my barricade and spilling forcefully down my cheeks.

I tried to speak, to continue to say how much I didn't care until maybe it came true. But as I opened my mouth, all that came out were wails. And the next thing I knew, I was on the floor, cradled in Sam's arms as denial gave way and reality hit me like an earthquake.

"I love him. Why the hell do I still love him?" I screamed, my chest tightening and throat aching. I had never felt such pain in my life. It felt like my heart was being ripped from my soul—an inward kind of pain that seemed impossible to soothe. "It hurts so much, Sam. I can't fucking take it."

"It's okay, baby. You're going to be all right." I could sense her struggling not to cry, and I felt bad because I had let love turn me into a burden.

But the tears would not stop, and my heart would not stop throbbing painfully. I cried so much that time passed like the flipping of a page, and my head began to hurt as well.

And the worst part was that in all of that, with all I had been through, the only thing I wanted was to be wrapped in Greg's arms. The old Greg, the Greg who would send me sweet texts in the morning and visit me at work in the afternoon, then take me out to sit under the stars in the evening. The Greg who made my life seem like a fairytale, the Greg whose kiss would light up every vein in my body, whose touch would send me floating.

The Greg who never truly existed.

Sam stayed with me until I stopped crying. She led me to the sitting room and helped me to a couch. "Let me get you some water." She rushed to the kitchen and came back with a glass of water.

I took it and nodded in appreciation. I still couldn't find my voice. I drank the water. It felt weird rather than refreshing, but I continued drinking to soothe my throat.

"You'll get over this, Olivia. I promise you that."

I looked up at her, a languid sigh escaping my nostrils. "But what if I don't, Sam?" My voice was hoarse, and it hurt to talk. "What if I'm just going to keep lying to myself until he does something else to make me realize how much of a fool I really am?"

She sat down beside me and wrapped her arm around my shoulder. "You are a lot of things, Oly, but a fool isn't one of them. You will find peace eventually, and maybe someone new."

I heard my ringtone blaring from upstairs. "I'll get that," she said before hurrying upstairs.

I sat in silence, struggling against my wandering thoughts. I knew it was already too late to patch things up with Greg, yet I couldn't wrap my head around why I felt the need to fix it.

It was as if I wanted to atone for my sins.

What if he's just trying to call my attention? There's no way a person could move on so fast. Maybe if I at least called him ...

"It's Lex. He wanted to know how you're doing. Apparently, he heard the news too," Sam's voice ripped me away from my thoughts.

Alexander, he was a good man. Beautiful, attentive, funny, smart. But he was no Greg.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"That you're a fucking mess," Sam replied.

"And what did he say after that?"

"Nothing, he hung up. He's probably going to come around after work."

I nodded.

She sat beside me again and said, “I have to get ready for work. I need to know that I can leave you here and you’ll be all right.”

I gave her a wry smile. “Maybe I should call—”

“Olivia, listen to me. Greg does not love you. He’s never seen you as anything more than a tool, and no matter what you do, he never will.”

I let out a shaky breath as the truth hit my core. None of what she said was foreign to me, but hearing her say it defined it more. Falling in love with Greg was a mistake.

The doorbell chimed, tearing through the moment of silence that had snuck into the room after what Sam said.

“Are you expecting someone?” she asked.

I shook my head.

She stood up, walked to the door, and opened it. “Oh my gosh, perfect timing. I need someone to look after her while I head for work.”

“It’s not a problem. Where is she?” Alex’s voice sounded, and I felt a sudden ease in my chest, springing to my feet.

I heard his footsteps approaching, and I stood in anticipation as he briskly walked in. He stopped as he caught sight of me, his bright eyes dulling and his lips forming a thin line.

He gave me a warm smile and commented, “You look terrible—beautiful but terrible.”

I managed to chuckle as I ran into his arms and flung mine around his neck. He held me tightly, his strong arms wrapping around my waist. “I’m so glad you’re here. I thought you’d hate me for spoiling your reputation.”

“It’s all right. My business can manage.” He pulled me away from the hug and looked straight into my eyes.

“I came as soon as Sam told me how you were faring. How are you feeling now?” he asked, following me back to the couch.

“I don’t know. One second, I feel like I’m okay. The next, it feels like my heart is being ripped out by a tow truck,” I said.

“Has he tried to contact you?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“And have you tried to contact him?”

I hesitated before shaking my head. “I mean, I’ve thought about it.”

“But you haven’t. Your heart is yearning for him, but you’re a smart woman. There’s nothing wrong with what you’re feeling as long as you don’t let it dictate your actions.”

I paused as I let his words sink in.

“Have you had anything to eat?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Of course, you aren’t,” he said, standing up and taking his suit jacket off. “Here’s what, I’ll whip up something quickly. We’ll have breakfast, and then we can talk about what to do about moving on. Sound fair?”

I hesitated. “Do I have a choice?”

“You absolutely do not.” He smiled at me, the kind of smile that sent a warmth swirling through me and fluttering at the pit of my stomach.

“I promised to stand by you through this. Your ex can continue with his little gimmicks, but he won’t be smiling for long.” He walked into the kitchen.

I stood up and followed him. “What can I help you with?” I asked as I stood by the doorframe. He looked up at me in shock.

It was him; he radiated a warmth that seared through any form of gloom and being with him relaxed me. I could feel my heart getting lighter with every second he spent with me. But I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“I needed a distraction anyway.” I shrugged.

He scoffed, feigning hurt. “Is that all I am to you, Miss Sanders? A distraction?”

I smiled as I smacked his forearm. “You know what I mean.”

He chuckled. “Well, you can help me with the onions. I’m pretty sure you’ve got no tears left.” He gave me a teasing look.

“I wonder how Sam was able to live with you for sixteen years.”

“I don’t understand what you’re insinuating. I’m a charmer.”

I scoffed. “That’s just what you think.”

We continued like that, sharing jokes and laughs and the occasional glances that held messages neither of us was willing to admit.

We were done just in time for Sam to join us. We ate and laughed, and soon, I forgot that I had been crying my eyes out over a complete douchebag. I felt safe, loved, and at peace.

And it was all thanks to my best friend and her brother, who I was slowly falling for.

He caught me staring at him again, and he gave me that warm smile. I felt goosebumps as I inhaled deeply. I was falling for him hard.

And I wasn’t one bit afraid.

Chapter Fourteen

HAVOC ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Alexander Steele

Days passed, and the whole internet drama between Olivia and Greg did not die down. It couldn't when Greg kept on feeding it with more posts of him and his new girlfriend.

Unbeknownst to him, he was digging his own grave.

It was cute at first, but people soon became sick of his undying pettiness. What made it worse was that with every caption, it became increasingly obvious that he was just using the poor girl to spite Olivia.

I was not surprised. That was the kind of man Greg was, and I honestly hoped he would continue being just that—the kind of man who saw women as mere tools. Soon, the media began to turn against him, albeit to a small extent. Still, I was sure it was enough to set him on a downward spiral.

And then, their attention shifted back to Olivia, but this time, it was not about blaming her for leaving Greg. They had begun to notice how silent she had been throughout the whole thing.

No matter how hard you try to direct people's perceptions on social media by leveraging influencers and important people, there will always be loopholes, especially when dealing with someone as careless as Gregory Hathaway. So, Olivia chose not to react to his constant victim-playing; she remained quiet.

Well, not exactly quiet.

In fact, it was all part of a plan that I had laid out for her the day he released the first photo and announced his new love interest.

"So, I promised we were going to talk about moving forward," I said, wiping my hands with a tablecloth. Samantha had left for work, and we had just finished with the dishes.

"Actually, I think I'll just move on with time. There's no reason to rush it," Olivia said as we walked back into the living room.

"That's a great idea, but I said moving forward, not moving on."

Her eyes narrowed as she turned to look at me. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's time you showed him that you have a voice."

She shook her head. "That's just going to drag this drama for longer than it should."

"Well, even if you don't, he will."

"And how do you know that?"

"Part of what I do for a living is conduct statistical analysis. Let's just say I've got pretty good foresight."

She folded her arms and shifted her weight to one leg before raising an eyebrow. "Well, go on."

A smug grin crossed my lips at the disbelief in her voice, and I said, "Why do you think Greg made that post?"

She rolled her eyes upward in thought before shrugging. "To piss me off, I guess."

“Exactly! But how does he know if you’re actually pissed? How does he even know you saw the post if you don’t react?”

“So, you want me to just give him what he wants?”

“Precisely, but not yet. You are going to wait till it’s what everyone wants.” My grin spread as she tilted her head to the side, interest playing in her eyes.

“And how are you sure that’s going to happen?”

“Because you’re going to get your life back on track. You’ll return to posting on your social media, but you won’t regard Greg’s post.”

“That will just make him more determined to get a reaction.”

“See? You’re catching up to speed. He is going to want to get your attention by posting more about his relationship.”

“So how does that help us?”

I paused for a moment. I could not ignore the fact that she’d said *us*. She had acknowledged the fact that we were a team. “You know how when you see a couple on Instagram, you feel like, ‘Oh, cute, wish my relationship could be like that.’ Then, as you keep scrolling, you see two more reels about the same couple—”

“And get fed up!” Her eyes brightened.

“We’re going to wait for that moment when the audience gets fed up, and people will begin to shift their attention to you,” I said.

“And instead of seeing someone struggling to prove a point, they see someone who’s picked her life back up and carried on,” she added.

“Exactly, but we will not stop there. That is when we would introduce the love interest,” I explained.

Her face fell. “Is that absolutely necessary?”

“If you don’t, people would begin to believe that the situation with Greg has affected your chances of ever finding a man and that you’re just secretly bitter,” I explained.

“I see where you’re going with this, but where on earth is this love interest going to come from?” she asked.

I spread my arms wide, a cheeky grin stretching her lips.

It took her a while to understand, and when she did, she scoffed. “No.”

I sighed as I got closer to her and held her forearms. “Think about it, Olivia. There are already rumors with very implicating evidence. If you suddenly pop up with another man, it won’t be pretty.”

“Fine, then I won’t show up with anyone, and we can scrap that last part of the plan.”

“Look, I know you’re trying to be careful after what happened, but this is the best shot we have at getting the media off your ass. I know you don’t like staying in Sam’s home and feeling like a burden.”

“But why does it have to be you? I mean, what would Sam think?”

“Think of it as a marriage of convenience. You can’t date any regular guy because they won’t give you the publicity you need to pull this off.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And *you* will?”

“Exactly.”

“Alex, I don’t want to burst your bubble, but you’re a businessman. You’re only famous among business tycoons and aristocrats.”

I sighed. “You do realize that before that, I was a very popular rockstar with a pretty massive fan base.”

She gave me a teasing smile as she shrugged. “I didn’t know you.”

“That’s because you have terrible taste in music.”

She scoffed.

“Look, just trust me on this, okay?”

She paused and looked at me. I could tell she was fighting with herself to make a decision. I decided not to push any further. Finally, she sighed and rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll go along with your crazy plan.”

I gave her a wicked smile. “You’re going to thank me later. That boy won’t know what hit him.”

I have never been interested in social media, especially not in couples’ dramas, but in the next few days after our agreement, I found myself deeply invested in everything surrounding Greg and Olivia.

It even got its own hashtag. Everyone was talking about the new developments, particularly Olivia coming out of her shell and not responding to Greg’s desperate attacks.

Everything was going according to plan, but what was more important was that Olivia was regaining her confidence. At first, it had been a challenge for her to step out of the house without feeling like a Marvel character. However, she eventually embraced the fact that to bring about change, she needed to face her fears.

Everything was going according to plan, and I was getting ready for the grand finale. I began reconnecting with the rest of my bandmates, and we began planning a reunion party.

I got back in touch with my friends from my music days, and they were excited about the idea. Soon, teasers flooded the Internet about my upcoming special appearance.

Olivia was surprised to see how fast I became a trending topic again. It was hard for me as I had left the music industry for over eight years, and a lot of things had changed during that time.

I used to think greedy businessmen were my worst crowd till I met the new generation of clout chasers who had taken over the music industry.

I began attending parties and dinner nights again while still maintaining my business. Multitasking was never my forte, but I was ready to make sacrifices. I was going to do

everything in my power to make sure Olivia was past Greg and happy again.

I sat in my office scrolling through Olivia's Instagram page for the fifth time that day. She only seemed to get more beautiful each time. I tried to convince myself that I was simply helping a friend. But lying to myself was also not my forte. I knew deep down that under any other circumstance, I would've made Olivia mine. But I couldn't let my feelings interfere with what really mattered.

"What's got you smiling like that, sir?"

I slammed my phone on my desk as Anderson's voice startled me back to reality. "You understand there is something called knocking, don't you?"

"I knocked. In fact, I stood at your door knocking for the last minute, but clearly, you were more occupied."

I sighed.

"Is that who I think it is?" he asked.

"Is there something I can help you with, Anderson?"

He stared at me for a moment before stating, "The CEO's sister is here to discuss the reports with you."

"What reports?"

"The one I sent to you an hour ago."

"Oh yes, that. Let her in."

He hesitated. "You didn't go through the reports, did you?"

I stood up from my chair and walked to the visitors' area. "I did. I've just been preoccupied, as you observed."

"Preoccupied with what exactly?"

"Maybe if you crawl out of my ass, I'd be able to concentrate. Now stop keeping our visitor waiting and call her in."

He sighed before walking out. Soon after, a young woman walked in. She was a petite woman with arresting facial

features and perky breasts that bounced as she walked, her hips swaying from left to right with rehearsed elegance.

I swallowed. It had been a long time since I had been with a woman—well, except for Olivia. I didn't want to lump her in with the rest of my escapades. That night was different; I could still remember it vividly.

“It's nice to finally meet you, Mr. Steele.” She stretched her hand for a handshake, her curly hair bouncing as she moved.

“Likewise. Please have a seat.”

She nodded before taking a seat in one of my plush white sofas.

“Tea or coffee?” I offered.

“I'd like something stronger.” Her voice was daring.

I smiled as I poured two whiskey glasses and joined her. “So, I hear you've already gone through the reports,” I said.

“Yes, and the progress your team has made in such little time is quite impressive,” she responded.

“And what do you think about the project?”

“I have nothing to say about that till I see the finished work, Mr. Steele.”

“A practical woman, I like that.”

She crossed her slender, long legs slowly, the oil on her skin shimmering in the light peeking in from my window blinds. Leaning in, she held my gaze while licking her lips. “I can promise you, there's more to like.”

I caught myself before my eyes went wide and cleared my throat as I placed the glass down. “That's very informative, um, about the report—”

“I've already gone through it, and like I said, I loved it,” she responded.

I blinked. “So, why are you here, if I may ask?”

She shifted on her chair, confidence emanating from her poise. “Well, I was so impressed. So I thought, ‘Why not

invite this brilliant man over for dinner, at least to appreciate the efforts he's put into this?"

"Oh, Miss Jaime, as much as I'd love that—"

"I'm not taking no for an answer, and please call me Liliana."

I sighed, trying to numb the guilt swelling in my chest. "Perhaps I could ..." I began, but my phone began to buzz in my pocket. I pulled it out and smiled as I saw the name. "Please excuse me, I have to take this." I picked up the call. "Hi!"

"Hey, boyfriend." Olivia's voice was refreshing, sending shivering waves through my shoulders.

I chuckled. "We're doing that already?"

"Well, duh, the big finale is in two days." Excitement trailed her voice, and I could feel myself getting excited as well. "Well, let's hope everything keeps going according to plan."

I turned to Liliana, who was waiting patiently. Then I asked Olivia on the phone, "Yeah, um ... do you maybe want to grab dinner?"

"Like, right now?" Olivia asked.

"You're busy, aren't you?"

"No, no. Absolutely not. Text me the address, and I'll be right there."

"Oh, all right then."

The call ended, and I turned to Liliana, fighting a cheeky grin as excitement bubbled in my chest.

"I'm sorry, Miss Jaime, but I'm going to have to pass on your offer."

Chapter Fifteen

ESCAPING ATTENTION

Olivia Sanders

I stood outside the burger place, the cold evening breeze blowing against exposed parts of my skin as I stared into the street. A black Highlander pulled up in front of me, and I watched as a man got down from the car and circled it.

Alex.

“You’re early,” I said as I handed him a paper pack.

“I had some work to clear out. What’s this?” He took the pack from me and studied it.

“It’s a burger. Are you ready?”

He looked up at me, an eyebrow raised as his eyes narrowed. “Ready for what? And why can’t we just eat inside?”

I scoffed as I grabbed his hand. “Save your questions for when you start a podcast. For now, just follow me.” I grabbed his wrist and led him through the street.

We dodged passersby and walked past a few blocks. My fingers latched around his warm skin as I pulled him behind me, the evening breeze still cozy on our skins. We bent into a curve leading to a dark alleyway.

“Just so you know, if we get jumped, I have no defense skills,” he said.

“So all that muscle is for show?”

“It actually is, honey. I *was* in showbiz before, you know?”

I rolled my eyes as I got to a door and pushed away some metal used to block it. “Yeah, you’ve proved your point. Once upon a time, you were a very important social figure. I’m sorry I undermined you. Now, would you give me a hand here?”

“Absolutely not,” he said.

I turned to him, aghast.

“For all I know, we could be breaking into ... wherever this is, and I want my alibi to stand when I’m giving my statement,” he explained.

I scoffed. “You’re not getting arrested, and no one’s giving a statement. Now, grab that iron there. It’s ridiculously heavy.”

He groaned before reaching down and pushing the iron aside like it wasn’t even there.

“So much for showbiz muscles, huh?” I quipped.

“What happened to regular people having a regular dinner date?”

“First of all, there’s nothing regular about either of us. Secondly, we can’t give the media any rumors yet.” My keys jingled as I slid one into the lock and twisted. “And we’re in.”

I pushed the door open and walked into the dark building. Alex lingered outside.

“What? Are you scared of the dark now?” I teased.

He scoffed. “If only you knew the kind of things I do in the dark ...” He trailed off, and I blushed, grateful for the pitch-blackness where I stood.

“Shut up and come inside,” I commanded.

He cleared his throat and walked in. I closed the door behind him, then searched through the air on my right till my hands came in contact with a lever. I pulled it down and watched as the space came to life.

Different shades of bright light sparked on one by one, reflecting on glass showcases and pretty leather seats to reveal a pretty diner. I turned to Alex, whose eyes were bright with shock. “What is this place, and why is it such a sight?”

I chuckled. “You really should start a podcast. This used to be my mother’s salon. She left it to me, and I turned it into this. I always had plans to start my own little pastry shop. I already had all the money saved, then Greg came into the picture and made it clear he wanted a trophy wife.”

“Each day, I find a new reason to be glad you walked out of that church.” He took a few steps further and looked around. “This is beautiful, Liv.”

I smiled, the way I did each time my nickname rolled off his tongue so easily. “You might want to keep your head down. People can see you from outside.”

“Oh.” He ducked back to the shadowed corner where I stood.

“Do you have a cent?”

“Do I—what is this, the Stone Ages?”

I rolled my eyes. “Stay here.” I walked behind the counter and keyed open the cash register, then grabbed some coins. Moving past the counter, I headed to a corner where a jukebox sat. Sliding in a coin, I selected a song.

Turning back to him, I smiled as he continued looking around in awe. I could see the pride in the way his cheeks swelled and his eyes lit up. Sneaking my way back to him, I said, “Follow me. This isn’t even the best part.”

“There’s more?” he asked.

I grabbed his hand, and we ducked as we crawled up the stairs. I opened another door that led to the rooftop. Then I

closed it and found another lever. I pulled it down and watched the magic happen.

It was much calmer than the space downstairs, but the highlights were the sky full of stars, and a short distance forward sat the moon in its full glory. Alex stood in awe.

“It’s pretty nice, isn’t it?”

“*Pretty nice?* This is wonderful!” he exclaimed, walking around and doing a slow 360 to survey the place.

I followed him and said, “I was hoping to host a launch party after the charity event. I thought maybe I could use that PR of yours for something more than proving a point on social media.” I shrugged.

“Liv, you’re going to do more than that. We’re moving the charity event here—to this very rooftop.”

I looked at him, shocked. “What? You’ve been planning this for almost a week, and the fliers have already been sent.”

“I don’t care,” he said simply, his eyes charmed by the moon as he stood still. “Is there a way that the guests can access the rooftop without all that ducking.”

“Yes, there is a garden round the back. I’ll just open it up so they can access the garden and climb the stairs to the rooftop,”

“Nice, let’s do this,” I smiled as I watched him. He was mesmerized by the moon, but I couldn’t get enough of how beautiful he looked standing there. He was my moon.

“Come,” I invited, reaching out to grasp his hand. As our palms connected, I relished the warmth that spread through my body. Leading him to the edge of the rooftop, I looked at him one more time, and he held my gaze.

For a long moment, we just stood there, searching each other’s souls through the gateways that were our eyes. I wasn’t afraid to let him in, and in that moment, I wished what we had was real. I wanted to kiss him.

“You get the best view of the moon from here.” I sat on the edge and watched him as he struggled in his suit to get beside me. I chuckled, and he rolled his eyes.

“You could have asked me to change, at least.”

“No, I actually love this. Me, sitting here in tees and jeans, next to you, straddled in an expensive suit—it’s poetic. It’s the theme I want for this place. A place where everyone belongs.” I nodded in the silence.

He turned to me. “Do you have any friends that you’d like to invite to the event?”

I turned to him, my eyes wide and my lips parted as I tried to feign hurt. “Are you suggesting, Mr. Steele, that all my friends are poor?”

He burst into a delightful fit of laughter, and I felt a strong urge to place my lips on his and savor that beautiful sound. When his laughter died down, I pulled out my burger and two sodas from my bag.

“I lost contact with all my friends after the whole incident. They were actually borrowed friends,” I said.

“Let me guess, partners of Greg’s friends?”

I nodded quietly. “I don’t know how I was so dumb to let him cage me in like that.”

There was a pause, and then he nudged me with his shoulder. “That, my lady, is your greatest weapon against him right now. Don’t see it as a weakness.”

I looked up at him. “And how’s that?”

He took a bite out of his burger and chewed in silence as he stared into the sky. “You gave him the idea that he has control over your life. That’s why he’s out there playing his dirty tricks and waiting for you to snap. But once he realizes how easy it is for you to snatch your life back, it would kill him.”

I let out a wry chuckle. “I wouldn’t say *easy*.”

He turned his head toward me. “Look at me,” he said. I met his gaze, and he continued, “I don’t know how many times I’d have to tell you this, but I’d even start a podcast if I have to. You are the strongest woman I know, Liv. Not many women would’ve handled this whole situation the way you have, and I’m proud of you.”

We sat in silence so thick I could swear he could hear my heart pounding in my chest. Then, I saw it clearly in his eyes—desire, the same intense feeling that had kept me in a chokehold all evening.

Leaning closer, he prompted me to close my eyes, and I could sense his soft breaths on my lips. Tilting my head to the side, I prepared for what felt like an imminent kiss.

Suddenly, the loud blaring of my ringtone tore through the silence.

He cleared his throat, leaning back, and I reached for my phone in my bag, thinking of a good reason not to fling it into the cold, dark evening. I sighed as I ended the call.

“It’s Sam. She’s probably looking for me.”

“Well, ending the call definitely wouldn’t help.”

“I know.” I sighed, inches away from tearing up. I had lost what would have been the highlight of my day—a perfect kiss under a perfect sky. I understood there was no getting it back; we had battled with our consciences hard enough to get that close.

He sighed before getting back to his feet. “We better get you home. You’ve got a launching party to plan.”

I sighed again, cheering up this time as I got to my feet as well. “And you, a charity event.”

He led my hand and led us back the way we came.

The next two days went by faster than I could keep up with, and the next thing I knew, I was standing in front of my mirror. Sam stood behind me, smiling from ear to ear.

“I hate that I’m going to miss your launch. You look so stunning,” she said, and I couldn’t deny it. I had my hair styled into a neat bun, two silky strands falling down the sides of my slightly made-up face.

There were dark circles around my eyes, which made my fair skin appear even fairer, and my dark red lipstick popped.

A slim necklace with a diamond pendant rested on my neck, matching the studs in my ears.

I turned, observing how the shimmering gold dress hugged my figure, accentuating my curves. It fell just below my knee, giving room for the soft glow of my skin above my ankles, strapped in black heels. I felt like it was prom night all over again.

“I hate you. How could you miss it?” I said, turning to Sam, who stood in her regular casual fit.

“I’m really sorry. My department is just under heavy pressure this period, and it would be selfish of me if—”

I pulled her into a hug. “I know, you’ve got to go save the day again. It’s enough for me knowing I have your full support no matter what part of the world you are.”

She tightened our embrace. “Always, Oly. I will always love and support you.”

“Always,” I whispered, fighting back tears.

We released each other, and I chuckled. I was overwhelmed by how much love and support I had gotten over the past few days. If anyone had told me, the day I walked away from that altar, that I would still be in the same city, living my best life only weeks later, I would’ve denied it.

As we walked out of the house, we found Alex standing in front of a car, his back facing us. I wondered where he was always getting cars from, especially since this wasn’t even his city.

Then again, he was pretty rich and apparently very famous.

He turned around, and his cheeky smile dropped as his eyes found me. “Well, fuck Greg.”

Chapter Sixteen

PRETEND DEAR, PRETEND

Alexander Steele

The ride to the event took longer than expected in New York's ever-bustling traffic. It probably would have been better if I had Derek drive us, but I wanted to spend this evening alone with Olivia, whom I found myself struggling not to stare at.

She looked extremely gorgeous tonight, and I found myself in an internal struggle, torn between keeping my eyes on the road and wanting to gaze into her beautiful eyes all night.

If I thought she looked her best with her hair down, I definitely wasn't ready for the princess she became with her hair styled up and two strands falling on both sides of her face. Her dark red lipstick, accentuating her full and bold lips, had become my new weakness.

Her dress, gold and sparkly, hugged her body nicely with a neckline that showed just enough cleavage to make me dance in my seat. It might be my imagination, but her eyes seemed to match her small necklace, which happened to be a diamond necklace.

“Eyes on the road, love. You’re not trying to get us killed, are you?” she suddenly asked, and I only just realized then that I’d been staring at her since I brought the car to a stop in the slow-moving traffic.

“Well, you sitting here and looking like a Greek goddess is messing up with my concentration levels,” I replied, my eyes meeting hers.

She blushed instantly, a hint of red coloring her fair face as she flashed a bright smile, and her eyes sparkled again. “You have plenty of time to stare at me later, but at least try to get us to the event venue safely. Otherwise, there won’t be a later,” she replied, still smiling.

I resumed driving, glad that the venue was just around the corner, even though I couldn’t resist the urge to steal glances at Olivia.

Twenty minutes of frustration later, we arrived at the venue. I had put a lot of work into ensuring this charity event would be splendid, and I was pleased with how we were starting off.

Olivia tucked her hand in mine as we walked into the large hall, where most of the guests had already arrived. I turned to look at her one last time, but she was already staring at me, wearing a big smile.

“Still haven’t stared at me enough?” she asked, looking up at me. The way she gazed right into my soul sent a warm fuzz through me. Now, I only had one regret: I should have taken the chance and kissed her earlier.

“I haven’t even started yet,” I replied, pulling her close and wrapping my hands around her waist to help her maintain balance. She looked around, a sign that she was environmentally conscious.

“People are watching us, Alex,” she whispered, trying to pull away from me.

I tightened my grip around her and closed every gap between us. “Let them watch. You’re here as my woman, after all, so they won’t be wrong to make assumptions,” I said, cupping her face in my hands.

She tried to look away, still unconvinced that it wasn't much of a big deal to have people give us attention. "Well, you know that's not what I meant." She paused and bit her lip, a sexy gesture that made it extremely hard for me to remain composed.

"What are you worried about, Liv?"

She sighed. "I meant the paparazzi. They already recognize me as Greg's runaway bride, and I worry they might project that onto you."

"That's the last thing you should worry about, darling, especially at an event like this. We're here to have fun, and we'll do just that," I reassured her and released her.

We made our way to the VIP seat reserved for me. Olivia was right; many people were staring, and some didn't even bother to take their eyes off when I looked at them. *The nerve of these people.*

Even though it was my charity event, I had handed over all organization rights to her. I was only here as a guest, monitoring the outcome of the event.

As Layla gave the opening speech and welcomed notable folks, I kept my eyes on Olivia. She had turned in her seat a few times, and I knew she was uncomfortable.

"You okay, babe?" I asked.

She forced a smile and nodded. "Yeah, I just feel a little out of place since I haven't really been to an event like this, where folks of the highest class in New York are gathered."

She looked adorable right now, and I could not help but smile. Layla was about to round up, and then I had to give a brief introduction and brief the guests about the event.

"I'll be going up in a few seconds now, but would you like to get some fresh air afterward? It's going to turn into a mini party once I finish anyway," I said.

She smiled a bit more genuinely this time. "That's fine then. Good luck."

I stood up and headed to the front of the hall to address the guests.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” I began, and the room erupted in loud clapping and cheering, most of which came from my fans who had attended the event.

My eyes met Olivia once again. It wasn’t hard to spot her from here, as she was literally sitting to my right, her face bright as she focused on me. My god, she’s a sight to behold.

I cleared my throat. “I’m honored to have the finest men and women of New York City, as well as the city’s most valued people, seated in this room today. I appreciate the time you’ve set aside, despite being the busiest people in this city, to gather here today for this charity event. Thank you, once again,” I expressed, and the room responded with applause.

I continued the speech as I briefed the guests on the purpose of the charity and outlined the vision for the agenda.

Twenty minutes later, I left the podium amid loud cheering and claps as I got back to my seat. Olivia gently squeezed my palms, beaming with pride as she whispered, “You did well,” into my ears.

I waited until the lights were turned off so everyone could watch a video clip that highlighted all we had done in our previous charity campaign. Then, I led Olivia out to the garden.

The garden was quite my favorite part of this remote paradise. No one ever was out here, and favorite part of it. No one ever came out here, and the air always smelt like fresh flowers. the air smelt like fresh flowers.

“Isn’t it so pretty,” Olivia remarked as we walked into the garden. The moon shone brightly, providing enough light to see Olivia’s pretty eyes clearly.

“It really is. It has been my favorite spot for a while now whenever I get the chance to come here,” I said as I led her to a bench in the garden.

The evening air was chilly, and I noticed goosebumps forming on Olivia’s bare arms, even though her face did

nothing to express how she felt. She was the kind of woman you'd have to pay close attention to; otherwise, you might miss a lot of things about her.

To alleviate the chill, I took off my tuxedo jacket and placed it around her, pulling her into my arms. She rested her head on my chest as we sat in silence for a while, my heart beating faster than normal.

“You know, I had doubts about staying back in New York after Greg and I called things off,” she started to say, her eyes fixed on the moon.

“Well, what changed?” I asked, although I knew she would get to that part eventually.

“Well, I met you, and then I had Samantha, who made sure I was always okay and kept me strong. For a woman who thought her world would crumble after my life took that drastic turn, I must say the past month has been one of the best times of my life, especially since I met you.”

Cupping her face, I positioned her to look at me, staring into her bright blue eyes. Her eyes met mine as she rested her chin in my palms, and I pulled her close.

Neither of us said anything as our lips met, and I kissed her, my tongue encircling hers. Her mouth was warm, and I drew her even closer, savoring the taste.

Her arms went around my neck, and mine wrapped around her waist as she drew nearer, etching her body onto mine. She smelled so good that I moved my mouth to her neck and kissed the nape of it. A mix of lavender and honey filled my lungs, and I inhaled deeply to immerse myself in the fragrance.

She let out a soft gasp as my tongue trailed her neck, holding onto me tightly. Suddenly, we heard the rustling of dry leaves from behind us, prompting Olivia to pull away.

“We probably should head back inside now,” she suggested, tucking an invisible strand of hair behind her ears. Before I could respond, she was already on her feet, so I followed after

her. I wondered about the source of the noise, wishing I could snap its neck for ruining such an incredible moment.

Olivia looked flushed as we entered the bright hall, and I could feel my cheeks burning as well. Just in time, we walked in to join the waltz dance, and I pulled her hands just before she got to her seat.

“It would be a crime if I don’t ask you to dance with me,” I remarked as I stretched my hands toward her.

She smiled and placed her hands in mine, allowing me to pull her up and lead her to the dance floor. “I don’t know how to dance, especially not the waltz,” she admitted, glancing around to observe the other couples dancing.

“Well then, follow my lead and place the tips of your feet on mine,” I instructed.

She did as I said, placing her hands on my shoulders. My hands naturally went to her waist, and we started to move slowly, matching the rhythm of the music.

After a few moments, Olivia seemed to have gotten the hang of it, twirling around in my arms, her face bright and relaxed. I could watch her be like this all night.

The dance went on for twenty minutes more until the first music stopped. Falling short of breath, she leaned close to my ear and whispered, “I’ll be back shortly. I need the restroom.”

I nodded and watched her exit the hall in a hurry. Some ladies had been sitting behind us, their eyes on our table all night—well, mostly on me—and I could tell they were fans because they had my merch from last year.

As soon as I returned to my seat, I felt their eyes piercing at me, although I tried to ignore it.

“Isn’t that the runaway bride girl that left Gregory Hathaway at the altar a few months ago?” one of them, a blonde woman, asked the rest of the table.

“Right! I wondered why she looked familiar. What is she doing with Alex at an event like this?” another woman with a short red pixie cut chimed in.

I could tell the gossip was purposely done for me to hear, as they knew they were within earshot. I chose to ignore it, although I could clearly hear all of it.

“Well, you know what they say. If a gold digger doesn’t find gold in one man, she runs off to the next so she can leech off him. How shameless!” the last woman, a chubby woman with black hair, added.

I could handle assumptions, but what I would not allow is random women calling Olivia names. I turned slowly to face them, ignoring the shocked look on their faces.

“Excuse me, ladies, but with all due respect, you know close to nothing about Olivia, the woman you assumed to be a gold digger because she refused to ruin her life by marrying Greg. I advise you to keep your mouths shut.” I watched their eyes grow wide as they stared at me. “Olivia is an amazing person, and if she really wanted to dig gold like you claimed, she wouldn’t have canceled her wedding to a multimillionaire. Doesn’t that say much about Gregory Hathaway instead? Have you ever stopped to think about it?”

They seemed tongue-tied as I looked away from them, fighting the urge to laugh at their bewildered faces. I stood up as soon as I saw Olivia walking back in.

“The event is almost over, and I’m sure you’re tired already. Shall we take our leave then?” I asked, and she looked relieved.

“All right then,” she said, and we made our way out of the hall, escaping the darting eyes and accusatory looks.

Chapter Seventeen

SAM IS PISSED

Olivia Sanders

The entire night with Alex had been splendid. Initially, I had no interest in attending the charity event, knowing it would draw the public's eye to me, especially since I'd be seen with Alex. However, I knew how much it meant to him, so I decided to go.

The evening turned out to be better than I expected, despite the whisperings and piercing stares from those around us.

My face blushed as I remembered the moments we shared in the garden, and the flashbacks felt like I was experiencing his lips on mine again.

Alex was driving beside me, his hands interlocked with mine. His eyes were on the road this time, and it was suddenly my turn to stare.

The flashlights from other cars cast a glow on his face, making his green eyes appear like clear emeralds. I watched as he pursed his lips, a habit I had come to recognize when he's completely focused on something.

“Do you want me to kiss you again?” he suddenly asked, and my face turned completely red. I turned my eyes away from him and smiled. He always knew how to get me.

“Well, I won’t mind another kiss. I could kiss you all night long if we had the chance,” I replied, pretending not to hear him say “Damn” under his breath.

“You’re tempting me, Liv.”

I smiled again, our eyes meeting briefly before he turned to face the road again. “That was kind of the point.”

He suddenly turned into the driveway of a fast-food restaurant and stopped the car. “I’m starving.”

We got out of the car and entered the crowded restaurant lobby. The last thing I expected at a small restaurant at 9:45 p.m. was a crowd of this size.

“The food better taste like heaven for the crowd to be of this size,” I commented as we approached the counter. Alex scanned through the menu boldly displayed on the screen above the counter.

“What would you like to have?” he asked, and I briefly looked through the menu before settling on a chicken salad and water.

Alex chose a double cheeseburger with fries and cola before we headed back to the car. I had insisted we eat in the car, as I wasn’t a fan of crowded, small spaces.

The food exceeded my expectations. The salad was crispy, and the chicken was tender. I could tell from the look of it that Alex’s burger was juicy, the cheese soaking into the meat.

“We should come here again. Their food is top tier,” Alex said through a mouth filled with fries.

“I agree. The food is worth driving five miles for—although we definitely have to pick a better time. I hate crowds.”

We spent the next ten minutes eating quietly and allowing the food to settle in. Having had our fill, Alex started the car again. We were still a few miles away from Sam’s apartment.

There wasn't any traffic this time, so we would definitely get there in less than half an hour. Wanting to pass the time, I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my news feed.

Fuck! I read through the hundreds of articles that continuously popped up as I scrolled. Hideous headlines filled my news feed, featuring my name and a very good photo of Alex and me from tonight.

"Oh shit, we're done for," I said to Alex. He glanced at me briefly, a frown forming on his face when he saw my serious face.

"What's going on?" he asked, still trying to focus on his driving. Unsure of how to explain, so I read one of the article's headlines: *runaway bride makes a comeback with famous rockstar Alexander Steele.*

Alex laughed as I stressed the pronunciation of his name. How could he possibly laugh in a situation like this?

"That sounds so ridiculous and unprofessional. Who would write such nonsense?" he asked, still seeming unbothered.

"There are thousands of articles with similar headlines. Some even claim we're engaged, while others just say we're dating. Another one says I was dating you secretly while I had Greg." I sighed and closed my eyes, wishing I could erase all I'd just read.

"Now that sounds terrible. I wonder how they could have released so many articles in barely two hours." This time, he looked quite concerned.

His phone started to ring, but he ignored it. The caller was relentless and continued to call until he got fed up and picked up.

"Hey, Mother," he said, putting the call on loudspeaker.

"Alex! How long does it take to pick up your damn phone?" she yelled, and I almost jumped in fear.

"I was busy, Mom. What's going on?" he asked, and I could tell he was pretending to have no idea why she was reacting that way.

“I’m also just as busy, but that’s not why I called. What’s this news circulating on the Internet about you dating someone?”

Alex sighed, and I stayed breathless in my seat. It was bad enough that I had to read vile articles about me online, sitting through Alex’s conversation with his angry-sounding mother.

“I am dating someone, Mother,” he replied, and I heard a loud, dramatic gasp coming from her end of the phone.

“Oh, Alex, how could you keep something this big from me? I am your mother, for crying out loud.” An uncomfortable silence ensued after she spoke, and I wished I wasn’t in the car witnessing this.

“I was eventually going to mention it to you, Mother,” His voice was a lot calmer now. Whatever manipulative string his mother had pulled, it was definitely working.

“Who is she? What’s her family background? Does she have ___”

“Her name is Olivia, and you’ll get to meet her soon enough.” He hung up the phone before his mother could say anything else and let out a huge sigh. I stayed frozen in my seat, unsure of what to say next.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked when I remained quiet for a while. We were getting much closer to Sam’s place, and I couldn’t wait to be out of the car already.

“Uh-huh,” I managed to respond. I felt uneasy, and I feared that he would notice if I said anything more.

He opened his mouth to ask again, but another phone call came in. He checked it and sighed again. He had done a lot of sighing since I read the news to him.

As much as I worried about being in the media’s spotlight, my biggest fear was about Alex. He had a career to protect, and news like this usually created a dent for public figures.

He finally picked up the call. “Layla.”

The voice this time was more frantic than his mother’s. She sounded genuinely worried. “Mr. Steele, where are you? You

left the event before I even got a chance to speak with you.” She stopped, trying to catch her breath. It was obvious she was moving at a fast pace.

“I got tired and headed home. What’s the issue?”

“Well, you made news headlines. Thousands of comments and articles have been made about you and ...” She stopped again and then continued, “Miss Sanders. You’re currently the number one trending search on all social media platforms.”

“Well, is that something? I’ve seen almost all of it, but I’m exhausted right now. Let’s talk tomorrow,” he said and hung up before she said anything else.

The car finally pulled up in front of Sam’s apartment, and I let out a huge sigh of relief. It felt like an excruciating, long journey.

“Do you want to come in?” I asked as I took off my seatbelt.

He shook his head. “It’s late, and we’re both clearly tired, so I think I should head home. Goodnight, Liv.” He pulled in and gave me a full kiss on the lip.

I mustered a smile and got out of the car. Exhausted as I was, I walked toward the door and inserted my key. The door opened, letting me through and shutting as soon as I released it.

Samantha stood there with a phone in her hand, eyeing me intensely.

“Hey, girl,” I greeted as I took off my shoes. Relief eased through me as my feet touched the warm rug. I hadn’t realized how much pain I was in until now.

“Yeah, hey,” she replied dryly as her eyes lingered on me. She looked really upset, and it was starting to scare me.

“What’s wrong, Sam?” I asked now, standing up.

She raised her phone to my face, showing me the blog articles. My heart sank as the realization hit me. I had been worried about myself and Alex all night, but I never thought of Sam. She was my best friend and Alex’s sister, but we kept her in the dark about our relationship this whole time.

“Sam, I ...”

She raised her hand to stop me. “Is it true?” she asked, and I fell silent. Explaining would be unnecessary right now because the damage had already been done. “I need answers, Olivia!” she yelled, and I jumped. It had been a while since I had seen Samantha this angry, and I knew how scary she could be when upset.

“I’m sorry, Sam. I really wanted to tell you, but the timing was never right, and ...”

“And I get to find out from the Internet instead. Best friends indeed.” She laughed, a scary and dry sound.

“Sam, please. I really meant to tell you, I swear,” I tried again, even though she had clearly taken a stance.

“Why Alex, of all people? You know very well that he is my brother. Why him?” she asked, coming close to me.

When Alex and I started having feelings for each other, my biggest fear was Samantha. She was an extremely cool person, but she loved her brother so much. I had no idea how she’d take the news, and I was afraid it wouldn’t be a positive reaction, so in my cowardice, I kept stalling the news, waiting for an inexistent right time.

“I’m sorry, Sam, but it just sort of happened. I told you earlier, but I just couldn’t find the time to tell you the details,” I said, my words failing me.

“For fuck sake, Olivia! We live together, so what do you mean you couldn’t find the time to tell me that you’ve been screwing my brother or even dating him?” she asked, and I stood quietly, my eyes pleading with her, realizing that my earlier confession had not sunk in with her.

“I feel so stupid, Olivia. You made me look like a fool tonight. Best friends, yet I find out about your relationship with my own brother like I am some random stranger.”

She started to pace around, and it made me nervous. I avoided her eyes as she glared at me, both of us silent.

“Please, Sam ...” I said, unsure what to say next.

“I’m always supportive of your decisions, Oly. I always want what’s best for you, but dating my brother is where I draw the line, actually. You’d either end things with him now, or I’ll have you move out of this house.” She left afterward, and I watched her, too stunned to do anything else.

Chapter Eighteen

HELL BREAKS LOOSE

Alexander Steele

I picked up my phone again and looked through it. No missed calls or messages from Olivia. The last time we spoke was last night when I dropped her off at Sam's place. I hadn't heard from her since then, and I was starting to get worried now.

I tried to call her again, but my call was forwarded to voicemail again. Feeling slightly frustrated, I headed to the studio, even though it was only 7:00 a.m.

Layla and Mother had both taken turns blowing up my phone all night. It got to the point where I had to turn off my phone. I was glad most of my business-related calls were forwarded to Layla. The past twelve hours had been overwhelming, with numerous blog pages and news agencies reaching out to me.

The ride to the studio was a short one, as the roads were still quite clear when I left my house.

As soon as I walked into the studio, Layla was right there waiting for me. I sighed as I approached her and took the coffee she held up for me.

“Good morning, Layla,” I said, and she followed me into the office. I could tell by her hastened steps that she was upset.

“I tried calling you all through the night, sir,” she started off as soon as we entered the office.

“Well, I was tired and had to sleep. That’s what nights are for, isn’t it?”

She sighed, and I knew she was trying to hold it together. “And this morning?” she asked in her most polite tone.

“I had to prepare for work. Besides, I’m here, aren’t I?”

She settled into a chair opposite me and opened the work laptop. I watched as she scrolled through various social media news feeds and comment sections. I did not say anything until she was done showing me just how much damage my recent relationship revelation had done.

“All of this, and it’s not even twenty-four hours yet,” she said, sighing out of exhaustion.

“They’ll die down eventually. Something bigger would make headlines, and I’ll be all forgotten,” I tried to assure her, but she looked even more frustrated.

“How long would that take? Do you know how many blog pages would milk this story before then? A lot of our sponsors and brand deals are already putting a temporary hold on their contracts with us as we speak,” she said, and I stayed silent for a moment.

I’ve always known that being in the spotlight came with its perks, but days like this made me hate it all. The crazy obsession the media had over my life made me suffocated. I always get the urge to leave it all behind.

Layla was still scrolling through the Internet, trying to delete as many vile comments as she could from my accounts. When the comments became overwhelming and unending, she turned them off completely.

“Let’s lay low for a while, at least until we can get everything to die down a bit. Maybe reduce your public appearance with Miss Sanders for a while?” she asked, although it was clearly a subtle suggestion.

“I’m not breaking up with Olivia, so in all of our resolving, I really hope that doesn’t become one of the options,” I said, and her expression was blank for a moment. As much as I knew she was in a tight corner, what I shared with Olivia was far more important than anything else.

“Well, I’m not asking you to do that, sir, and I mean absolutely no disrespect, but Miss Sanders did make an incredible impression on the media a few months ago, and that had put her in the public’s black book since then. All I’m saying is, until the air is cleared, we should try to keep you in the clear for now,” she explained.

I sighed aloud. The conversation itself was getting quite exhausting, and I needed a break from all the noise. “All right, let’s talk about all of it later. I’m going for a drive. Please try not to call me at that time. I’m already tired of you.”

Layla was out of the office shortly after, and I picked up my keys and jacket. I contemplated leaving my phone in the studio, but the hope of getting to reach Olivia later encouraged me to take it.

I walked quickly to my car, desperate to get away from everything. Olivia being unreachable was at the top of my list of frustrations.

I dialed Samantha, hoping to reach Olivia through her. She was the only person who hadn’t called me since the media craze, and I wondered if she had no idea about what was going on.

The phone rang for a long while before she finally picked it up. “Hey there, little sis.”

“Yeah, what’s up?” she asked dryly, her tone cold. What has been happening with everyone lately?

“You okay? I don’t know, but you sound quite cold right now.” Samantha and I had been close since childhood, so I

could always tell when she wasn't in the best mood.

"I'm chill. What do you want?" she asked again, and I decided to let her be. I'm not exactly in the best state to start playing the concerned big brother anyway.

"Uh ... I can't reach Olivia for some reason, and I'd like to know if you can help me get through to her."

"Sorry, bro, I can't help," she responded quickly. Too quickly.

"Why? What's wrong?" I asked, getting impatient with her attitude. Regardless of her being an adult, Samantha had the tendency to be extremely childish, especially at moments when it was not needed.

"Nothing. I don't know where she is either, so of course, I can't help you reach her." The passive-aggressive tone was so clear, making me almost a hundred percent sure something was up.

"Okay, can you help me get through to her on the phone? I need to discuss something with her urgently," I said, trying my best to keep my voice calm.

"Of course, you have something to *discuss* with her. Anyways, I'm not your messenger, so sort your shit out yourself!"

The phone disconnected immediately, and I sat confused as to what that was about.

I started the car afterward and drove toward the highway, blasting some old country jams on my radio. I had no destination in mind, but I was desperate to get as far away as possible if it meant I had peace for a few hours.

Two hours later, I made a stop by a park in downtown Manhattan, although I wasn't familiar with the environment. It seemed quiet enough, so I walked in and sat on a bench right in the middle of the park.

The air was cool despite the bright sun above me, as the tree provided shade. No one else was present in the park except for a group of choristers practicing at the far end of the park.

Closing my eyes, I raised my head to breathe in the cool air, the scent of flowers filling my nostrils. If only I could stay here long enough until the world was calm again. It would be so much better with Olivia by my side. I pulled out my phone and tried to call her again.

The number you have dialed is not ...

I hung up, resisting the urge to throw the phone across the park. I was starting to get worried now. Samantha's attitude made me even more worried, but there wasn't anyone else I could contact at the moment.

My phone buzzed just then, and I quickly turned the screen, hoping for a callback. When I saw it was an unknown number, I dropped the phone in frustration. The number continued to call a few more times, making me wonder if it was Samantha trying to reach me. I picked up immediately and placed the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

No one spoke for a moment until a familiar voice came on. "Why are you ignoring my calls, Alexander?"

Fuck. "Mother, why aren't you calling me with your actual number?" I asked and instantly regretted my question as soon as it came out.

"Are you being serious right now? You've practically ignored me for over eighteen hours, and I called your secretary, but she told me you had stepped out. I did what I could to reach my son." Her tone was dramatic, so I did not bother countering her. I knew better than anyone else that a dramatic Nina Steele wasn't one I'd want to argue with.

"All right. What is so important that you almost blew up my phone?" I asked, acting oblivious.

"Talk to me. Who is this runaway bride you're dating? Why are you involved with someone who would cause you problems? I've tried my best to set you up with the best girls in the country, but you've chosen to lower your standards once again." She stopped, and the phone fell silent for a moment.

Here we go again. “Finest girls according to your standards, not mine,” I said, wishing I could avoid this conversation. So much for taking a break.

“What more do you want? They’re beautiful and smart, attended the best schools, and have reputable families. Do you know how many men would beg to marry them? And even if you had to pick someone, why must it be a girl with a stained reputation for crying out loud?”

“I’ve heard you, but I promise Olivia is not all the media says. I’d love to explain it to you, but let’s save it for when we meet,” I spoke calmly, unwilling to give her a reason to argue further.

“And when would that be?” she asked again, her voice a bit calmer now.

“Very soon, Mother. Goodbye.” I hung up shortly after and relaxed when she didn’t call back again.

My short holiday was suddenly ruined, and as I started to head back, my phone rang once again. I felt relief seeing the call was from Samantha.

“Where have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you since last night,” I said before she had a chance to speak.

“Yeah, we need to talk right now, Alex. Your place, please. I’ll be there in an hour.” The line went dead before I could ask any questions, but the urgency in her voice prompted me to rush toward my car and drive at full speed.

Upon reaching my apartment, I found Olivia waiting on my front porch and hurried toward her. She looked pale, and the dark circles around her eyes were more visible than before.

“Are you okay, babe?” I asked, gently cupping her face in my hands. My heart sank when she immediately pulled away.

“I’m fine. Let’s go in,” she replied without looking at me, and I opened the door, holding it wide open to let her in.

“Samantha found out about our relationship, and she wasn’t too happy,” she said as soon as I shut the door. She was pacing

around my living room now, looking more tense than I had ever seen her.

“I suspected something was wrong when I spoke to her earlier, but she wouldn’t say anything, so I couldn’t make sense of it,” I said.

Olivia didn’t respond. She continued to pace around until I placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Sit, please.”

She shrugs me off. “I love Samantha, and I can’t lose my best friend because of a make-believe relationship.” Her words felt like a blow to my face, and I suddenly realized how right she was. Painfully so, but still right.

With our recent development, I had forgotten about the circumstances surrounding our relationship for a moment. Of course, this was just a big arrangement to help her get back at Greg. In my defense, we had both gotten carried away, and everything had felt real.

“Right, you’re right. But we have an objective, and we’re not there yet. When the time is right, we’ll tell her if there’s a need to.” My last words caused Olivia to stop pacing, and she turned to face me.

She didn’t ask questions, and I didn’t bother explaining myself because I wasn’t sure what I’d say if I had to.

Chapter Nineteen

STILL FAKING?

Olivia Sanders

I woke up to the strong aroma of pancakes and fried eggs. The air had been filled with it for a while now, but I was trying to get some extra sleep, so I refused to get out of bed.

As the aroma grew stronger, my stomach started to betray me, and I was forced to wake up. Putting on some sweatpants, I rushed out of my room and dashed toward the kitchen, eager to have a taste.

I stopped right at the door as my mind suddenly snapped back to reality, and I remembered the current situation. Samantha and I were not on speaking terms. She was successfully ignoring me, which meant we no longer shared anything with each other.

I slowly walked back to my room, my stomach still growling in hunger. As soon as I shut the door, I groaned in agony into my pillow. I hated being in this situation, but there wasn't much I could do right now.

Getting Samantha to listen would be quite tough, and I still wasn't ready to explain everything to her—at least, not yet.

I picked up my phone and dialed Alex. It was past 7:00 a.m., and from what I knew, he had nothing scheduled for the day.

“Hey ...” a deep, husky tone came on the phone that made me breathless for a moment. I wasn't expecting him to still be asleep, but his morning voice wasn't something I was prepared for in any way.

“You owe me breakfast, Mr. Steele,” I said after a moment. I listened as I heard him stretch loudly and clear his throat. I wished I was there to witness it.

“And why is that?” he asked in a clearer tone. I suddenly missed the growly morning voice I heard a minute ago.

“Apart from Pancake House, no one else makes fluffy and tasty pancakes like Samantha does, and I'm sure you're aware of that. The enticing aroma of her pancakes woke me up, but unfortunately, I can't even get a taste of them because we're not on speaking terms, and you know whose fault that is.”

“Mine, of course,” he replied. “Exactly. So do something about it, mister,” I said, although I had nothing in mine. Part of me was hungry and grumpy, while the other part just wanted to see him.

“Let's go to Pancake House then. Should I pick you up?” he asked, and I immediately got off the bed.

“So that we rub our annoying asses in Sam's face? Hell no. I'll get an Uber and meet you there.” I hung up shortly after and dashed into the bathroom.

A few minutes later, I was squeaky clean and out. I picked out a flowery red dress and put it on. Brushing my hair neatly, I pulled into a ponytail and applied a little blush and lipstick to give my face some color.

When I was satisfied with my appearance, I strolled out of my room and headed out. Samantha was in the dining area, having breakfast, when I walked past, but she didn't even look up from her phone.

“Sam ...” I started to speak, and she immediately stood up to leave. Despite trying to act unbothered, getting the silent treatment from her was killing me on the inside.

Putting away the bad feeling, I ordered an Uber and waited outside for the ride to arrive. I got into the Uber a few minutes later, and he drove off.

Alex was sitting at a table when I got to the restaurant, and I joined him immediately.

“That was quicker than I expected,” he said as I sat down.

“I live a mile and a half away from here,” I said as I sat down.

“I was waiting for you so we could order together,” he said and opened the menu book on the table. With a go-to order for Pancake House, I didn’t bother looking through the menu.

Alex opted for a simple breakfast with eggs and bacon, while I chose a full breakfast menu that had scrambled eggs, baked beans, pancakes with syrup, and bacon.

“How do you manage to eat all that and still not gain any weight?” he asked, his eyes wide as the waiter placed a full tray in front of me.

“I honestly don’t know, but I’m not complaining either.” We started to eat, and I found it hard to take my eyes off Alex.

His golden-blond hair was growing beyond his jaw, slicked back behind his ears. His eyes appeared a brighter green today, giving his lips a bloody red tone, almost like a vampire.

I stole glances often enough that our eyes met a few times. His features were perfectly etched into my brain at this point, and images of him often found themselves in my head involuntarily.

He was quite the sight, and sitting right in front of me at that moment didn’t help matters. Our eyes met once again, and I forced my eyes to stay on my plate for the rest of the meal.

My stomach felt like it would burst after the heavy meal, so Alex suggested we take a walk to ease indigestion.

I didn't protest when he took my hand in his as we walked through a quiet New York street. His excuse? We still needed to appear like a couple in public places to make our "relationship" look more authentic and believable.

I didn't mind. If we were being honest, holding hands with Alex was something I looked forward to. His palms were large and manly, and for a brief moment, it felt like those hands were grabbing onto me.

"What are you doing later tonight?" he asked after we walked for a while.

I shrugged. "I'd be home, probably binge-watching my favorite TV show."

"Great! I'd love to spend time with you this evening if you would also want that."

I smiled as soon as he asked. "Where would we be going?" I asked, unsure what to make of his little request. For all I know, I was probably the only one with the butterflies.

"Just out for drinks. We've both had a hectic time in the past two weeks, so I guess we could do with a few cups of alcohol," he replied.

Nodding, I said, "Well, I guess you could pick me up this time. Samantha would be out all afternoon. She'd be back late, so I don't think you'd get to run into her anyway."

Alex's eyes suddenly lost color, and I could tell my words affected him. He wasn't on the best of terms with his sister after the whole dating scene, and things hadn't improved since then. If there was anything I had learned from being around the Steele kids for a while, it was that they both had an awful amount of pride.

Samantha was the kind to drag out an issue for as long as she felt like it. She had once stayed a year without speaking to her mother after Mrs. Steele had successfully paid off her then-boyfriend. It took her aunt's intervention and a forced apology from the older woman to get them back on speaking terms.

As for Alex, he didn't like being pushed around. He wanted to always have control of the situation and would much rather try a thousand different ways to make the situation better instead of outrightly apologizing.

"That works for me. I'll pick you up by seven o'clock then," he said as we approached his car. He had parked some distance away from the restaurant, so we spent a great deal of time walking down here.

Alex drove me home, stopping a few yards away from the apartment, and I walked the rest of the way home. I spent the entire afternoon catching up on a book series while secretly anticipating spending time with Alex.

It was 6:55 p.m. when Alex pulled in front of the apartment. I had already gotten up earlier, but I couldn't bring myself to call him so he would not know how eager I was about tonight.

The doorbell finally rang, and I tried not to rush toward it. I opened the door ten seconds later, prepared for the Alex my eyes met.

He was wearing a wine-colored shirt with three undone buttons, giving way for me to see his chest. His well-toned arms looked like they could burst through his shirt at any moment, and I had a hard time taking my eyes off them.

His hair had a wet, curly look, indicating he had just washed, and I wished I could run my hands through it.

As he walked into the apartment, I held the door, catching a whiff of aftershave mixed with a sweet vanilla cologne. We were yet to start the night, and he already had me in a chokehold.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his eyes briefly checking out the short green dress I had on, hugging my body in all the right places. The dress was sleeveless and revealed a lot of my upper chest, where Alex's eyes were now focused.

"Yeah, I'll grab my purse, and we'll go." He waited as I rushed into my room to get my little brown purse, and we headed out of the apartment.

The ride to the club was brief but felt tense and longer. I struggled to keep my eyes away from him, fighting the overwhelming urge to bury my head in his neck.

I did a brief breathing exercise as soon as I got out of the car. The night was yet to start, but I was already looking forward to it.

“What would you like to drink?” Alex asked as soon as we got a reserved table.

Scanning through the drink list for something strong, I replied, “Tequila would be fine.”

He motioned to the waiter and ordered a martini for himself and a tequila for me. A loud hip-hop song played on the radio, but surprisingly, I found myself vibing to it. Our drinks eventually arrived, and we both took a shot at the same time. The hotness of the tequila pinched my tongue a little until it rested in my throat. Sharp as it tasted, I needed something to ease the tension I was feeling right now.

“Have I told you just how stunning you look tonight?” Alex asked after a few glasses of martini.

I wasn't quite sober myself, so I shook my head. “You haven't, but I'd love to hear it,” I replied, my head leaning toward his face. He looked even better up close, or was it the alcohol?

“You're a fucking stunner, Olivia,” he said and smiled, revealing a perfect set of pearly whites. He was staring at me, his eyes traveling down my skin and coming back to my eyes again.

Feeling courageous due to the effect of a few tequila shots, I held his jaw and leaned forward, unsure what to say. The music suddenly changed, and one of Alex's songs started to play, one of my favorite songs.

Alex's face lit up when I smiled. “Let's dance, shall we?” he asked, standing up and holding his hand out to me. I took his hand, and he led me to the dance floor.

We began dancing, starting off with a fast pace in sync with the music, and then we slowed down when a different tune

started playing. The song being played was quite sensual, so I was caught off guard when he pulled me close and grabbed one of my thighs.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, his eyes holding mine.

I wanted to look away, but my eyes seemed like they had a mind of their own. I nodded, trying not to think too much about the question. My hands stayed around his neck as I held onto him, allowing my waist to move slowly to the rhythm of the song.

My whole body pressed against his, our eyes interlocked. His lips were so close that I could feel his warm breath on my skin. Alex held my face up and locked his lips with mine, holding my waist firmly with his hand as I staggered backward.

I felt warmth between my legs as our tongues locked while he sucked my lips gently. With one hand on his chest and the other on his back, I closed my eyes and allowed everything to flow according to the mood.

After drinking in my lips and allowing me to savor the taste of his, he finally pulled away, but the hunger in his eyes remained.

“Let’s get out of here.” He pulled my hands desperately as we walked out of the bar, drove to his apartment, and eventually came to a stop when we got inside.

The door had barely shut when Alex’s mouth covered mine again, the hunger seeping through him. I wrapped my legs around him and let him place me on the dressing table, and his lips were all over my neck before I could think. I let out short gasps as his tongue trailed down my neck, and his hand made its way to my breast.

He teased, playing around my nipples without touching them, making my body itch to have him.

Feeling desperate, I started to unbutton his shirt, my hands working quickly until he stood bare-chested before me, his chest throbbing as he stared at me.

He unzipped my dress and lowered it as my breasts revealed themselves, my nipples hard and pointy. Alex's fingers circled them just then, making me whimper as he gently pinched and continued to tease me with his hand movements.

"Alex ..." I managed to say, the pleasure shooting through me. Desperate to feel some sort of control, my hands walked down his pants, and I pulled out his dick.

The action seemed to have taken him by surprise, but before he could say anything, I had slipped down to take him in. His dick filled my mouth, and I sucked on it, putting my tongue to good use.

"Fuck, Olivia ..." he moaned and grabbed my hair, holding it like his life depended on it. I continued to suck until he released into my mouth, forcing me to swallow all of it.

I smiled into his now flustered face, beaming with pride as I saw his reaction. It didn't last as he picked me up and threw me gently on the bed. My dress was completely off now, and all that was left were my panties. Alex slid them off me, and I spread my legs to give him a perfect view.

"So beautiful," he whispered and placed his fingers inside his mouth. Sticking two fingers in, he starts to fuck me with his fingers, sending intense pleasure through me.

"Oh, Alex," I cried as he got faster while I dripped on his fingers. He kept his eyes on me as his fingers worked their magic, and his other hand remained on my nipple. My moans were loud now as I felt close to climax.

I let out a loud scream as I climaxed, letting out all my juice on his fingers. He licked it off immediately and slid his cock inside before I could regain myself. Each thrust had an impact on my stomach, and I held onto him tightly, moaning aloud, while he continued to thrust through me, his waist moving fast.

"You're huge," I managed to say.

He smiled, saying, "You're not taking it all in yet."

My eyes widened as he slipped out and slid in again, this time pushing in until he was hitting the spot. If I felt intense

pleasure before, this was a mixture of pain and pleasure, but in a way that felt so good, I thought I'd pass out.

A few minutes later, Alex climaxed. As soon as I did, our loud moans echoed through the room as we both orgasmed. Alex stayed still for a while before falling off me and collapsing into the bed.

Chapter Twenty

REAL LOVE

Alexander Steele

I opened my eyes to see Olivia lying beside me, sleeping peacefully. I brushed the strands of hair from her face so I could see her features clearly. Her face was relaxed as she slept, her breathing easy. I could wake up to this view every day of my life and definitely not get tired.

Last night was intense, and I had no idea it would end that way when I asked her to spend the evening with me. She was more than perfect, and there wouldn't have been a better way to end the night than we did last night.

She rolled just then and opened her eyes. I watched her shut them and open them again until she looked up to see me.

“Good morning, beautiful,” I said as she pulled herself off.

“Hmm ...” she managed to let out as she stretched and lay down back. “What time is it?” she asked.

I pulled my phone from the drawer beside me. “It's almost eight a.m.,” I said.

Olivia flew out of the bed. “Holy crap, why didn’t you wake me up?” she asked, pacing around the room aimlessly.

I stood up and joined her, placing my hands on her waist to stop her. She turned to face me.

“I didn’t wake you up because it’s a Sunday morning. Now, stop moving around so early in the morning and relax,” I urged her.

She checked her phone to see if I was correct, then sat down on the bed. She didn’t say anything as we tucked ourselves back under the covers and lay still for a while. She was still naked, and the urge to continue what we had started last night was heavy on me. I was not sure she’d want to go another round, so I fought it.

“We should hit the shower,” I said and pulled her out of bed. She smiled as we walked into the bathroom, and I started to run hot water for the bath.

Once the water was at the right temperature, I dropped some bath bombs inside it, and we immersed ourselves in it.

Olivia looked extremely satisfied as she shut her eyes and smiled. “This feels so good,” she said.

Smiling, I replied, “It really does, especially with you.”

She did not respond. The rest of the bath was done in silence, and several minutes later, we headed out and started to get dressed. I watched as she struggled to slip on her dress, and I quietly offered my help. Surprisingly, she allowed me without any protest.

“We should get food,” she suddenly said as I got dressed, and I nodded in agreement. I was starving as well.

I held the door open for her, and I watched as she moved fast, stopping just at the entrance.

“My dress! I can’t wear it out,” she said.

I held my laughter. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with your dress, Olivia. People wear worse.”

She raised her eyebrow, and I knew I said something wrong. “I’m not other people, and I’m definitely not comfortable wearing this dress in broad daylight.”

It was evident I wouldn’t be able to convince her, so I got one of my spare tracksuits from the room and handed it to her. She disappeared into the bathroom. When she appeared again, she was in my tracksuit, which seemed a little too big for her.

“Much better?” I asked, and she nodded.

Still feeling a bit hungover from last night, we both ordered a simple breakfast, each accompanied by a cup of black coffee.

“I have something to tell you, Olivia,” I started off as soon as she finished the last piece of sausage on her plate.

“I’m all ears,” she said, but her face formed a frown immediately.

“Well ... I’ll be leaving New York soon. I have to make an important trip, but I’ll be back in a short while.”

“Okay, when are you leaving?” she asked, the frown on her face gone.

“Midweek, actually. I would have made it faster, but there’s something I need to tell you.”

“I’m listening,” she said and leaned forward. I bit my lips as I had no idea how to go about this.

“I really like you, Olivia, far more than I could put into words, and it’s killing me to pretend that I don’t when all I want is ...” I paused, taking a brief moment to pick out the appropriate words to describe how I felt. “All I want is to hold you close and never let you go,” I said.

She nodded. “Look, Alex ... I really don’t know what to say right now, but I also like you very much. It’s been torture trying to pretend that we’re just friends when I want more than that.”

I sighed, trying to hide my excitement. I had mentally prepared myself for all responses, but a positive one was the least I expected.

“You don’t know how happy I am to hear you say that, Olivia. I was worried you didn’t feel the same way, but hearing this”—I took her hands in mine and kissed them —“has made my entire day.”

She smiled, her small white teeth flashing before me. She allowed me to hold her hands as we walked out of the restaurant. We took a long walk until we saw a public bench.

I waited until we settled in the chair before I spoke again. “Now that we both know we like each other so much, what do you say we make it official?” I asked, turning to face her.

“What about Samantha? We haven’t even told her about our fake relationship. How would she react to knowing we’re really dating now?” Olivia asked, and my heart sank.

The whole time, I had been so preoccupied with thoughts of what could go wrong that I had almost forgotten what had already gone wrong. I still hadn’t spoken to Sam since the call I made to ask of Olivia. Sam had successfully made it a duty to ignore everyone, and I had no idea what to do.

Involving my mother would be a waste of time since I still hadn’t done a proper introduction between her and Olivia. The last thing I’d expect my mother to do would be to defend a woman she had not officially met over her precious daughter.

“You know what? I think we should tell her, and I want us to do it together,” I said.

Olivia smiled. She had been so afraid to do it alone. I could imagine how she felt now that she knew I’d do it with her.

“Oh, Alex, you’re the best!” She threw her arms around me, and I wrapped her in mine.

Chapter Twenty-One

SOME EXPLAINING TO DO

Olivia Sanders

This whole morning had been somewhat of a dream. Waking up next to Alex was an experience I wouldn't mind having for a lifetime. I know it was not the first time, but it felt so different now that I had fallen for him.

When he told me about his feelings for me, I initially thought it was a joke. We had just shared an amazing sex the previous night, so I assumed it was a result of the aftermath. I wouldn't have blamed him; it was one of the best sex I had ever had in my life.

My feelings for Alex had been developing for a long while now. At first, I thought I was just distracted because of our make-believe relationship, but the feelings grew stronger with each passing moment, and that scared me. The last thing I wanted was to have strong feelings for a man who didn't feel the same.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he asked, bringing my attention back to the car. He was driving us to Sam's apartment. After a

long discussion, we decided it was only right to inform Samantha already about the current state of our relationship.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just having flashbacks,” I said, my cheeks flushed a little.

He squeezed my thigh gently. “I’m glad I’m not the only one.”

His touch still managed to give me butterflies. I felt like a high school girl with her first crush whenever he stared at me with passion, and Alex was a very passionate man.

“Are you nervous?” I asked, although he didn’t seem like it.

He shook his head. “No, I’m not nervous. I most definitely hope she gives us listening ears, but we can always try again if she’s being difficult.”

I knew very well that he knew Sam more than I did, but I found it hard to be as relaxed as he was about everything. As much as I knew Samantha was just being petty, I still was afraid to lose my best friend. She had been my biggest supporter since we became friends, and I loved her so much. Losing her would be like losing a huge part of myself.

A phone buzzed suddenly, and I turned to see Alex picking up a call and putting it on speaker mode.

“Morning, Layla,” he said as soon as the call connected.

“Good morning, sir. I’m sorry to disturb your call, but we’ve made some urgent changes recently, and I’d love us to talk about them in person.”

“Is it that serious? We can just talk about it now anyway.”

I swear I heard the woman on the other end sigh softly. “We can’t, unfortunately, so please tell me when you’d be free to talk,” she replied.

Alex scoffed. “How does lunch sound for you? And it better be really urgent.”

The call ended with the woman agreeing to Alex’s time, and he looked quite concerned.

“What was that about?” I asked when I noticed the frown wouldn’t leave his face.

“Well, that was Layla, my PA and manager. She said she’s made some urgent changes, and whenever she says something like that, it always ends up being something I don’t like but is necessary.”

“And what are you suspecting it to be?” I asked again.

“Well, I do have my suspicions, but I don’t want you to worry, so let’s wait till I confirm what it actually is.”

Well, he could have left that last bit out if he didn’t want me to worry. Now, I have enough reasons to worry. He reached out for my hands just then, and I managed a smile. We started to get closer to Sam’s apartment, and my palms were sweaty.

Alex finally pulled over in front of the apartment, and we made our way slowly to the door. I had my own key, but given the circumstances, I decided to ring the doorbell.

“Who is it?” Sam called from inside, but neither of us responded. It took a while before she finally opened the door, and when she did, her face suddenly turned cold.

“What happened to your key?” she asked me without looking in Alex’s direction. We had stopped back earlier to get some flowers and her favorite cookies, and I could see her side-eyeing the package.

“Hey, Sam ... uh ... would you please let us in?” I asked in a very low tone, and she stared for a few seconds before walking away from the door and leaving it to us. Alex held the door while I walked in first, grabbing Sam’s arm just before she made a turn for her room. “Let’s talk, please?”

She turned and looked at me with the coldest eyes, but I didn’t budge. *It was either now or never.* Shrugging her arm away from my grip, she brushed past us and walked into the living room. Alex and I sat on the sofa directly opposite her while she folded her arms across her chest and stared.

“What do you guys want?” she asked dryly. I was pretty sure she could spend the rest of her life ignoring us if we

didn't make an attempt to reconcile first. I found her self-will to be incredibly fierce.

"Please give us a chance to explain everything regarding our dating and relationship," Alex said for the first time since we got here, and Sam also looked in his direction for the first time, too.

"Make it quick," she said.

I adjusted in my seat as I thought of the best way to start the conversation. "It all started when we found out about Greg's engagement. I was disheartened and angry. After everything he had put me through, he easily found a replacement for me only a few weeks after the wedding scandal." I paused to read her face, but her expression was completely blank. "So Alex offered to help me get back at Greg by pretending to also be my new lover, so I agreed. I promise you it really was an innocent plan in the beginning ..."

"And now?" Sam cut in, her eyes traveling between me and her brother.

"We recently found out that we had feelings for each other, but it wasn't always like this." Alex chipped in.

"We really love you, Sam, and it was never our intention to hurt you. Things were just quite messy at the time," I finally said, and she sighed. I still couldn't tell what she was thinking as she remained unfazed, even after our explanation.

"Well, I hope you guys are happy in your relationship," she said and stood up to leave. Alex caught up with her before she could exit the room again, and she turned, her eyes flashing with annoyance. "Look, I've given you my time by listening to your explanation. How about you do the same for me by allowing me enough time to process this? At least I deserve this much, don't I?"

I glanced at Alex, urging him to let her be. When he had released her, I moved closer and spoke. "Yes, you deserve as much time as you need to fully process all of this. Bear in mind that we both love you so much." Sam pursed her lips, and I continued, "Also, if it helps, I'm moving back to my

apartment right away. I have no reason to remain here anymore since I stopped hiding. I'll give you as much space and time as you need. I miss you so much already." Tears were starting to well up in my eyes, so I blinked to push them back.

Sam turned just then to look at me, and for a moment, I saw a hint of my best friend again. The longing in her eyes made me feel like throwing my arms around her and forgetting everything else.

"Do whatever you want." The ice queen was back again, and she left the room before anything else could be said. I sighed, and Alex put his arm around me.

I led Alex to my room so he could help me pack my things. There wasn't much I brought here when I moved in with Sam, but I had bought quite a few things since then, so packing all of them would be stressful to do alone.

"Are you okay?" he asked as soon as we were within the privacy of my bedroom. I nodded, although I wasn't sure how I felt. Explaining everything to Sam brought about a feeling of relief that I didn't think I'd feel, but at the same time, I wasn't sure our relationship would ever go back to the way it was again.

Alexander kissed my temple, and I wrapped my arms around him. He did the same, and I felt an immense level of comfort in his embrace. We stayed that way for a while until I reminded him that we needed to pack.

Less than twenty minutes later, Alex was carrying my big bag downstairs while I held a smaller box and my handbag.

Sam was still inside her room, and I knew she wouldn't be coming out until we left. "We're leaving, Sam!" I shouted at her bedroom door.

She didn't respond, and I waited a while before we walked out of the apartment.

My apartment wasn't so far from Sam's, so we got there in less than fifteen minutes. I had not been here since what was supposed to be my wedding day, so the place felt abandoned and stuffy.

I opened the windows to let some air in. Alex was staring at my art collections on the wall, as well as a mini bookshelf where I had about ten books stacked in.

“Your apartment looks extra cozy,” he said, pacing around my small living room. “Yeah, I got it three years ago, and I had planned on moving out, but I had gotten so used to this place already.”

His phone suddenly chimed, and he checked to see that it was an alarm for his meeting. “Oh right, I’m sorry, but I have to go, baby. Would you be fine cleaning by yourself?”

I nodded, and he pulled me into his arms. “Cleaning is like therapy for me, so of course, I’ll be fine. Call me as soon as you’re done with the meeting,” I replied, and he kissed me. It was a hot and intense kiss that turned quickly into a mini make-out session.

When he finally released me, I felt some warmth between my legs. Alex left shortly after, and I focused on cleaning my apartment and rearranging things that were out of place. By the time I had finished, two hours had passed. Feeling exhausted, I collapsed into my couch and took a long, needed nap.

The sound of my doorbell woke me up. It was almost 5:00 p.m. now, and I must have been asleep for about three hours. I staggered to the door, putting a hand over my mouth as I yawned. I opened the door to let Alex in. I wasn’t expecting him to return, but the look on his face instantly made me feel tense.

“Is everything okay? How did your meeting go?” I asked, walking behind him.

He stopped abruptly and turned to face me. “So, it was about my trip. It has been shifted to three weeks from now,” he said.

I smiled, feeling grateful I would get to spend some time with him before he left. “That sounds wonderful. At least I get to spend a few moments with you before you leave,” I said, still smiling excitedly.

“I guess so,” he said, “except I’m not sure when I’ll be back.”

The smile left my face as quickly as it came. “What do you mean by that?” I asked, my face masked with concern.

“I was supposed to start my tour in a few months. However, my team recently conducted a market survey, and it appeared that now would be the best time to sell concert tickets. So, my tour dates have been set. At the very least, I don’t think I’ll be back for another four to six months after I leave.”

My knees suddenly felt weak as I tried to process everything he had just said. Four to six months? Just when we were getting started.

“I mean, I don’t know how to feel right now, but I guess I just need some time to wrap my head around it,” I said, although I wasn’t sure I could hear myself.

Alex didn’t say anything else. He just wrapped himself around me and held me close to his chest. Neither of us spoke for a while, unsure of what to say or how to feel.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE TOUR

Alexander Steele

I ignored the numerous messages Layla had sent me in the last thirty minutes as I held Olivia in my arms. It had been a few days since I told her about my upcoming tour, and we had spent every day together since then.

I still had no idea how she felt about it, as she was really good at hiding her feelings behind her big bright smile, but I knew I felt like shit. Leaving her when we had just finally gotten a chance to be together was heart-wrenching, but I knew it had to be done.

“You should answer your phone. It’s disturbing,” Olivia suddenly said, her eyes still closed and her voice low. She was still half asleep, with her arms around my bare chest, and I couldn’t help but admire her.

I kissed her temples and picked up my phone. Layla’s call came in just then, and I swear this woman never gave me a break.

“One day, you would actually succeed in blowing up my phone for good, Layla,” I said as soon as I picked up the phone.

“Good morning, sir. You have a meeting with the investors in less than twenty minutes, and you’re yet to be here. Not to mention, you’ve skipped practice with the band twice this week, as well as the fitting for your concert outfits. Time is not exactly on our side right now, you know.”

“I’ll be there shortly. It’s too early to nag me as well.” I hung up after, and Olivia slipped her arms away from me. “What was that for?” I asked as I tried to put her arms around me again. She pulled away, her face breaking into a smile.

“You heard the lady. There’s a whole room of sponsors that want to have a meeting with you. I don’t think having my arms wrapped around you is what you need right now.” She sat upright, resting her head on the headboard.

“First, Layla, and now you. These ladies need to let me catch a break, especially you, my queen.” I smiled and kissed her, rolling so I was suddenly on top of her.

Her cute giggles sounded like music to my ears. Her arms naturally wrapped around my neck, and I kissed her again—first on her lips and then on her forehead, moving all over her face until my tongue trailed down her neck.

At first, she was gasping softly, and her hands raked through my hair, but all that was short-lived as she pulled away shortly after.

“You should actually attend your meeting, babe,” she said, and I reluctantly rolled off her. I dragged my feet as I hit the shower, taking more time than I usually did.

I had zero motivation for the meeting or any other tour-related activities. Although I loved touring and considered it one of the highlights of my career, the prospect of performing on stage, engaging in fan sign events, and listening to the crowd cheer had lost its previous appeal.

Additionally, waking up to the woman I loved every morning had become a cherished part of my routine. Spending

time with her, especially knowing we only had a short while until we were separated again, added to the internal conflicts I had been experiencing over the past few days. With the concert drawing near, I wondered if I could sustain this lifestyle for much longer, especially now that I had somebody to hold on to.

Despite these thoughts, I managed to get myself out of my house. Olivia was still asleep when I left, and I silently hoped she would be there when I got back.

Arriving at the office half an hour later, I was met with the faces of angry sponsors. Layla, standing at the door, sighed with relief upon seeing me.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Something important came up,” I quickly said as I sat down.

“We all have busy schedules as well, Mr. Steele. The least you could do is to reschedule the time or at least inform us through your secretary instead of getting her to pacify us while you waste our precious time,” a middle-aged man said, drawing nods from others.

“Once again, I’m sorry for the delay. Shall we start now?” I asked again, and the room fell silent.

The meeting started shortly after, and I found it hard to pay attention. It was a two-hour meeting that dealt with the tour funding, a matter Layla could handle perfectly. However, for some reason, the investors always wanted me there. Apparently, it showed I was unserious if I was never present when the funding of my project was discussed.

My mind drifted to Olivia again. She was the only person I could talk to about these days. Her touch, the warmth of her skin, the way her eyes lit up when she smiled, and how she stared at me even when I wasn’t doing anything to deserve her adorable gaze.

Leaving her was one of the most difficult decisions I had to contemplate, especially given the horrible timing. It also sucked that I had no idea how she felt about all of it.

When I mentioned it the other day at her apartment, I caught a glimpse of her initial reaction. She looked distraught and was unable to say anything else. However, she had been all smiles and said, “It’s okay, babe,” afterward, so I had a hard time deciphering how she really felt.

The meeting seemed to last forever, and I wondered if I could sit through the next hour of it. Layla had repeatedly tapped my arm to bring my attention back to the room, but it was always short-lived. Nothing new was ever said, and everything was done for the sake of formality.

By the time the meeting finally ended, I had cramps in my back. I still had to shake hands with all fifteen investors and thank them for wanting to sponsor my tour. They were doing it for the huge profits and publicity they gained from it anyway, so I did not know why I still had to thank them for fattening their pockets. *Formality’s sake, indeed.*

“What’s next?” I asked Layla, who had been sticking so close to me like I would disappear if she let me out of her sight for a single second.

“Your fitting for the outfits you’d use throughout the concerts. You’d be having two fittings—one today and another one next week. We want to give the designer enough time to get the outfits ready in time for when you leave,” she explained, and I stopped when something crossed my mind.

“Layla, please remind me again why it had to be now of all times that you and the rest of the team would put together a tour? Such an abrupt plan in a short time?”

She sighed. I was pretty sure I had asked the question at least twice since the tour was decided upon.

“I already explained it to you, sir. Summer is starting in a few weeks’ time, and since your concert starts in Europe, the holiday season would be profitable for you. Most of your sold-out concerts were held around this time.”

She was right. Summer and Christmas seasons were the best times to hold a concert. The turnout was massive, and in a place like Europe, where holiday visitors were always pouring

in, my concert would usually be filled with loads of them who just wanted to have a good time.

“I understand that, but we could have at least started in New York. No place like home, right?”

“We definitely considered that too, but with the recent dating scandal you had concerning your involvement with Olivia Sanders, we weren’t too sure the media had forgotten about everything, so taking the risk would have been a hit or miss. Europe, on the other hand, wouldn’t hold it against you because they had little to no idea as to who Gregory Hathaway was. They’d barely be bothered about your decision,” she explained, and I realized just how hard she worked.

She handled everything that had to do with my career, and I’m pretty sure the only thing she couldn’t do was sing in my place.

“All right, thank you, Layla. I’ll make my way to the designer for the fitting.”

She nodded and walked away while I headed out for the designer.

The drive to the designer was quite a long one, but it brought me closer to home, so I felt pleased. I still hadn’t called Olivia, so I quickly dialed her.

“Hey, baby,” I said as soon as she picked up.

“Hey, sweetie, how did your meeting go?”

“It was long and boring. I kept thinking about you the whole time. What have you been up to?” I asked. We didn’t have any discussion related to it, so I wasn’t sure she was still in my apartment.

“Cleaning, actually. By the way, what would you like to have for dinner? I’ll cook,” she said so casually I could tell she was getting used to spending time with me. I suddenly wondered if this wouldn’t make it harder for her when I had to leave.

“Pasta sounds nice. Creamy pasta or Bolognese, I really don’t mind,” I said, my face blushing as the thought of her

wearing nothing but my T-shirt while she made pasta for me was suddenly vivid in my mind.

“All right, I can’t wait to see you again, baby,” she said and hung up, leaving a huge grin on my face.

I walked into the fashion house where my outfits were usually made. I hadn’t been here in ages, not since last summer.

“Long time no see, Mr. Steele!” Madam Bridget, the owner of the fashion house and my fashion designer, hailed as I walked in.

“Indeed, Madam Bridget. I can see you’ve made incredible upgrades since my last visit,” I said as I looked around. The place seemed to have gotten bigger in size, with more fitting rooms and mirrors than I remembered seeing the last time. The staff number had tripled, indicating steady growth over the past year.

“Miss Layla called and mentioned you needed outfits for a tour.”

I nodded, and she stretched her large hands toward the staff. The young lady placed a big tape on it, and another lady adjusted the mirror so my tall frame could be completely seen. I stood still as Madam Bridget showed me the designs Layla had picked, none of which I had objections to.

The fitting took a while, as the short designer and her staff struggled to get my full frame. I fought the desire to laugh through it all as she improvised on ways to take the measurements without having me bend low. Two hours later, the fitting was done. Feeling quite exhausted for the day, I headed straight home.

Olivia had already set the dinner table, and my jaw dropped when I saw what she had on. It was one of my office shirts, a large one that stopped right beneath her knee. I could tell she had nothing else on as her nipples were erect, poking through the shirt.

“How was your day, babe?” she asked as I sat at the dinner table. I couldn’t take my eyes off her as she stood in front of

me, smiling into my face.

“My day was good, but tell me, what’s for dinner?” I asked, running my hands through her silky skin. She laughed when she understood what I meant.

“You can have both for dinner, babe, but let’s start with pasta,” she said as she dished out the pasta.

We enjoyed the rest of our dinner over light-hearted conversation and a lot of laughter. I refused to think about leaving in a couple of weeks as I focused on the most beautiful thing in my life right now—Olivia.

Chapter Twenty-Three

THINGS BEGIN TO SETTLE

Olivia Sanders

I walked into my apartment with my shoulders slouched. For someone who loved the comfort of her own space, I wasn't quite happy to be back. I had spent the whole week at Alex's, enjoying quality time together and making the best out of the time we had left. However, as his departure date approached, anxiety started to weigh on me.

My emotions had been in disarray since he told me about his upcoming tour. Our relationship had just started to bloom, so the last thing I had expected was to have him move away for a long time. Though I couldn't stop him from leaving, I didn't want to burden him with my sadness.

I knew I had to find a way to conceal it. I feared that he would change his mind if he knew how sad I felt about it, and the last thing I wanted was to stand in the way of his career. I had already cost him a dent once, and I hated myself for it.

I walked into the kitchen and made a bowl of cereal. I was too tired to cook anything, and I left before having breakfast at Alex's. He had an early morning rehearsal, so breakfast at his

place would give him an excuse to be late for it, which he had been keen on doing lately.

I knew he wasn't eager to leave. I could tell from the way he ignored most of Layla's calls or showed a lack of interest in meetings and rehearsals. As much as I wanted to be a source of inspiration for him, it wasn't the easiest thing to do when I felt the same way he did.

I ate my cereal quickly before they got a chance to become soggy. I wasn't a fan of soft and soaked cereals, as they always made me want to throw up.

I checked the time when I finished eating. It was already 10:00 a.m., and I had brunch with Samantha at noon. We hadn't spoken since the last time I was at her apartment with Alex, so it was a pleasant surprise to have her suggest we had lunch later on.

She still wasn't on speaking terms with Alex, and I wondered why she seemed more upset with him than she did with me. Alex, on the other hand, had made no effort to reconcile with her, and that even made me more worried. The last thing I wanted was to come between them, although that had already happened.

I quickly hopped into the shower and had a quick bath. The brunch place was just around the corner, so I had plenty of time to rest and get ready, both of which I needed.

The past seven days at Alex's place have been a blast, but it also meant I barely got any sleep. Alex was a light sleeper, so he was almost always awake. I wasn't a fan of sleeping in new environments, so I also couldn't get as much sleep as I would have loved.

As soon as I moisturized my skin after my shower, I lay on my bed and closed my eyes for a quick nap. I woke up just in time to leave my house for brunch. The sun was scorching today, and I wished I could just stay indoors and cancel at the last minute. Knowing Samantha, she would definitely hold this over my head if I canceled at the last minute.

I took a cab to the brunch place. I felt relieved when I realized I had gotten there before Samantha. We still weren't on good terms, so I couldn't tell how she'd take it if I wasn't punctual.

Samantha arrived five minutes later, and I waved so she could see and recognize me. She flashed a brief smile when she saw me and walked toward me.

“Hey,” she said as she settled down.

“Hi, Sam.”

The table fell silent afterward as we beckoned to the waitress walking past us. I ordered a tuna panini and orange juice while Samantha had a chicken breast salad and Greek yogurt. We ate quietly while my mind ran through a lot of things. Sitting here in this awkwardness was even worse than having her ignore me.

Thirty minutes later, we had both finished our meal, and Samantha looked ready to speak. I waited for her to speak, as she looked like she had something to say.

“I know you're wondering why I asked us to hang out together. I'll be very honest, I've missed you, Olivia. These past few weeks have been agonizing.” She leaned forward, and I did the same. “I was really hurt when I realized you were dating Alex, and I had absolutely no idea. Perhaps I'd have reacted better if you had told me before I found out on the internet, but you didn't, and I felt extremely bad because I thought we were best friends.” She paused, and I fought back the tears that threatened to pour down my cheek.

Samantha was right. We could have prevented this dent in our relationship if only I had come clean and told her about the whole shenanigan with Alex from the start. It would have been very easy to open up about the feelings I had later developed for him along the line.

“You're right, Sam, and I'm really sorry for not being transparent to you as my best friend. You've always been so supportive of me, and what I did wasn't the best way to treat a friend. I hope you really can forgive me because I've missed

my best friend so much.” The tears were trickling down both our cheeks now, and I didn’t resist when she pulled me into her arms.

“I’m sorry too, Olivia. I had been so engrossed in my selfish desires that I didn’t realize just how much you loved Alex and wanted to be with him,” she said, and I shook my head, unwilling to hear anything else from her.

It felt like a huge burden had been lifted off me when we walked out of the brunch place. Samantha and I were back on good terms again, and suddenly, the world felt better again.

After making sure she got her Uber to head home, I turned toward my apartment. With the sun now down, I walked back, my heart filled with joy.

It was a good fifteen-minute walk, but right now, it felt like five. I stopped when I got to my apartment and saw Alex waiting for me. He had flowers in his hand.

“I left your house just a few hours ago. Why are you back so soon?” I asked, and he pouted his lips dramatically.

“Sounds like you didn’t miss me,” he said as I continued to walk toward him. I stopped right in front of him and took the flowers from his hand. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close.

The strong scent of his cologne serenaded my nostrils, and I buried my head in his neck. If only he knew how much I missed him.

“Of course I missed you,” I said as I pulled away from him. He stepped aside so I could open the door. I didn’t mind spending another day with him.

Alex sank into my large couch, pulling me into his arms. I laid my head on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. His chest was rigid and firm, a clear sign he always worked out.

“So tell me, how did your day go?” I asked, although I already knew his routine schedule now—tour prep, practice, and meeting.

“I didn’t do much actually. Luckily, Layla was able to represent me at a meeting in Brooklyn while I had practice. As soon as I was done with practice, I came straight here.”

He was staring into my eyes again and brushing my wavy auburn strands. “Hmmm, that feels really good,” I said as his hands continued to gently massage my hair, giving me a satisfied, therapeutic feeling.

“Do you like it?” he asked when I closed my eyes and pulled my head toward him so he could massage my scalp better.

“I love it. Your hands feel magical on my scalp,” I expressed, and his smile lit up. I cherished those moments when he smiled, and I had no intention of getting used to it anytime soon.

“What did you do today?” he asked, and I suddenly remembered I didn’t tell him about meeting Samantha.

“Oh, I had brunch with Sam,” I mentioned, a smile playing on my lips. It felt good to share this, and I could not help but enjoy the surprised look on his face.

“Really? How did that happen?” He looked really interested in hearing the details, and I wished for him to reconcile with her.

“I mean, she hit me up the other day and asked if we could have brunch together. I agreed, and I’m glad I did. We’ve ironed out our differences already,” I shared, still smiling. However, I noticed how gloomy Alex’s face had become.

“That’s really sweet. Now you can breathe properly,” he said, brushing my lips with the tip of his fingers.

“What about you? Are you still going to hold on to your pride instead of making things up with your sister?” I asked, and he scoffed, turning his face away from me.

“I’m not being proud. I do miss Sam, but we’ll reconcile when it’s time for that to happen. Don’t worry about it, babe,” he said and pulled away from the couch, a sign that the conversation was over.

The rest of the evening passed quickly, with Alex preparing rice and curry for dinner. We had leftover ice cream as we watched *Money Heist*.

When we finally retired to bed, Alex was forced to share my single bed with me. We squeezed in together, with half of my body's weight on him. I stroked his hair until he fell asleep, his breath steady against my neck.

For some reason, I wasn't sleepy. A lot of thoughts were running through my head now. I thought about my relationship with Alex. I loved him so much, but I couldn't help but be scared, especially with the trip ahead. I knew Alex loved me too, but a part of me could not help but wonder if the adage "out of sight would, out of mind" might apply to both him and me.

Strange as these thoughts might have seemed, they were kind of valid. I didn't think I could handle another heartbreak after Greg.

Alex rolled over just then, his large arm wrapping me even tighter now. He looked so peaceful when he slept, with his lips looking fuller and the lines on his face smoothed. I kissed his forehead, brushing the little strands of hair off his face.

"Are you not sleepy, babe?" he suddenly asked, still half asleep. I guess he could tell from the way I was breathing irregularly and tossing every second.

My back finally touched the bed, and Alex wrapped his entire body around me, feeling like a big, cozy blanket.

Whatever these thoughts were, I was ready to hold on to this man for as long as I could. I was pretty sure he would do the same for me, too.

Chapter Twenty-Four

EVERYTHING FALLS INTO PLACE

Alexander Steele

The warmth of her soft lips pressed against mine woke me up. I smiled, eyes still closed as I held her waist and turned so her back was on the bed, and I was hovering over her. I opened my eyes to see her giggling in a childlike manner.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I said as she threw her arms around my neck. I had spent the last five days in her apartment, unwilling to spend another moment without her.

The time for me to leave was finally drawing near, and it was more nerve-racking than I’d imagined it to be, especially since it wasn’t my first time going on tour. It was probably the first one where I had to worry about leaving the woman of my dreams behind.

I knew I would be returning, but four months was such a long time, and I honestly did not know what would happen in that time. I had trust in Olivia, but we just started our relationship, and I could not say we had gained solid ground yet.

The past few days had felt like a true honeymoon phase. We'd spent most of the day together, trying to fit in as much quality time as we could. I was always eager to get out of meetings or work, just so we could spend as much time as we could in each other's company.

At some point, I feared I might have been too clingy, but I guess I was lucky to have the most amazing woman as mine. She wanted me in her space as much as I wanted to be in it, and I wanted her around me all the time.

"Let's eat. I made breakfast," she said, urging me to get off her. She was wearing my T-shirt again, a cute habit that had developed. I didn't mind; in fact, it was a huge turn-on for me.

I kissed the bridge of her nose. "I'll be right behind you. I just need to wash my face." She smiled, and I watched her walk out of the room, her hips swaying in a manner I found inviting.

I quickly washed my face and brushed my teeth. We had a meeting in two hours, one I wished I could skip. It had been a full week of endless meetings and practice.

At some point, I felt burnt out, and the tour had not even started yet. Being at Olivia's place proved to be an amazing stress relief. Sleeping here was easier because, naturally, I did not think about work when I was around her.

Heading to the dining area, I found Olivia had set the table with lots of slices of bacon, sausages, muffins, and a plate of omelet for me. She had made an omelet for me two days ago, and I became obsessed with it afterward.

As I sat down, she poured me a cup of black coffee, and I brought the cup close to my nose to take in the sweet aroma.

"Hmm," I said as I placed a forkful of omelet in my mouth. Olivia smiled like she always did when I complimented her food.

"Is it really that good?" she asked, though she already knew my answer.

"It's absolutely the best I've ever had."

“Try the bacon. It’s amazing,” she urged, and I did as I was told. I loved chewy bacon strips, and Olivia knew just how to make them right.

“As expected, you’re really the best,” I said in a singsong tone, trying to eat slowly to prolong our breakfast time. Olivia had recently insisted that I take my meetings and work appointments seriously, as she didn’t want to be an excuse for me to become lazy. I understood her perspective, but sometimes, she seemed a bit too pushy about it.

“I’ll be going shopping later, so you might want to carry a spare key in case you’re back before I’m home,” she suddenly said.

I paused, holding my coffee midway as I looked in her direction.

“What are you shopping for?” I asked, a small frown on my face.

Olivia wasn’t the kind to impulse buy, preferring to stick to a strict budget. While I had offered to relieve some of her financial burdens, the thought of being dependent wasn’t something she could fathom.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten we have dinner tonight with your mom, Alex,” she replied.

I raised my eyebrow. I had genuinely forgotten about it, mainly because I had only agreed after much pressure from my mom and aunt.

“Oh, right. I still don’t understand why you need to go shopping. Whatever you have to wear, it’s fine, babe. My mom isn’t very picky,” I reassured her. She had casually mentioned needing a new outfit when I told her about having dinner with my mother, but I had taken it as a joke.

“Samantha says otherwise, and I think it would benefit me to believe my best friend more,” she said.

I couldn’t argue with that because Samantha *was* actually right. Nina Steele was the most sophisticated and classy woman I knew. My mother had grown up in an equally rich family, so she had always carried herself with grace and pride.

I admired that about her, but I didn't want Olivia to feel like she had to live up to my mother's expectations.

"All right then. If you insist on going shopping, at least let me come with you," I suggested.

She rolled her eyes, a gesture I found insanely attractive. "On one condition: I'll pay for whatever dress I pick."

I sighed; her independence could be insufferable sometimes. "Fine, I won't meddle, but you have to promise me that if you see something you really want and it seems out of your budget, then you'll let me pay rather than changing your mind. Please, Olivia."

"Deal," she replied.

Breakfast was done a few minutes later, and I headed back inside the room to prepare for my meeting before she had the chance to remind me of it.

Half an hour later, I was out of the house and headed to the office. Layla had been calling me more than anyone else in the past couple of weeks with schedule reminders, cross-checking details, and various other reminders. I knew she was working hard, but I wished she'd take a minute to breathe as well.

I arrived at the studio ten minutes before our meeting time. Layla was already in the conference room, making sure things were ready.

"Morning, Layla," I greeted as I settled into a chair and loosened my tie a bit. Olivia always insisted on knotting my tie recently, but she always made it so tight that it felt like a choker.

"Good morning, sir. Trust your night was good?" she asked while placing files on the table in front of every chair.

"I had a good night's sleep, but I can't say the same for you. Seems like you haven't slept in days." I observed her closely. She had bulging bags under her eyes, and her face looked almost colorless. Despite my efforts to ensure my staff had enough time for themselves, Layla was a workaholic, even working on holidays.

“I did manage to sleep a few hours, but I feel good. Thanks to my coffee.” She raised her cup to demonstrate her appreciation, and I shook my head.

“You should get some proper rest after today’s meeting, Layla. Take it as an order,” I said in my most stern voice, and she remained silent.

The room started filling up with my head staff and directors, and the meeting began shortly after. This meeting served as a final check and planning session before my upcoming trip.

“Well, we finally have a date for your flight. You leave next Wednesday at nine a.m. I’ll send the itinerary details to your email. Please do well to go through it this time,” she said, and my brain paused for a minute.

Wednesday was literally five days away. Until now, the reality of this trip hadn’t dawned on me. It felt so far away, and now it was less than a week to go. So many thoughts were rummaging through my head. I felt my hands physically trembling.

“Are you all right, sir?” Layla asked after a moment, and I managed to nod. The meeting was short, thankfully, and I had to persuade the band to postpone practice for the day.

Don’t think about it, Alex, I tried to convince myself as I drove to meet Olivia at the mall. Whatever it was, I had to keep my feelings in check so that the rest of the day went well. We barely had enough time left together, and I’d rather not ruin the few moments with anxiety.

Olivia was standing outside the mall when I got there, and I pulled her into a tight embrace as soon as I got to her.

“Missed me that much?” she asked, laughing when I refused to release her.

“I always miss you,” I replied and released her a few seconds later.

I had always thought Samantha was the most indecisive girl I had ever encountered. She could never make up her mind about anything, even with little details like food. Olivia seemed to be on a different level.

While she never found it hard to decide on food or TV shows to watch, spending her money was always a challenging task. When it came down to making decisions on purchases, she suddenly paid attention to the smallest details, as if she had a phobia of spending money on the wrong things.

So, I sat in the waiting room of Zara, watching her try almost every dinner-appropriate outfit within her size. Some of them even looked really similar, but they seemed different to her for some reason.

I watched as she tried on another green dress and stood in front of me. “What do you think?” she asked again for the umpteenth time.

“It’s really beautiful. I think it matches your eyes,” I tried to sound as enthusiastic as possible. It didn’t work out as she frowned and held up a similar dress in red, asking for a comparison.

At this rate, I knew we would never leave if I kept rating outfits she’d never pick. Instead of picking one of the outfits she held, I stood up and walked to her. Taking the dresses, I placed them on the clothing rack and held her shoulders with both my hands.

“Liv, my darling, you’re really an amazing and beautiful woman. Now, I’m very much aware of all Samantha had told you about my mother, and she’s not wrong. The woman can be quite a handful.”

She sighed but held it in while I continued, “All you need is to make a remarkable first impression. What you need to keep her hooked is your amazing personality, and I don’t think that’s a problem. You’re the most lovable person I know, so I’m sure you’d be fine.”

She was quiet for a while until she looked up. “I am overthinking it, aren’t I?”

I nodded my head in agreement and kissed her cheek. “Just pick something really nice, and trust me, everything else will fall in place,” I said, and she finally agreed. A few minutes

later, we were out of the store with a new dress and shoes in hand.

It was almost 7:00 p.m. when we arrived at my family's mansion. Olivia's hands were still trembling nervously, and no amount of reassurance from me could make her feel better. She had also been texting Sam all night, but that didn't help either.

"Are you okay, babe?" I asked as I parked my car in our family's driveway.

"I'll be fine. I just need a minute to catch my breath."

"Well," I started to say when I looked ahead to see my mom staring at us through the living room window, "you have less than a minute now because the lady's waiting."

Olivia looked ahead just in time to catch my mom peeking just before she left the window. Three minutes later, we finally climbed out of the car and walked to the front door.

I allowed Olivia to ring the doorbell, and we waited patiently until the door opened.

"Hello, Mother. Long time no see," I said as she walked into my arms without saying anything. The dramatic display lasted a little longer than a minute until I pulled away from her. Her eyes lingered on me for a while, and then she turned to Olivia.

"Good evening, Mrs. Steele," Olivia said, giving my mother the biggest smile I had ever seen on her face.

"Olivia Sanders," Mom said as she held Olivia close and gave her air kisses on both sides. "Alexander's description does absolutely nothing to justify how beautiful you really are." My mother flashed the biggest smile just then, and Olivia's face turned red in a few seconds.

"Thank you, ma'am," Olivia said, staring into my mother's eyes with adoration.

"Come on in," Mother said as she ushered us into the large hallway that led to our grand living room.

"Holy shit! You and Sam grew up in a castle?" Olivia whispered when my mother was out of earshot. I fought the

urge to laugh out loud as we walked into the living room.

“Dinner’s ready. We just have to wait for your aunt to come down,” Mother said after we sat for about ten minutes without saying anything.

My eyes quickly darted to Olivia. She looked sick with anxiety. Her eyes occasionally looked across the room, but she didn’t speak.

“Excuse us for a second. I’d love to show her my room,” I said, grabbing Olivia’s hands.

“Of course, you can. I’ll send it to you once everything is ready.”

My bedroom was right around the corner, so I walked quickly and pulled her inside. “Are you really okay, babe? You look really sick.”

“I’m sorry, Alex. I’m just overwhelmed, that’s all,” she replied, her voice low. I hugged her, kissing her soft lips for a brief moment and pulling away before I got tempted any further.

Aunt Margaret was downstairs when we appeared in the living room again. She saw Olivia and was up on her feet immediately. “Oh, wow, you’re so beautiful,” she said, smiling as she hugged Olivia tightly.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Mom ushered us to the dining hall, and dinner was served. Mother had gone all out with steak, gravy, pot roast, and a grilled chicken all set on the table.

The conversation during dinner was light-hearted, and I couldn’t have been more thankful. Mother and Aunt Margaret took turns entertaining us with stories from their college days, as well as their love life.

Olivia had relaxed after a while, laughing at their stories. I found it silly, but I couldn’t be more grateful to them right now.

We had cheesecake for dessert, and we all moved back to the living room.

“Tell me, Olivia, do you want kids?” Mother asked suddenly, causing Olivia to almost choke on a bite of cake.

“Eventually, yes. I do want to have children.” For some reason unknown to me, Olivia was smiling as she answered the question.

“How many children would you ideally want to have?” Aunt Margaret asked this time. They had their eyes on Olivia.

“Well, children can be a handful, but I can confidently raise three times of my own,” she replied, and the older women laughed calmly.

“Try five,” Mother teased. “I’ll be sure to help you if they become too much to handle.”

Olivia laughed and nodded. “We’ll take note of that,” Olivia said, still laughing.

A call came in on Mother’s phone just then, and she excused herself.

“Do you like art? I’d love to show you my collection,” Aunt Margaret, a proud art collector, suddenly said and ushered an enthusiastic Olivia out of the living room.

I went in my mother’s direction until I found her on the balcony. Her call was almost over, and she was startled to see me creeping up from behind her. Before she got a chance to say anything, I hugged her tightly from behind.

“Thank you, Mother,” I said.

She looked confused. “For what?”

“For making Olivia feel really comfortable around you tonight. It means a lot to me that you were the only one who could help her release all the nervousness she had been feeling.”

She chuckled softly. “Oh, son, you really thought I’d dump a truckload of questions on her? I had done every background I needed to, down to her apartment address. I invited you guys for dinner so I could meet her for myself. She’s an adorable woman,” she said, smiling as she walked away from me.

As we drove home that night, the upcoming trip crossed my mind. Olivia was still unaware of the date of my departure, but I did not want to tell her right now. We had such a wonderful evening, and the last thing I wanted was to ruin the entire mood.

However, one thing was clear to me now: I wanted this woman to be a part of every moment of my life. I could not bear the thought of spending a single day without loving her. I had a clear plan in mind, and I smiled as the idea dropped into my head—a smile that lingered on all night as I thought of the perfect way to execute it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HAPPY ENDING

Olivia Sanders

I stood transfixed as I watched Alex pack his stuff into his luggage. I had been watching him for the past hour, unable to say anything. Alex had told me about his departure date on Saturday, the morning after we had dinner with his mom.

We had spent almost every second of each day together since then, doing all the fun activities we could. I knew he would be back, and this trip was only temporary, but it felt like a huge part of me would be gone for a while.

“Are you okay, babe?” he asked, stopping midway when he noticed I had been staring at him for a while. I forced a smile and nodded my head. Regardless of how I felt, I didn’t want him to feel any more reluctant about leaving than he already did.

This trip was important for him, and I was willing to suppress my emotions so that he could pursue what he loved doing best.

“Have you packed up everything you need? Toiletries and underwear, too?” I asked, checking his bag.

“Yes, I have. Besides, these things can be easily bought if needed,” he replied.

I frowned. “Still, it’s easier to just pack them from here instead of stressing Layla and the rest of the team.”

He frowned back at me. “Layla doesn’t buy my underwear or toiletries. I can perfectly get those myself.”

I smiled. “I could get them for you too.”

He kissed my nose. “Yes, you can. You’re the only exception.”

When everything was finally set, we headed downstairs for a quick breakfast. He was supposed to be on his way, but he insisted on having breakfast with me, even though Layla had developed a temporary migraine thinking about how much of an inconvenience that would be to their schedule.

At this point, I had a feeling Layla hated me. I always seemed to ruin her perfect schedule because Alex couldn’t do without me for a moment. I wouldn’t blame her, though; I’d feel the exact same way if I were in her shoes.

I kept breakfast simple—just some cheese toast and creamy hot chocolate. I watched Alex take slow bites of bread, a strategy I had come to recognize as his way of extending our time together.

I had been against it as soon as I learned about it, urging him to eat faster so he would not miss his appointments. However, I found myself doing the same this morning—picking little crumbs from the crust of my bread and chewing them slowly.

“Promise you’d call me every day. Several times if you could, but at least once a day if you’re too busy,” I said, and he squeezed my palm.

“You don’t even need to ask, babe. I would do all of that even if you didn’t ask,” he said, kissing my hands.

“You shouldn’t skip your meals, too. It gets rainy in some parts of Europe during the summer, so stay warm and covered

all the time. Get as much sleep as you can and take as many breaks as you can.” I spoke while my throat felt husky because of the tears I was trying to hold back.

Smiling, he said, “Come here, baby.” He pulled my hands till I was right by his side. He pulled me onto his lap, and I hugged him tightly.

Layla’s call came in a few minutes later, and it was our cue to leave. A car honked right outside my apartment, and I helped Alex carry one of his smaller bags while he rolled two large ones to Samantha’s car.

Samantha had offered to take us to the airport so I wouldn’t be alone when I watched him leave. She had also spent some quality time with her brother in his last week, most of them with us together, and other times, it was just them having their siblings’ moment.

“Good gracious, Alex. We are running late,” Sam said impatiently and drove off as soon as we got in.

The ride was quiet, and I felt grateful that Samantha let both of us ride in the back while she drove. Alex slouched so I could rest my head on his chest while his arms were around me and our fingers intertwined.

The drive to the airport was very short—less than an hour—and I found myself wishing it were farther away.

Both his mom and aunt were at the airport when we got there, although we weren’t expecting them.

“My god, Alex. You don’t have much time left. What took you so long?” Mrs. Steele paused when I showed up from behind him, her arms extending to me.

“Hello, Mrs. Steele,” I said, hugging her tightly.

“Are you okay, darling?” she asked, her voice so genuine that I knew I might cry if she continued to look at me that way.

“I’m fine, ma’am,” I said and turned to see Samantha suddenly holding her phone to my face and recording me. Confused, I looked around to find Alex.

My hands flew to my mouth when I saw him on one knee right in front of me, holding a ring box open.

“Alex ...” I started to say, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Olivia Sanders, I had known I wanted you to be part of my life when I met you for the first time at the airport. It’s crazy how you were running away from another man, but I wanted to be your next and last man.”

“You’re an amazing woman, Liv, and there’s really no one else I’d rather spend the rest of my life loving, cherishing, and adoring. You’ve been perfect from day one, and I’m sorry it took me this long to realize this.”

The tears were trickling down my face, and I was aware we had an audience, but I didn’t care. All I had my eyes on was Alex.

“I know this isn’t the best circumstance for a proposal, given that I was about to be across the world from you for the next six months. I had given up my career a while ago and only picked back on it several months ago because I missed performing on stage. I had no idea you would come along and turn my entire life around. I promise to come back for you, and this ring is my vow to do that. So please, would you be my wife?” he finally asked, and I said yes immediately. He slipped the diamond ring onto my finger, and I pulled him up for a kiss.

“Yes, Alex, I will marry you. I’ll spend the rest of my life loving you,” I said, and everyone around us was suddenly cheering.

It still hurt as I watched him leave, but I had an assurance he’d be back, and I was ready to wait for him.