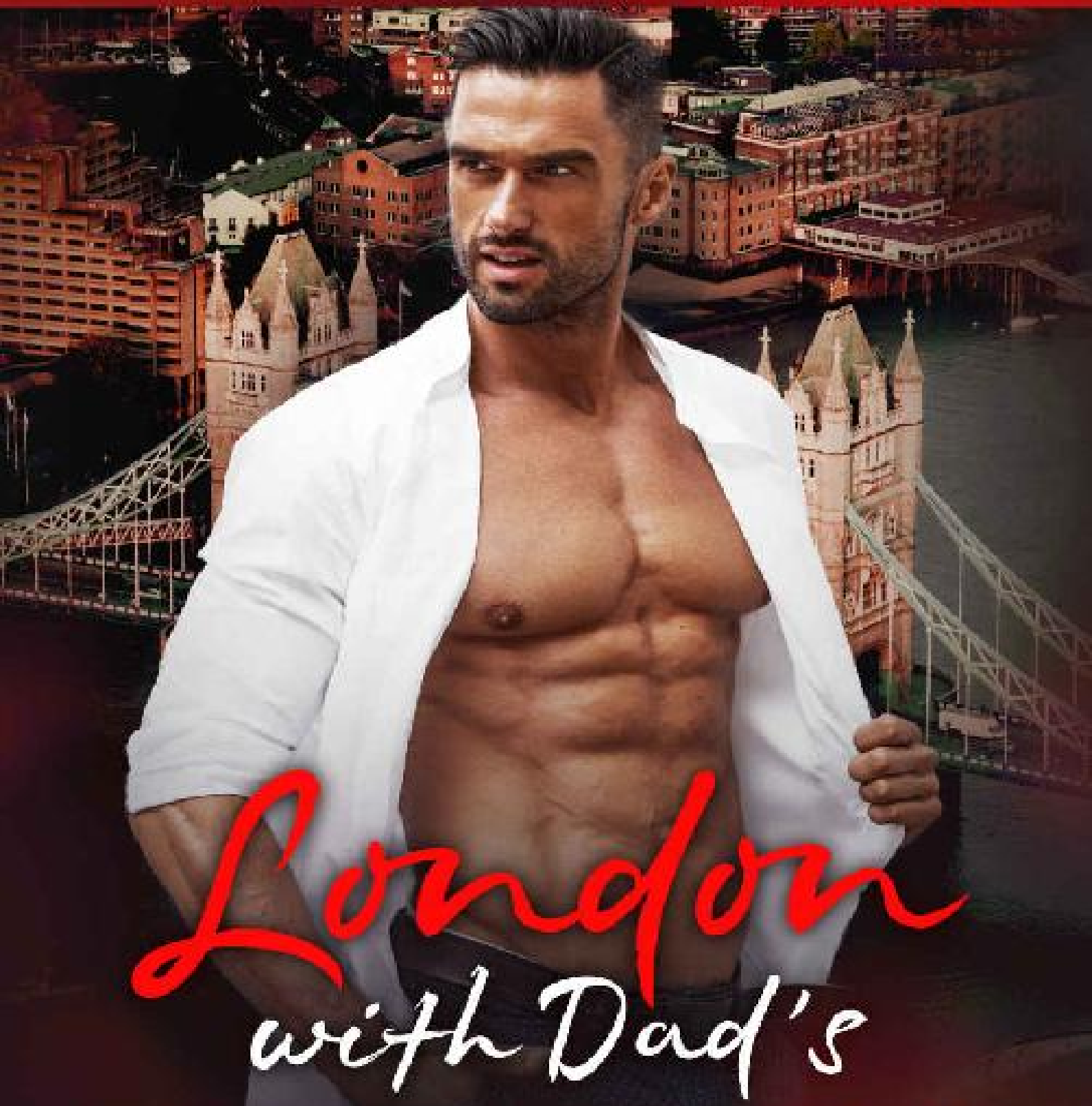


A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS BOOK 198



London
with Dad's

BEST FRIEND

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FLORA FERRARI

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NEWSLETTER

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS

BRATVA BEAR SHIFTERS

LAIRDS & LADIES

RUSSIAN UNDERWORLD

IRISH WOLF SHIFTERS

About the Author

LONDON WITH DAD'S BEST
FRIEND

AN OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 198

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

LONDON WITH DAD'S BEST FRIEND

She's supposed to be in London to plan her future, but an unexpected meeting turns her entire world upside down...

Casey lands in London with one thing on her mind: what is her future going to look like? With college fast approaching, this trip is supposed to be her chance to consider studying abroad and get some freedom from home.

When Casey's dad tells her he's arranged for an old friend to show her around, she expects to greet some old, stuffy businessman she's never met who will drone on for a few hours and then leave her to explore the city alone.

The **drop dead gorgeous** man in the suit who meets her at King's College is decidedly *not* a boring work colleague. It's been years since she last saw Edward, and she's literally left speechless when they meet.

Edward finds himself just as lost for words as he realizes the beautiful blonde with the stunning blue eyes is the same gangly teenager who was at his going-away party before he left for London.

He can't keep his eyes off of her, charmed not only by her beauty but also her demure demeanor and gentle wit.

But Casey is only in London for a week, and then she has to leave Edward — and they both have to face the reality of who they are to one another.

After all, she's the daughter of Edward's best friend, no matter how little that changes how they feel, and there's an ocean between them.

Will this newfound attraction have the chance to bloom into something more? Or will her father's disapproval and Casey's youth prove too much for the pair to overcome?

London With Dad's Best Friend is an **intense, passionate romance with high stakes** but the chance for even higher rewards.

Standalone with an HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Edward

I walk down the street, my head full of the meeting I just left, when my phone rings in my pocket. I assume, thanks to the timing, that it's probably a colleague remembering some last-minute point to make, or my assistant reminding me I'm done for the day. But when I fish it out and answer the call, it's an unexpected voice that answers.

"Edward! How are you doing?"

"Rick?" I say. I'm surprised to hear from an old friend. A very good old friend, actually – we became best buds in college, and continued to hang out over the years until I moved to London for work. That was just a few years ago, but we've stayed in touch with phone calls and emails. I just wasn't expecting to hear from him out of the blue today.

"Am I catching you at a good time? I can never remember how to work out the time zones."

I laugh. "It's a good time. I've just finished with a lunch meeting, and I'm about to head home. Nothing else booked in for the day, so I'm a free agent until tomorrow."

"That's perfect. Look, I wanted to ask you a favor. A big favor, actually."

"Uh oh," I say. I pause to duck into the entrance of a closed shop, getting out of the way of the foot traffic along the busy street. "What is it?"

“Well, it’s Casey.” Oh, yes, Casey, his daughter. I remember the last time I saw her, she was a gangly teenager – I guess she must have been about fourteen or fifteen then. I spent more time with Rick alone than with his family, but they all showed up at my going away party to see me off. “Thing is, she’s going to be in your neck of the woods.”

“In London? What’s she doing here?”

“She’s thinking about studying abroad, so she’s checking out a couple of colleges this week. It was all a bit last minute – we didn’t decide until the end of last week, and then it was a bit of a mad dash to organize the flights and the hotel. The thing is, I did tell my wife I would speak to you, and then I – well, I forgot.”

“Damn it, Rick,” I chuckle, shaking my head. He’s never been the most organized person I know. “Alright. What do you need me to do?”

“I said you’d be able to look out for her. You know, make sure she gets around alright, doesn’t get too lost. One of the schools she’s looking at is King’s College London.”

I nod, understanding now. That was the college I spent a year studying at, as part of a student exchange program. It was one of the reasons I’d chosen to come and work here in London – remembering the good times I’d had when I was younger. “Alright. So, when is she set to have her tour?”

“Well, actually, it’s today.”

“What!” I check my watch; it’s almost three in the afternoon. Rick sure as hell left it late to call me. “What time?”

“Uh, not long from now. About three thirty.”

I swear down at the phone, shaking my head. “Then I’d better head off now. Where will I find her?”

“I’ll tell her to wait for you outside the main reception building,” Rick says. “Thanks, Ed. You’re a good pal.”

“Sure am,” I mutter, ending the call and beginning to walk quickly. I was going to have to hop on the Tube and hope I

didn't hit any delays if I was going to get to her in time. Trust Rick to spring something like this on me.

By the time I get off the Tube at the familiar stop and rush over to the campus, I think I'm going to miss the tour altogether – but a glance at my watch tells me I'll be there with a couple of minutes to spare. Casting a look around, I can't see Casey anywhere. I walk towards the main reception, staying alert. I expect she'll be coming towards me any time soon.

There's a young woman standing in front of the doors that I can't help but admire as I wait. She stands with her back to me, but all I can see are the curves of her body – and I like what I see. She's dressed in a white shirt over a pair of white jeans, and platform sandals to give her a little extra height, with blonde hair spilling down her back. Her voluptuous body looks ready to burst out of the top, tailored with tight paneling that hugs her perfectly. I can't stop looking at her round, apple bottom ass, packed into those jeans that look like they must have been painted on her.

She begins to turn around, and I hold my breath, ready to see what this vixen looks like from the front. My eyes cross her body, taking in large breasts trapped under the tight shirt, lovely wide hips, and –

“Casey?” I ask, blinking in surprise.

“Edward?” she replies, sounding just as awestruck as I am.

But she can't be – I'm so blown away it's ridiculous. I could never have imagined that the girl I was going to meet – the girl I remember – could have grown up to look like *this*. She's gorgeous, from head to toe. Those bright blue eyes are the only thing that hasn't changed, and the rest of her... I can see she's not a girl anymore. She's a woman, and a beautiful one at that.

I have to pick my jaw up off the ground. I'm staring at her like an idiot. I know I should say something, but my brain is fighting with my dick over whether we should be turned on by her or not. She's hot – smoking, actually. But she's also Rick's daughter.

And even knowing that, I want her with an instant and primal fierceness. I want to make her mine, and I don't know how I'm going to be able to hold back that urge.

CHAPTER TWO

Casey

“Casey?”

I look at the man calling my name in surprise, and then it registers. It’s him. It’s Edward.

“Edward?” I reply, totally lost for a moment in the awe of thinking that this is the man who is taking me on my tour. When Dad said he was sending one of his old friends to take me on a tour because he went to King’s once, I had no idea it was going to be Edward. In typical Dad fashion, this was all organized at the last minute and he didn’t give me any real details.

But it’s more than that. I haven’t seen Edward since I was fifteen, and while I thought he was kind of hot at the time, I’d forgotten about him for the most part after he moved to England. I was just a silly teen then, more obsessed with staring at my phone and wondering if the school’s quarterback even knew what my name was, and I didn’t pay enough attention to him at the party. With my Dad hovering over me, it was hard to think about whether this older guy was hot or not.

But he is. He definitely is. And that makes everything so much more awkward.

He and my Dad met and became friends in college, which means he probably sees me as a little kid just starting on a

journey he made twenty years ago. There's very little chance of him even looking at me twice, especially considering he's been my Dad's friend for a really long time.

Which is a shame, because he is seriously handsome. He's wearing a black suit with a thin black tie, and a crisp white shirt underneath it. The weather is warm – I was almost expecting perpetual rain for my trip in London, but this summer heat is apparently normal for the season – but he looks cool and collected. Meanwhile, I'm regretting the full coverage my white shirt and jeans give me. I wish I'd put on a dress to cool down in.

I realize all of a sudden that we're both staring at each other, not saying a word, and a flush comes to my cheeks. "You're giving me the tour today?"

"Oh, we aren't joining an official tour?" Edward asks. "Your Dad said I needed to meet you at half past three so you wouldn't miss the start."

I roll my eyes. Dad is seriously hopeless. "I took an official tour this morning, at nine thirty," I tell him. "I bet he got confused with the time zones. I'd still love an inside look, though. Those tours are always the official story – I want to know what it's really like."

"Of course, a lot has probably changed since I studied here though," Edward says, slipping his hands into his pockets. "But if you don't mind me gazing at all the new buildings and the changes..."

"I don't mind at all," I tell him. We turn together and fall into step, Edward seeming to decide on exactly where he will take me first.

I hardly know what to say to drive the conversation onwards. As we move through the campus, I notice other girls around us – my age or older, probably already students here – eyeing Edward with open appreciation. Some of them even watch us walk all the way past them, turning their heads to follow us as we pass by. He obviously stands out – it's not just me who thinks so.

Which is just one more reason why I might as well not even think about him, because I would never have a chance of getting a guy as hot as Edward – and definitely not one twenty years older than me. He’s got better things to spend his time on than college girl drama, and I’m not even *in* college yet.

“This is the SU,” Edward says, gesturing towards a building which is plastered with posters about upcoming events. “The Student Union. It’s a bar, an events space, and all the offices for the SU are also here. You’ll probably spend a lot of time here.”

I make a face. “I don’t know,” I tell him. “I’m not really into the partying scene.”

“Really?” Edward seems impressed. “I’m surprised. Most girls your age would be jumping at the chance to experience these things a few years early. The legal drinking age is eighteen here, not twenty-one.”

I laugh. “It’s not like it’s a big deal, though. To be honest, I just want to study hard and get a good degree. I’m going to be taking business classes so I can get a good job when I graduate.”

Edward nods. “That’s smart,” he tells me.

Just then, I look up and see a guy in a red polo shirt emblazoned with the college’s logo heading out of the doors of the SU. He looks up and sees us both, and pauses.

“Hi, are you a prospective student?” he asks.

“Yeah, I am,” I tell him.

He frowns at me. “You should be on an official tour, not wandering around by yourself. I can take you around now.”

I hesitate, glancing at Edward. I was looking forward to walking around with him, even just because I liked the excuse to spend more time in his company. But if we weren’t allowed, then I guess this might be coming to an end sooner than I’d like.

What should I do?

CHAPTER THREE

Edward

I look the little twerp up and down and decide there's no way he's stopping me from spending some time with Casey. We only just properly met, and I'm not giving away this opportunity to get to know her – and allow her to get to know me a little.

“We don't need a tour,” I tell him, drawing myself up to my full height. “Casey's already taken the official tour this morning.”

“Well, I should still escort you,” the boy says. “There are some areas that only students and faculty members can access, and we also don't want you getting lost.”

“There's not going to be any problem with that,” I say, drawing my wallet out of my back pocket.

“Uh, sir, we can't take bribes,” the kid says, half-laughing. “I don't know if you do things different in the US, but...”

I glare at him and pull out the item I want to show him – my alumni card. It features my picture and full name, as well as the years I studied and my course. Undeniable proof that I am actually allowed to walk around as much as I'd like.

“You said that Casey needs to be accompanied by a student or a member of staff, right?” I ask him. “Well, you're looking at a former student. So, buzz off, kid.”

He studies the card closely and swallows, clearly trying to decide whether to argue with me or not. “I see,” he says, finally. “Um. Just. Be careful, I guess.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t go anywhere we’re not supposed to,” I tell him, filing the card away. Then I slip a hand to the small of Casey’s back and push her forward, steering her around him and away, leaving him to watch us go.

“I thought he was going to kick us out for a moment,” Casey mutters, glancing back over her shoulder at him and then facing forward.

“Just a jobsworth,” I say dismissively. “He’s only a student rep. He’d have to call security to do anything like that. He wouldn’t have the authority.”

“I wouldn’t have known that,” Casey laughs. “I guess I have a lot to learn.”

“I wouldn’t recommend just straight-up ignoring your reps, but yeah, they can’t do a lot by themselves,” I tell her. “They can get you in trouble, sure, but they’re not like the campus police or anything.”

“What should we look at next?” Casey asks. “Isn’t that the library up ahead?”

“Right,” I tell her, with a knowing smile. “Now, the library is going to be very important. If you’re staying in the dorms, expect a noisy environment, especially if you have annoying neighbors. Sleep is not something that all students try to pursue during the night.”

“That sounds stressful,” Casey says.

“It can be, if you’re trying to study,” I say, leading her along the path towards the library. “That’s why you’re going to want to spend a lot of time in here. It’s changed a bit since I was a student – the computer rooms, particularly – but whether you’re studying on your laptop or taking down books to read, you’ll still need some peace and quiet. The library provides that.”

“I might get distracted by having other people around,” Casey says, looking up at the floors of the library stretching above us

with a worried expression.

“Well, there are private study rooms you can book out,” I tell her. “They’re usually only big enough for one student and you’re supposed to stay quiet inside there, but they have sound-proofing so you can’t hear any distractions from outside – or see anyone else, either.”

“That sounds a lot better.” Casey turns and looks to one side. “And what’s that building, again?”

I frown. The building is mostly glass, modern and filled with light. I realize that all I remember being there in my time was a little stretch of grass where students would sit out on warm days. “I don’t know,” I admit. “That must be new.”

I almost have to laugh at myself. Maybe it would have been better if we’d had the kid along to give us a tour. But I’m not about to admit that out loud – and if I ever see him again, you best believe I’ll let him know that we didn’t need him at all.

We explore the rest of the campus at a leisurely pace, taking everything in. Whenever I can, I dispense some little snippets of wisdom from my own time as a student. I feel confident that, even if the technology and some of the buildings might have changed, a lot of my tips still ring true. Maybe Casey doesn’t exactly need any advice about using the library’s fax machines, but she can definitely improve her student experience with things I picked up on both sides of the pond – things that you could use at any college in the world.

I find that I don’t want the tour to end. I drag it on for as long as I can, but finally I have to admit that I’ve shown Casey everything there is to show here. Everything I can remember, at least.

And that means I’m going to have to come up with another excuse – because I definitely don’t want this to be goodbye.

CHAPTER FOUR

Casey

Every step brings me a new view of something else to fall in love with about this school. The mixture of modern and older buildings, the students walking around the campus, the different recreational opportunities, even some of the clubs – it all sounds great to me.

I can really see myself studying here. I didn't know if that was going to be possible, but I really love it.

But the college might not be the only thing I'm falling for.

When I interact with men my Dad's age, they tend to be stuffy and old, showing the two decades between us by the way they act. They talk about things that go above my head, and they disapprove of just about everything my generation loves or creates. Forty might as well be sixty as far as my Dad's other friends are concerned.

But Edward is nothing like any of them. I'm starting to wish that I knew him before all of this – that I'd taken the time to talk to him when he was still in the US. Of course, it never occurred to me back then – and when I knew he was leaving to come to England, what was the point?

He's been here for long enough that his accent has started to change, and it's totally hot. Every now and then he says something that's just so completely British – like calling the

student rep a jobsworth – and it’s thrilling. I’ve never met anyone like him.

“Well, that’s King’s,” Edward says, hesitating. We stand facing one another outside the main reception building. The place where we first met up. We’ve walked everywhere and seen everything, and there’s nothing left to look at. It’s a shame. I feel like I could carry on talking to him forever. “What are your plans now? Are you looking anywhere else?”

“Yeah, I’m going to take a tour around Royal Holloway in three days. I’m here for a week. Dad wanted me to get a feel for the city itself as well as just looking at the schools themselves.”

“That’s a good plan,” Edward smiles. “But, do you know anyone else here? Or are you totally on your own?”

“I’m on my own,” I say, with a little nervous smile. “Dad said he would have come with me, but he had this big thing at work. Anyway, it’s fine. I’ve been nervous about exploring on my own, but when I come back in September I’ll be on my own again anyway. I’ve got to get used to it.”

“Well, you’re not completely alone,” Edward says thoughtfully. “I know you want to be independent, but it’s also nice to have a friend around. And when you start your course in September, you’ll have other students in the same boat to hang around with. Why don’t I spend some more time with you this week? I could show you more of the city, help you to get your bearings.”

“Oh!” I can’t help but grin. The opportunity to spend some more time with the hottest man in London? Possibly in the whole world? Like I’m going to say no. “That sounds amazing. Thank you.”

“It’s not a problem,” Edward says. “I can show you around tomorrow. Actually – what are your plans for dinner?”

Dinner – with Edward? I think someone needs to pinch me, because I’m either dreaming or I’ve died and gone to heaven.

“I don’t have any,” I say. “I was going to see what was around, and if I couldn’t find anything, there’s always room service at

the hotel.”

“Then you’re coming out with me,” Edward says, smiling.

“Just let me make a call or two, and we can go.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Edward

I step away from Casey to get some privacy, leaving her on a stone bench outside the reception area. I had plans for tonight, but that doesn't mean I have to keep them.

"Hello, sir?" It's my assistant, James, who answers the call. He's always around when I need him – even though I should have been done with work until tonight's get together, there's always something that comes up.

"Ah, James. Tonight's dinner – I need you to cancel it."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "Cancel it, sir?" James replies hesitantly.

"Yes." I don't necessarily like to torture him, but it is fun to hear him trying to wrestle with the politeness that's been drilled into him since birth, and the fact that it sounds like a ridiculous thing for me to do.

"But..." James pauses, then the politeness apparently loses the fight. "This is a big dinner, sir. Don't you remember? It's been planned for over a month. It's your opportunity to finally get Stan Robinson to give the firm his business."

"I know that," I say, grinning to myself at how uncomfortable he sounds. At least I've managed to cure him of always telling me I'm right. "But something even more important came up. I'll keep the reservation – but you can call them and let them know only to expect two, not four."

“What should I say to Stan and the others?” James asks, sounding stricken.

“Tell them a personal emergency came up, and I’ll need to reschedule,” I say. “And if they ask, the reservation was cancelled. I really don’t need them turning up and seeing me there. It might be a bit difficult to deny.”

“Got it.” James pauses. “Is there... really a personal emergency, sir?”

“Of a sort,” I tell him, glancing back towards Casey. It was an emergency. If I didn’t do something, she was going to walk out of my life without ever being mine, and I can’t have that.

I end the call with James and return to Casey, spreading my arms wide. “I’m all yours for the evening,” I tell her.

“Great!” she says. “Where are we going for dinner?”

I look her up and down; she looks amazing, but I don’t want her to feel out of place. “Did you bring anything dressy with you?” I ask.

“Of course,” Casey tells me. “I don’t have any plans, but I thought I should bring something just in case. There might have been a formal occasion at one of the schools I needed to attend.”

“Good,” I grin. “First, let’s go to your hotel, so you can get changed. Then, I’m taking you somewhere nice.”

“Where?”

I laugh at Casey’s wide, curious eyes. “You’ll see,” I tell her. “Come on. I’ll get us a cab.”

Within twenty minutes, we’re at her hotel. I wait downstairs in the lobby as she changes; thankfully, my work uniform of a dark suit and tie means I hardly ever look out of place in any social setting, and tonight will be no exception. I had originally intended to change into something with a little more of a flashy cut, to show off to Stan Robinson and impress him, but there’s no time for the both of us to change. And if I can make sure Casey is going to feel comfortable, then that’s what I’m going to do.

She comes down the stairs in a pair of low heels and a navy blue dress that hangs off her shoulders, cut nicely with a flattering, fluttering sleeve. I take a moment to appreciate the low v that allows me to admire just the very top of her cleavage, and then drag my eyes back up to her face. “You look wonderful,” I tell her.

The blush is immediate, flooding her face from her forehead to her neck. “Thank you,” she says.

I love the look on her face. I can tell she’s not used to getting compliments like that – and I can also tell that she really enjoys them. I want to make her smile like that all the time. And I have a few ideas for things that I could whisper in her ear that might make her blush even harder.

Then I picture that dress ripped open on the floor of my bedroom, and it’s me who has to look at the floor and clear my throat to regain my composure. “Shall we?” I say, pointing to the taxis waiting outside the hotel as a distraction.

I offer Casey my arm, and she takes it. That feels like a small victory, even if we haven’t exactly discussed the possibility of taking this any further yet. But as I feel her hand rest on the crook of my arm, and she walks at my side, I know I don’t want this to be the only time.

I want to make her mine – to show her off like this all the time. I want to shower her in jewels and designer clothes, send her to salon appointments and spas dates, give her a life of utter luxury.

But first, I’m going to give her a taste of gourmet food – and I have a feeling she, of all people, will be able to appreciate it the same way I do.

When we get out of the taxi, it doesn’t look as though we’ve arrived anywhere special. A dark brick exterior with tall glass windows, on the bottom floor of an office building and with a boarded-up shop next door – it doesn’t scream elegance. But I’m playing a little bit of a trick on Casey on purpose. She may not think we’re going anywhere special, but the BRAT restaurant has a Michelin star. All of the best gems in London are just like this, hidden away in plain view.

We're seated at a table for two. In the cramped space inside the restaurant, there aren't many tables. We can see the chefs working in front of us at an open kitchen, and on the other side of the room is the bar, taking up much of the available room. Here, you can see everything as it happens – and I think Casey will love it.

“Order anything you want,” I tell her. She might be surprised by the prices down the side of the menu; I don't want them to put her off getting from what she thinks sounds the most appetizing. “We'll do four courses, and I'll get some bread and butter for the table.”

Casey's eyes widen. She looks like a kid in a candy store, being given the chance to order whatever she wants. Except I no longer think of her as a kid. With her curves, how could I?

We place our orders of chopped egg salad with bottarga, moorland beef tartare, roast duck, and burnt cheesecake with rhubarb for me; langoustine, young leeks with fresh cheese, beef chop, and lemon tart for Casey. She's made good choices, and I feel almost giddy with anticipation, waiting to watch her eat.

I realize that it's important to me that she enjoys this meal. I want her to like the things that I like. I want to see that we're a good fit. I feel it in the way the blood rushes to my dick every time I get a glimpse of her body, but I also feel it in the easy way we talk, the ambitions she has, the magnetic attraction. I will make her mine, and it starts here.

“So, tell me about college,” I say. “What are your essentials?”

“A good faculty and course for business studies,” Casey replies immediately. “That's at the top of the list. I also wanted to come to London to get a different cultural experience. And I'd like a college with good facilities so I know I'll be able to learn to the best of my abilities. A nice dorm would be good, too.”

“Are you thinking about staying on campus?” I ask. “You know, students here often live off-campus by renting a small apartment or studio somewhere. You don't have to stay on

campus if you're not interested in the nightlife or you want to experience the culture more."

"I don't know," Casey shrugs. "I'd like to do the first year in a dorm at least. To help me find my feet. Maybe after that, I'll change my mind."

"Well, King's definitely has everything on your list," I say. "But Royal Holloway does too. You might have to decide based on your gut feeling of which of them appeals to you more."

Our first course arrives – beautifully presented, and bursting with flavor. While some Michelin-starred restaurants are known for plating up a tiny amount of food in a fancy way, BRAT keeps the fancy but doesn't skimp on portion sizes. That's why I knew it would be a good fit for Casey. I can see that she likes to eat, which makes her a perfect dinner companion for me, because I do too.

I watch her take her first bite. Her eyes roll back into her head and she moans in delight, making me quickly move to place my napkin more firmly across my lap. I can't take my eyes off her for long enough to make a start on my own food at first; she's so captivating. With each bite she glories in the food, appreciates it.

When the food is on the table we eat in silence, appreciating it for its flavor. We might make a comment here and there about how good it is. But between courses, we talk about Casey's life at home, her ambitions of running a business, how her family is doing. That she's always dreamed of having a traditional family of her own, a few kids and a dog, and being able to give her children everything they need. The more we talk, the more I realize how much we have in common – and how closely our needs are aligned.

I've been waiting for a long time to find a woman like Casey. I've stayed single, all these years, waiting for the perfect fit. And now here she is in front of me. I almost want to grab her up and lay her over the table and take her right here, put my claim on her, let everyone know that she is mine. But I can be

patient. I have a week to possess her – and I'll do it, at a pace that doesn't make her run for the hills.

CHAPTER SIX

Casey

Dinner was so wonderful that it's a shame it has to end. I barely want to move from the table – not just because I'm filled with the delicious food and enjoying that sleepy after-dinner feeling of satisfaction, but also because I don't want to leave Edward. But I have to go back to the hotel at some point tonight, and there's no avoiding it.

“Do you know which Tube station is closest here?” I ask, realizing I'm going to have to figure out exactly how to get back to the hotel.

“I'll take you in a cab,” Edward says with a smile. “I'm not leaving you to take the Tube all dressed up like that. Besides, it will give us a little more time to talk. We have to plan tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, in all the excitement of the food, I'd almost forgotten that Edward agreed to show me around tomorrow. If I get to spend the whole day with him when I wake up, it will be a lot easier to say goodnight.

“That sounds great,” I say, as we get up from the table. Edward leads me outside, the bill already taken care of, and we climb into the back of a taxi together, largely ignored by the driver as he follows our route in silence.

“So, what do you want to see?” Edward asks. “I don't think we'll get around to everything in a week, let alone a day, but if

there's something you're more excited about, we can start there."

"I don't know," I gasp. There are so many iconic sights in London. I've already had a few of the key experiences – like right now, riding in the back of a black cab, for example – but I want to cross as many of them off as possible. "I'd like to see the classic sights. The things you see in movies. Like Big Ben and Tower Bridge."

"That can be arranged," Edward says. He slides his phone out of his pocket and starts typing on it, though I can't see what he's doing. "Leave it with me. I'll meet you bright and early, unless you'd like a later start."

Sleeping in bed alone, rather than getting to spend time with Edward in this beautiful city? There's no way I'll miss even a moment of his company if I can help it. "Bright and early is good," I tell him.

Far too soon, we pull up outside my hotel. I wish we were further away, but it can't be helped. We're here now, and I can't delay – I have to go inside.

I get out reluctantly, but turn in surprise to see Edward paying the taxi driver. Isn't he going home? Is he staying here too? Or does he – does he want to stay with me...?

"I'll walk you to your door," Edward says, offering me his arm again. "I'm a little old-fashioned, I'm afraid. I like making sure my date gets home safe."

Date? Butterflies flutter in my stomach. I guess it was a dinner date, but neither of us said anything about it until now. I still can't really tell if it really was a date – or whether he's just saying that to be nice, trying to make his friend's daughter feel good.

I can't find my tongue as we head to the elevator and then go up five floors, before walking down the corridor to my door. We linger outside as I insert my keycard and unlock it, nudging it open with my hip.

"Well, this is me," I say at last. It sounds like something a girl would say in a movie. I'm not sure exactly where it came

from, but at least I didn't sound like a total idiot.

"Alright. Have a good sleep. And don't forget – bright and early in the morning."

I nod in agreement. Suddenly my throat is dry, and my voice has forgotten how to speak. I think I want to invite him inside. I think I want him in my hotel room – maybe even going all the way. But it's too forward to say anything, isn't it?

And I'm sure he would say no. He probably sees me as a kid still. And even if he did agree to come inside, I have no experience with this kind of thing. I'd come off like a freak and probably scare him off for good, and that would mean missing out on tomorrow.

I don't want that to happen.

"I'm looking forward to it," I manage to say, which is the truth and hopefully not too dorky. I don't know if he knows that I want him – that I can't stop looking at him and thinking about him. I hope he can't tell, because I must come off like a lovesick teenager right now.

Edward leans towards me, and for a magical moment I think he's going to kiss me – and I freeze in panic, not knowing what to do – but then his face moves past mine and his lips land on my cheek, a friendly gesture or the kind of thing a family friend would do, and he smiles at me and is gone.

I turn to watch him after a moment, but all I see is his form vanishing through the doors of the elevator. I step inside my room instead, feeling all kinds of things – excitement, satisfaction from the food, but most of all an electric kind of longing for him.

I wish for a moment that I had said something. Invited him in for a coffee, or whatever it is that people say in order to keep the night alive just a little bit longer. But I only have packets of coffee from the complimentary hotel service, not exactly a gourmet treat. And I don't know what I would have said or done next. Maybe it's for the best that I didn't say a word.

It's already late, so I get ready for bed and change into my nightgown, then snuggle into the big puffy duvet the hotel has,

resting my head on a pile of pillows. Sleeping in a hotel alone means you get to use all of the pillows just for yourself, and I'm definitely enjoying them. But that makes me think about who I might be sharing these pillows with, and before I know it my thoughts are filled with Edward again, and the mental image of him lying beside me.

That thought sends a shudder through my whole body. Him here beside me... shirtless, maybe even naked under the sheets, and me the same. Before I can really think about what I'm doing, my hand travels under the sheets and under the hem of my nightgown, and I start to touch myself, lost in the fantasy of Edward.

I picture him kissing me, his body over mine as he rolls over me, the covers ripped away and my body totally exposed under him. He would touch my breasts, touch me between my legs just like I'm doing now – I try to pretend it's his hand instead of mine – and then he would...

And then he would – what? The moment fizzles away and I'm left frustrated and disappointed, knowing that I can't finish the fantasy. As much as I would like to know how it feels – and as much as I'm turned on at the very thought of it happening – I'm a virgin. I don't know what it feels like to have sex. I don't have a real reference point for that. It might be the most amazing feeling in the world – at least, that's the impression I've been given – but I have no idea.

I burrow deeper into the covers and sigh, closing my eyes to sleep. Tomorrow still holds a lot of promise, even if today didn't go quite the way I would have liked it to. I can only hope that Edward might start seeing me as a real woman – not just the little girl he associates me with from before. Maybe that way, there might be some small hope that he could one day be in my bed for real – though I can't say I'm optimistic.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Edward

I'm determined. Casey will be mine. Nothing is going to stop me from achieving that goal – and by tonight, I'll have her in my arms.

It took only a bit of back and forth with my assistant to get everything booked and into place. Now it's ready, and I wait with the taxi outside of Casey's hotel, scanning the front reception area constantly for any sign of her.

Before too long, she appears, breathless and pink in the face from what must have been a dash out of her room and down the elevator to meet me. She waves her cellphone at me, an indication that she got my message to come downstairs, and smiles. As she rushes out of the hotel I put my arms out instinctively to catch her, worried that she will slip and fall under the sheer momentum she is carrying.

"Good morning," I chuckle, catching hold of her elbows and holding her steady.

"Morning," she pants. "I came as soon as I saw your message."

"I can tell." I look her up and down; she's stunning even in just jeans and a simple t-shirt.

Casey blushes. "I didn't want to keep you waiting."

"And you didn't," I laugh, opening the door of the cab for her. "Come on, get in. We've got an appointment to make."

“Oh, really?” Casey scrambles into the cab, looking back up at me. “Where?”

“You’ll see,” I say with a grin, moving to get in next to her and closing the door.

A night to sleep on it has done nothing to dampen my appreciation for Casey’s body, her beautiful face, the easy way we get along. If anything, I’m appreciating it more today – realizing that it wasn’t just a moment of madness. This is real, and it’s going somewhere.

As the taxi moves along, I point things out through the windows, Big Ben, Harrods, London Bridge and Tower Bridge across the water; and then we’re pulling up alongside the docks, giving Casey an amused look before getting out.

I hurry around the car to offer her a hand as she gets out, and she emerges into the morning air, fresh and brisk this close to the river.

“What are we doing?” she asks, looking around in wonder.

I chuckle and point to the short pier that extends across the water, towards a boat moored close to the edge. “I’ve booked us a quintessential London experience. The river cruise with lunch.”

“A river cruise?” Casey’s eyes widen slightly. “That sounds kind of fancy.”

I laugh, offering her my arm as has become my habit as we walk towards the gangway. “It’s a little bit fancy. I upgraded us to VIP. But it’s just a tour of the city, as seen from the river. We’ll tick off a lot of your sights this way, and we get lunch wrapped up as well so we don’t have to scramble around for somewhere to go after.”

Casey grins. “It sounds really fun,” she says. “I can’t wait.”

“The boarding time is in ten minutes, but we should be able to get on early with our VIP pass,” I tell her. I show our tickets to a man in a waterproof coat standing by the gangplank that leads to the boat, and he unclips a black rope to let us through.

Soon we're seated at a table up in the roped-off VIP area, getting our bearings. The boat fits a number of tables – ours, along with the other VIP seats, are round with a precise number of chairs depending on the number of people dining. Further down the boat are the ordinary seats, tables of eight where people are seated in mixed and matched groups of bookings.

We're able to sit in comfort and enjoy fresh juice and coffee while the other guests file onto the boat, and we even get a chance to go upstairs to admire the deck before the tour is ready to set off. We stay up there, admiring the view, as the tour begins.

We don't talk much, because the tour guide does that for us. He tells us about Big Ben and the Tower of London, takes us under Tower Bridge and London Bridge, points out the House of Parliament and all of the other famous sights – and even things I didn't know about. Ancient ships still moored in their harbors, pubs and inns that have been around since Shakespeare's time – all of it interesting and noteworthy. Most of the time, though, all I can see is Casey.

Finally, as we reach the furthest point of our journey, the spoken tour coming through the speakers ends and we're ushered downstairs. There, as the boat slowly returns us to the docks, we eat a lunch of delicious seasonal pasta and berry cheesecakes, and I can't help but wonder if anything in my life is ever going to have quite the same shine on it if Casey isn't by my side.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Casey

I love this. I love all of it. I love the way that Edward offers me his arm, and helps me down the stairs so I won't fall, and pulls out my chair for me. I love how he looks at me like I'm the most interesting person in the world, even though I know he must meet more interesting people all the time. I love eating with him, feeling like I'm not being judged at all, and talking freely between bites.

He takes care of me, makes sure that all of my needs are met. He won't let me stand on the deck feeling too cold or too hot, won't let me get thirsty or hungry. Is this what it would be like to be his wife? The thought fills me with a yearning I can barely explain. We've only really known each other a day, but I already feel like I don't ever want to be apart from him again. I just wish there was some way to make him feel the same.

When the lunch is over and the plates are cleared, we come slowly back into the docks, and I feel sad that the river tour is finally coming to an end. I enjoyed every minute of it, all the more so because Edward was by my side.

We're just stepping off the boat when I hear it. The thing I've so far managed to avoid with Edward, but I knew had to be coming at some point. The one thing I get everywhere I go. The cruel comments about my weight, always making me feel so low and embarrassed.

“Better be careful,” someone in the line behind us mutters, though not so quietly that I can’t hear it. I can’t help but wonder if it’s on purpose. “The anchor’s about to get off the ship. We might float away without lardarse there!”

I feel my cheeks burning red, and for a moment I want nothing more than to curl up and die. Instead, I do what I always do when someone makes a comment like that. I keep walking ahead, pretending I haven’t heard a thing, trying not to show how hard I’m shaking, blinking back the tears stinging at my eyes.

Until I hear a loud thump and a number of gasps behind me, forcing me to turn and look in the direction the voice came from.

I’m not at all expecting to see what I do. Edward, striding towards me with his hands curled into fists at his side. I thought he was right behind me, but now he’s having to catch up – and, I realize, walking back past other people who were behind him in the line to leave. All of them are staring at him with a kind of shocked awe, even moving aside as he goes through. He catches up with me and grabs hold of my arm, and starts to pull me away.

But not before I see what was blocked from my view behind him. A man laid out on the floor of the boat with a dazed expression, just now starting to sit up as another woman fusses around beside him.

Edward must have gone back there and laid him out after hearing what he said.

I look up at Edward wordlessly as he walks along, an angry yet confident kind of energy now surrounding him. I don’t even have the presence of mind to wonder where we’re going next, because all I can think about is how he just punched a guy for being rude to me.

He’s like a knight in shining armor, ready to defend my honor. It feels incredible. No one has ever stood up for me like that before.

But at the same time, a part of me is still dying inside. The fact that he did means he heard the comment that guy made – about me being so heavy I must have anchored the ship. I don't always feel bad about my weight – a lot of the time, I think I look good – but when people make those comments about me, thinking I can't hear them, it really hurts. And now Edward's heard it too – the source of my shame.

I know he won't want to be with me now. What kind of man would want a girlfriend, let alone wife, who attracts those kinds of comments? I might as well give up on the feelings I've started to have for him. Who was I kidding? I'm never going to be in his league.

CHAPTER NINE

Edward

I slowly let go of the anger that is gripping my insides, forcing myself to deliberately regulate my steps so Casey can keep up. All I want to do is go back there and hit that guy again. How dare he say something that would make Casey feel anything less than the beautiful goddess she is?

She doesn't say anything about what happened on the boat. I'm not sure that she actually heard him say what he did. In fact, we don't say anything at all for a while as we walk instead of taking a taxi, taking a route I know will get us to our next destination.

Actually, I'm glad we have a little walk. It helps to burn the anger out of me, and by the time we arrive, I feel much better.

"Here we are," I tell Casey, turning to her and waving a hand at the iconic landmark behind me. "The London Eye."

"Wow!" Casey exclaims. "It's so much taller from down here on the ground than I thought. I had no idea how big it really is. I'm glad we came to see this."

"We're not just here to look at it," I tell her with a wink. "We're going on it."

"What?" Casey exclaims. "But I heard the tickets are so expensive – and you have to book in advance!"

I grin at her. "Well, there are some advantages to all those networking dinners and events I have to go to."

Casey looks up again at the huge wheel towering over us. “We’re going in one of those big... carriage, thingies?”

“Right,” I laugh, taking her by the arm again to lead her to the line. You have to arrive at a specific time slot to get on, and thankfully, we’re right on time. “One of those. Come on.”

Casey is so excited as we climb inside and the wheel begins to move that I know I’ve made the right choice. There are lots of different activities you can do in London – going around Madame Tussaud’s or the London Dungeon, the Natural History Museum, the National Portrait Gallery or the Tate Modern – that it was hard to narrow it down to just a few things for one day. Of course, if today goes well, then I’m hoping I can get tomorrow as well.

“This is so amazing,” Casey murmurs, as we watch the city begin to fall away beneath us. From the moment the wheel begins to move we can see a different view minute by minute, different sights appearing and being swallowed up by the distance as we go. Looking out over the city like this feels romantic – like standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower or overlooking Venice from a balcony.

Without thinking, I slip my arm around Casey as we stand by the glass looking out. She fits perfectly against me. Her head just level with my shoulder, my arm fitting around her right shoulder and traveling down so my hand can cup her waist on her left. It feels comfortable and right, but after a moment I realize what I’ve done. It wasn’t even intentional. I feel Casey stiffen, her muscles going tense at the unexpected touch.

But then, to my surprise, she doesn’t push me off or ask me what I’m doing. Instead, after just a moment, she relaxes. I could almost swear that she leans into my touch, shifting her weight towards me.

It seems that my plan is working better than I thought. It could be that there really is a chance of this happening tonight – and despite all my determined thoughts, I really wasn’t sure that I could get her to see it. The rightness of us.

But now, standing in the London Eye and looking out over the city, I feel like we might just be the only two people in the

entire world. And it works so well it makes me ache. If it weren't for the other people also riding in the gondola with us, I might rip her clothes off right now, and take her in front of the whole city. That thought makes me hard, and I have to focus very carefully on thoughts of business deals and boardrooms and elderly CEO's to make it go away.

We spend the rest of the day doing the tourist thing, buying silly England souvenirs from one of the many tourist trap shops with all their Union Jack-printed goods, walking down famous streets, admiring the Tower and Parliament from the ground. Finally, it's time to go for dinner; but instead, I suggest something else.

"It's getting late," I tell her, checking my watch. "I should probably take you back to your hotel."

"Oh," Casey says, looking momentarily disappointed. I'm sure she was expecting dinner – but I have other plans. "Yes, of course. I hadn't even noticed the time."

CHAPTER TEN

Casey

I thought it was all going so well – he put his arm around me on the Eye and it made me burn with desire – but when Edward suggests it's time to go back to the hotel, I can't help but feel bitterly disappointed. I suppose I was hoping to spend more time with him tonight – but if he has plans, I understand that we can't be together for a full twenty-four hours.

Just like before, Edward puts me in a cab and then comes with me all the way to my door, carrying my bags full of souvenirs for me. I could manage them myself – I didn't completely go all out – but it's nice to have someone offer to do something nice for me. Not only that, but when I get to the door, I realize it's also an excuse to invite him to come inside.

“Could you put the bags on the desk?” I ask him, holding the door open and trying to look coy.

“Of course,” Edward smiles, brushing past me and walking right into the room. I close the door behind him and, even if it only turns out to be for just a moment, I have what I wanted. Edward inside my room, just the two of us with a big empty bed.

I sit down on the edge of it, watching Edward as he puts the bags down and then glances around. “This isn't too bad, is it?” he asks. “Is the bed comfortable?”

“I like it,” I say, feeling shyness threatening to overcome me as I gather my courage to add. “Why don’t you sit down and try it?”

Edward does, sitting right beside me. The soft mattress dips under both of our weights, bringing us just marginally closer together.

“Um,” I say, before my nerve fails me – because I have an idea of how he can stay longer, and maybe a way to get him to do more. “We didn’t get dinner. I’m going to order room service. You can stay and have something if you want?”

I’m almost certain he will say no, and I don’t dare turn my head to look at him, staring at my hands where they rest on top of my knees.

“That sounds good,” he says, reaching for the menu on the table. “We can’t have Michelin-starred food every night, right?”

“Right,” I laugh, a wave of relief washing over me. Could it really be that he’s willing to stay here and eat with me? I can hardly believe my ears. It might have been my idea, but I never really thought he would go for it.

We order something – I barely even know what, because all I can hear is the pounding of my own heart in my ears. I can’t take my eyes off him as he shrugs out of his jacket and sits in his long sleeve shirt, the muscles in his arms visible through the fabric. He sits so close to me, and I can’t think about anything except how much I want him.

But what am I supposed to do now? I know that I want something between us to start, but I don’t know how. I’ve never made any moves before, let alone the first. What should I do? Just grab hold of him? Say something? I’m lost in indecision, the heat growing in my belly as I think about what I want him to do to me, but unable to make it happen.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Edward

There's a new energy between us. I can feel it, thrumming almost palpably. A new heat rising in the small space between us, like we're two magnets being pulled together by an inescapable force. I set the phone back onto its holder and toss the menu back onto the table and then I can no longer ignore it. It's there, and it's real, just like I had hoped.

I turn to Casey and see it in her eyes, lidded and looking at me through her lashes; her mouth, just slightly parted as she catches her breath; her cheeks, tinged with a light pink, as her gaze falls to my own lips. I won't make her wait. I want this – I want her. I want to make her mine, and now that I see permission in her eyes, I will take her.

I reach out to cup one side of her face first as I bend my head down, my mouth seeking out hers for that first contact. It's hot and heady, her soft lips pressed against mine for a sweet kiss. I flick my tongue against her lips, looking for access, and they part for me as if by instinct. Then our tongues are dancing as I deepen the kiss, holding her against me, exploring her mouth.

When I pull back Casey's eyes are closed, and she opens them to stare up at me, her breath still catching unevenly. Her expression is shock and awe, surprise and desire, all layered together. She didn't think I would make this move. I lower my head to kiss her deeply again, to show her that it wasn't a mistake, that I want this.

With one hand still holding her cheek, I move the other over her neck, sweeping it across the curve of her shoulder, down over her side to her waist, pulling her closer to me. I shift on the bed so that we can press together more closely, feeling the heat of her body against mine, all soft where I'm hard, the perfect counterpart.

I release her lips only to move her with an animalistic growl from deep inside my chest, lifting her and pushing her back onto the bed, flat on her back, looking up at me with eyes that are questioning but trusting. She will let me have what I want. I know it when I look into her eyes. All I have to do is take her, claim her, show her that she's mine.

I crawl over her, positioning my body exactly over hers, supporting my weight on my knees as I lean down to kiss her again. My fingers twined in her blonde hair while my other hand explores her chest, the contours of her bra, the flesh spilling over the side. My hand slips down to her hip, my thumb holding the exact junction of her waist with her hip, my fingers circling around to the side of her ass, squeezing.

She feels so good under my hands. I trail my fingers under her t-shirt, across the heated skin there, pushing up and up slowly until I reach her chest. I push the fabric out of the way, over her shoulders and then, as she raises her arms, up and over her head. I toss it onto the floor dismissively, feasting my attention on her breasts, the way they swell and rise with her heavy breathes under her bra. I want it out of the way – I want my skin on her skin, my hands on her.

I reach behind her for a moment for the clasp and find it, flicking it open. The material sags without the tension holding it in place, and I lean down to kiss her hungrily as I pull it away from her body, letting it join the t-shirt on the floor. I break off to look, to take in the glorious sight of her. She spills over my hands, each of her breasts too large to fit only in my palms, my fingers gently squeezing all they can find only to release and then circle her nipples, drawing them up harder and taller.

Casey groans low in her throat and I lower my face to her chest, taking one of her nipples into my mouth and flicking at

it with my tongue as my hand repeats the same motions on the other side. Then I walk my free hand down, down to the waistband of her jeans, down to pop the button and slide down her zipper.

“Wait,” Casey blurts out, and I stop immediately. “There’s something... I should tell you something.”

“What is it?” I ask, looking down at her flushed cheeks and slightly swollen lips. I can’t imagine anything she could say that would make me not glory in this sight.

“I’m a virgin,” she says, the flush in her cheeks deepening to a red. “I... I’ve never done this before. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m sorry. I – I thought I should tell you because I... I don’t know how to... to please you.”

She’s flushed and squirming, obviously deeply embarrassed by her admission. I freeze up completely. Of all the things she could have said, I wasn’t expecting that. I stare at her for a moment, unable to move or say a thing.

Then I hear a knock over my shoulder, room service arriving with our dinner. With quite possibly the worst timing that a room service delivery has ever had.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Casey

Edward is gone from over me, rolling off the bed to answer the door and collect our room service. I quickly scrambled to get underneath the covers, lifting them up over my chest to cover myself up. I feel awful. But I had to tell him – it was the right thing to do, in case he expected more from me than I was able to give. But now I think I've messed everything up.

What was I thinking? Of course, he wouldn't want to be with a virgin like me. I'm just a kid compared to him. There's no reason why he would waste any more time with me. I'm sure once the food is gone he's going to leave – maybe he won't even stay to eat. I don't blame him. After this, we never have to see each other again. I'm flying home at the end of the week, and he's already fulfilled his obligations of showing me around.

I don't pay any attention to the conversation at the door, as Edward accepts the room service cart and carries in a tray before closing the door. All I can do is focus on the fact that my eyes are filling with tears, and try to blink them back. I'm such an idiot. I should have stayed quiet and maybe blamed it all on nerves.

Edward comes to sit on the side of the bed, facing me, and I can't look at him. One hand is pressed high against my chest, holding the covers in place, but the other rests on the bed

sheet. It's this hand that he reaches for, taking hold of me and tracing a circle on the back of my hand with his thumb.

"I'm glad you told me," he says, quietly. There's intimacy in the way he talks to me, making me look up in spite of myself and meet his gaze. "It's not something that should be taken lightly. Your first time is important. You'll remember it for the rest of your life – and you want to have good memories, not bad ones."

I want to speak, to tell him that I would have made good memories with him. That nothing about him could possibly be bad. But I feel like my heart is breaking, because this speech is going to be about why he has to leave and never see me again, and I don't think I can open my mouth to speak without crying in front of him.

"It doesn't put me off," Edward says, his second hand joining the other, both of them sandwiching mine with a comforting touch. "I still want you. God, it's hard to hold myself back, Casey. But your first time should be special."

I frown, totally confused. I don't know if I understand any of this. Did he just say that he's actually fine with it? But then why does it still sound like he isn't going to have sex with me? "What?" I ask, my voice coming out thick with emotion.

"I want your first time to be special," he says. "I want there to be a build-up. A whole experience. I want you to know how special you are, and to feel it. I'm going to do that for you. But not tonight. We need time. I want tomorrow to be your special day."

I blink. So... he means... he still wants me after all?

"Tomorrow," I repeat, half-question, half-wonderment, the only thing I can manage to make my lips murmur.

"If you'll have me," Edward says, leaning forward to ghost his hand across the side of my cheek.

My eyes nearly pop out of my head. If *I'll* have *him*? Is he crazy?

"Yes," I tell him, but then I make a hopeless gesture towards my own body. Aside from the sheets, I'm still topless, and

there's still an unresolved fire in the bottom of my belly, stoked before my confession. "But why not tonight?"

Edward gives me a knowing smile. "I know you're eager for this," he says. "I won't leave you frustrated. We can still do other things, even if I don't take your virginity just yet."

"What do you mean?"

Edward only smiles. "Do you trust me?"

I don't need to think about it. I do – inherently, even if I don't know why.

"Yes," I whisper.

Edward grins and leans in to kiss me. "Then here's a little taste of tomorrow," he says, and gently coaxes the covers down away from my chest.

He goes right back to where we were, as if nothing had happened. His hand on my breast, twisting my nipple in that way that seems to send electric sparks through me, then his mouth on the other side, his other hand tracing its way down to my waistband. His fingers slip inside the fabric, brushing across my skin, in a place no one else has ever touched me – making me shudder in anticipation and need and maybe a little bit of fear. I don't know what to expect, but I do trust him like I said, and I let him explore me with his hands.

Edward shifts his weight, using both of his hands now to slowly push the fabric of my jeans down over my hips, my panties going with them. He moves to my feet to pull everything off me, and I'm naked in front of him, not a single scrap of clothing left to cover me up. I feel vulnerable but also excited – because I know I've chosen the right man to see me, and I only see admiration and adoration in his eyes as they sweep across my body.

Even so, I'm not prepared for what happens next. Edward moves forward between my legs, spreading them wide at the hips until I'm completely exposed to him. Cool air hits me there, alerting me to the fact that I'm already wet with the excitement, and I want to blush and squirm away and close my legs. But Edward looks at me with heavily lidded eyes and

says one thing, one thing that pushes all of my insecurities aside.

“Beautiful.”

I can't resist the way he looks at me, the way the word falls off his lips. I don't want to cover myself up now – I want him to see. I want him to tell me again how beautiful I am. I want to feel like it's true, the way he keeps making me feel that way over and over again, like no one else ever has.

And when he dips his head down low and I feel the touch of his tongue on my sex, I can only gasp in surprise and in pleasure at the way his rough tongue scrapes along all of my delicate nerve endings, setting them completely on fire.

My hands clutch into fists in the sheet on either side of me, trying to hold on to something in the face of how strong and powerful the sensations are. I can barely breathe or think or know anything, only that Edward's tongue is lapping at my most sensitive nerves, swirling in circles or long licks up and down, setting me alight in all kinds of different ways. I may have touched myself before, but I have never experienced anything even remotely similar to this – the wet and hot pressure of his tongue, the intimacy of it, the sight of his head bobbing between my legs, the thought of him tasting me...

I gasp and moan with abandon, with no way to control myself or the way my body reacts to these sensations. I'm hot all over and panting for breath as he ramps up the pace, his tongue flicking faster, faster – and then one of his fingers doing the same as he pulls back for a moment, a new sensation entirely – and then another unexpected phenomenon as his tongue returns to circle around my post sensitive point, and his finger teases my entrance, slipping inside me and making me moan even louder.

It's more than I could have imagined. Edward begins a slow rhythm, tormenting me as the pressure builds and builds, eliciting such magic from my nerves that I never thought was possible, making me shut my eyes and grip the sheets harder, unable to focus on anything else but the way he makes me feel. The whole world disappears and recedes further and

further away until even the rest of my body no longer exists, just the narrow world between my legs, Edward's tongue and his fingers, working me up into a frenzy.

Inside me a wave is building, a wave that pushes me higher and higher, my hips bucking and pushing all on their own without my input, rising higher and higher until it feels like I can't go any further – until there is nowhere else to go – until everything crashes over me, wild and inescapable, and all I can do is let go and let myself be drenched by the wave, powering through me and sending the deepest ecstasy into every cell of my body, into my fingertips and toes, every hair on my head, the whole world in technicolor and more vibrant than before.

I come down to find my hips twitching, some invisible power between my legs pulsing rhythmically, and Edward sitting up with a satisfied smile that I can't help but return in the golden glow of my own pleasure.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Edward

I look at Casey writhing in pleasure, her face contorted with it, a flush in her cheeks as her legs twitch and wobble in front of me, and I know I've never seen anything as beautiful as this.

I wait for her to catch her breath and recover, and offer her my hand to help her sit up. "Good?" I ask.

"Good," Casey confirms, with a tone that implies it was much more than that.

"Hungry?" I grin at her.

She nods emphatically, and I grab the covers, tucking them over her again so she won't feel too exposed while we eat. The room service came on a tray, so I bring it over and sit on the bed next to her, leaning up against the pile of pillows as I settle the tray across both of our laps. This way, we can eat at the same time, together, as close as possible.

It tastes good, possibly because we have both worked up an appetite, but not a single bite of it tastes as good as Casey. I'm already looking forward to tomorrow, to the chance to experience more, to taste her again. She tastes like the best ambrosia, nectar of the gods, because she is mine. The scent of her stays in my nose, the perfume of her skin, and I know it's mine and only mine to know.

Tomorrow will be special, just as I promised. Which means that, as soon as we're done eating, I have some calls to make.

“I’m going to step out,” I tell her, collecting the tray with its empty plates and glasses. “I need to organize some things for tomorrow. After that, I’ll come back to you. Is that alright?”

“Yes,” Casey says, a little breathlessly, clutching the covers against her bare chest. I think of her nakedness under all of that and I can’t help but feel a stir of arousal, my dick hard again and still without release. But I shake my head to clear it, tamping down my own desire. This is about Casey. This is all about her needs – mine can wait.

I set the tray down outside our door in the hall, for one of the staff members to pick up on their rounds, and head down the hall towards the exit. Just as I remembered, there’s a smoking area outside the restaurant downstairs, a seating area in the open, deserted at the moment with all of the other guests either in the bar or in their rooms.

I take my cell phone out of my pocket and call my assistant.

“James,” I say, by way of greeting. “I need you to cancel all of my plans for tomorrow.”

James sounds as if I’ve just asked him to dye my pet dog pink. “All of them, sir?”

“Yes, all of them,” I say, smiling at his confusion. I don’t blame him. He doesn’t know what’s happening here – what I’ve found. He doesn’t know about Casey. “I won’t be reachable for the entire day. No emails, texts, phone calls – nothing. Please make a note of that and rearrange everything for next week.”

“Next week?” I can hear the stress levels rising in James’ voice.

“Don’t worry about it, everything will keep,” I tell him. “If they won’t wait, I don’t want to work with them anyway. Make sure that you don’t reschedule anything to this week, because I may have to cancel everything else until Saturday. In fact, it’s a good idea to start rescheduling everything that isn’t urgent right away. Even if I do come back into the office, I may be distracted.”

“Got it,” James says, though he doesn’t sound particularly convinced. “What should I tell them?”

I laugh. “Nothing. Just that I want to reschedule. No, that I *have to* reschedule. They don’t have the right to an explanation, it’s private business. Besides, half of them will assume I’m meeting with their competitors, which will give us an advantage when we do meet.”

“Yes, sir,” James says. “And... from Saturday, you’ll be back to normal...?”

I glance up, in the direction of Casey’s hotel room. “I certainly hope not,” I mutter, before ending the call.

When I get back up to the room, Casey has redressed in a silky nightgown that flows over her curves, making me want to throw her on the bed there and then and rip it right off her body. But I know that I can’t – a promise is a promise, and I’m taking this one especially seriously.

“Oh,” she says, looking up at me with a shy smile. “You’re back.”

In that moment, I realize she didn’t believe that I would come back. There’s something so appealing about her innocence and doubt, so endearing. I want to hold her close and let her know that everything is always going to be alright, because I’m not going anywhere – not ever again.

“I said I would be,” I tell her instead, checking my watch and slipping my shoes back off. “It’s late. Do you want to get some sleep?”

Casey nods. “I was thinking that.” She glances at me from under her lashes, shy and unsure. “Are you... staying here?”

“Is that alright?” I smile at her, reaching up to undo the buttons of my shirt. “You have a pull-out sofa bed. I can sleep there.”

“Are you sure?” Casey blinks, looking at the big empty bed.

“I’m sure,” I laugh. “I promised you. Tomorrow is special. And if I sleep in that bed with you tonight, I’m not going to be able to hold myself back.”

I find a spare blanket in the top of the closet, and along with the sofa bed, it's enough to make a passably comfortable place to stay the night. We settle into our respective places, and Casey turns off the lights by the bed, leaving us in the darkness.

"Goodnight, Edward," she says, already sounding sleepy.

"Night," I tell her, smiling to myself. Before long, I'll be hearing that from her every night, in the bed that we share. She's going to be mine – for the rest of my life. And I can't wait to start.

Tomorrow will be more special than she could imagine – it has to be. There's a lot at stake. And I won't risk losing her now.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Casey

I wake up, and for a moment I think it must have all been a wonderful dream. Then I look across the room and see Edward, just buttoning up the cuffs on his shirt, and I realize it wasn't a dream at all. It was real.

He looks freshly showered, his hair towel dried, and I could swear his shirt looks brand new even though he didn't bring anything with him.

"Morning, princess," he says, a knowing smile on his lips.

"How long have you been awake for?" I ask, scrambling to flatten down my hair and brush my fingers through any tangles that may have appeared while I was sleeping.

"Since dawn," Edward chuckles. "Old habits die hard. Even if I'm not working today, my body still thinks I must be."

"Oh, wow." I sneak a glance at the clock by the bed, it's past ten in the morning. "I'm so sorry. You should have woken me."

Edward shakes his head. "You looked peaceful. Besides, it's not your fault I'm an early riser. I had some things to take care of this morning, to make sure everything is set up, and now I'm all yours."

I smile shyly at him. "Do you mind waiting just a little longer, for me to shower and get ready?"

From the way Edward's eyes rake over me, I know he's enjoying the implications of the word 'shower.' "Of course," he says. "Take your time. We have a relaxed day ahead."

I rush into the bathroom to shower and dress as quickly as I can. No matter what he says, I don't want to waste a single minute. I only have a week here until I have to go home, and half of that is gone already – and every moment with Edward is precious.

Plus, the quicker we do whatever he has planned, the quicker we can get back here and have some fun.

I can't help but wish I'd packed something a bit sexier – jeans and t-shirts are great for exploring the city, but not so much for seducing your Dad's old best friend. Not that I seem to need to do much more in that area – he's already promised me tonight, and last night was amazing.

I emerge ready to go and take Edward's arm, as I'm now used to, locking up the room and heading down to the lobby together. For a moment I worry about being seen together – I've only paid for a single occupancy room – but then I relax. After all, Edward can take care of it if we get into any problems. And it would be worth it, to have him with me all night.

The short, and by now habitual, taxi ride takes us into the very center of London to Oxford Street, a place I've only ever heard about until now. It's a wide street populated on both sides with shops from high street brands to the bigger names, superstores with thousands of garments to choose from, and amazing independent places I've never heard of. From there we go to Regent Street, and down to Liberty, the iconic store that offers designer clothing, homewares, and everything you could imagine – all wrapped up in a beautiful old building that was once a haunt of Oscar Wilde.

Through the whole experience, Edward keeps telling me that I can have anything I want. My eyes pop open wide at some of the price tags, but he tells me not to look at them – to just decide whether I want something based on how it looks and how it makes me feel. Even so, I don't pick out a thing – and I

can sense Edward is getting frustrated as we head up to another floor in Liberty.

“I just want you to have anything you want,” he says. “You don’t have to be shy about it. Really. Anything you want, I’ll get it for you.”

I feel my face flush. It’s not that I’m not grateful – I am – but I find it hard to accept this kind of gift. I don’t want him to spend too much on me. And besides, however much I may love the idea of buying a gorgeous designer dress from a top fashion house, I doubt they would have anything that might fit me – and I don’t want to go through the embarrassment.

“I just haven’t seen anything I really want yet,” I tell him, but I can see that he’s not convinced.

We come to a floor full of womenswear, and even simply walking around the rooms, displayed around a central railing that looks down through the floors below past a magnificent hanging sculpture, is awe-inspiring. All of these beautifully detailed gowns and shirts and knitwear pieces hanging on the racks, with name cards hanging above them of the most famous designers. I hardly dare to touch them, but I look at everything with wide eyes. So, this is how the rich live.

“Will you be alright looking around here on your own for a minute?” Edward asks me, out of the blue. He has a distracted look on his face. “I want to go talk to someone – the man who does my personal styling whenever I’m here. I’ll be back from the menswear floor in a moment.”

“Alright,” I say, not wanting to hold him back – even if I will feel a bit more awkward wandering around on my own.

I don’t have to wait too long, as it happens. I’m exploring a room filled with one-off vintage pieces when Edward reappears – and behind him a tall, willowy woman with clear eyes, clear skin that shines as if polished, and beautifully cut hair. She looks like a model, and given where we are, I can’t help but expect that she is.

“Casey,” Edward says. “This is Mara. She’s a personal stylist here, too.”

I look at Mara with a moment of confusion before it starts to become clear. “That’s why you went to talk to your stylist?”

“I wanted a recommendation,” he says with a smile.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Casey,” Mara says, her words toned with an English accent. “I’d like to help you pick out a new outfit. Why don’t we talk about the kind of things you like to wear?”

I try to fight down the embarrassment and awkwardness, but I feel my cheeks heating up. “Oh, I don’t know... I didn’t think you would have anything that fits me.”

I don’t dare look at Edward to see his reaction, but Mara only smiles. “Actually, we have a lot of sizing options for many of our collections. Our customers don’t all wear a size six.”

“Oh,” I say, taken aback. “Then... I suppose I would like to get a new dress.”

“No expense spared,” Edward puts in quickly. “Don’t even tell her the prices, Mara. I’m picking up the bill.”

After those words, everything seems to go by in a blur. Mara asks me quick-fire questions about what I like, how I feel the most comfortable, the colors I normally wear, even what kind of occasions I might be wearing the dress to. Then she hurries me off to a dressing room while she picks out dress after dress for me to slip into, cooing and praising me whenever I emerge. At last, I think I’ve found the one, a shimmery blue fabric teased into a Greek-style robe, hanging around my body in flattering drapes from a central halter that is encrusted with beads. It looks classic and timeless – which has to be a good choice if this is the only designer piece I can ever afford to own.

I walk out of the changing room area to find Edward, sitting in a chair and flicking through something on his phone. He looks up when I come out, and his eyes go wide.

“Yes,” he says, immediately.

“Yes?” I ask, giggling a little. I feel giddy. It must be the Liberty experience.

“Buy it right now,” he says. “Yes. A thousand times yes.”

I grin and twirl for him, letting the fabric fan out around me for a moment. “I take it you approve, then?”

“Casey,” Edward tells me evenly. “Go and get changed so we can buy that dress, before I ravage you right here in the middle of the store.”

I squeal with laughter and rush back to the changing rooms, doing as I’m told. I don’t need to hear it from him twice – this day is getting better and better already.

When we emerge from Liberty with a pretty purple bag slung over Edward’s arm – since he insists on carrying it for me – I feel as bright inside as the sunny day that awaits us. We stroll a little longer through the colorful Carnaby Street area, before Edward suggests we head somewhere else.

I follow along, sensing the air of mystery, not asking him where we’re going. I have the feeling that he’ll just give me a vague answer or tell me to wait and see, and I’ve started to realize that it’s better to let Edward surprise me – because his surprises are always worth it.

“Here we are,” he says, checking his watch as we walk towards the famous Browns. “Just in time for afternoon tea.”

My hand flies to cover my mouth, and I try to hold back a shout of delight. Afternoon tea at Browns’ was one of the key highlight experiences I heard about when I researched my trip to London – something that is recommended for everyone to do. And Edward organized it without telling me, even though you have to book in advance. He probably had to pull some serious strings to get us in this quickly.

We’re seated quickly at a table in the grand downstairs dining area, and then served with a pot of tea and a circular-shaped metal tray with several thin tiers. On each of them are more delights, tiny sandwiches cut into fingers, miniature cakes and brownies of several different shapes and flavors, and gorgeous scones with jam and cream to spread on top. Each bite is delicious, and the iconic setting makes it even more exciting.

Finally, when there are only crumbs left, I look at Edward with total satisfaction and a smile. “What’s next?” I ask.

“Next, I thought I might take you home.”

“Home?” I frown. “My flight’s not until the end of the week.”

Edward laughs. “Not *your* home. My home.”

“Oh!” I take this in, slowly thinking about it. Of course, just because I’ve been staying in a hotel, Edward wouldn’t be – he lives here all the time. I just never really considered where he was going when he left me on that first evening. And then it strikes me that going to his home is an intimate step – it means seeing another side of him, the private side that only friends and family have access to, and it means going to the place where his bedroom is. “Oh, right.”

It’s Edward’s turn to frown at my reaction. “You don’t want to?”

“No, I do,” I tell him quickly. “I just... I suppose I’m a little nervous.”

Edward reaches across the table to take hold of my hand. “You don’t need to be nervous. I’ll take care of you.”

I look into his eyes. “I know,” I say, because it’s true. He will. I trust him – and I know that whatever happens next, it will be the best experience it could possibly be, because I will be with him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Edward

Casey seems a little quiet in the taxi ride back to my home. I reach for her hand and hold it, between us on the back seat, hoping that I can give her some measure of comfort that will help to soothe her nerves. I understand her being nervous, of course – this is all new to her. But I hope that she can trust me to treat her well and make her feel good.

My own heartbeat increases in pace as we get closer to my house. I have barely been able to restrain myself these past two days, and the thought of finally getting to claim Casey is almost too much to bear. I want to have her, right here in the taxi – but I can wait a little longer. I have to make sure she enjoys every moment of this.

We get out of the taxi in front of my home in Notting Hill. I bought it when I moved here, perhaps optimistically though I've never met a woman who could fulfil my dreams until now, I purchased a home big enough for a family, grand and furnished with all of the latest accessories. There's a small garden behind it, five bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a huge kitchen where I can see myself gathering one day with a family. Or at least, I can now – because while I could never quite fully imagine it before, now I can easily picture Casey as my wife, doting on our children.

“This is your home?” Casey asks, looking up at it from the sidewalk.

“Yes,” I tell her, taking my keys out of my pocket as the taxi speeds away. “Come inside.”

“But... you live here alone?” Casey asks.

I laugh at the look on her face. “So far, yes. I’ve been waiting to find the right person to share it with. I know it’s too big for one person, but I had hope that one day I would be able to fill it.”

We step inside and I enjoy watching Casey, all of this is what I’m used to, the things I see every day, but it’s new to her. Her reaction reminds me of how I felt when I first toured the property.

She turns in a circle in the entrance hall, admiring the tiled pattern on the floor, the wide staircase reaching upwards, the light flooding in from the large windows. In the lounge she runs her hands over the back of the couch admiringly; she pauses in front of the painting I have in my study. When she’s seen everything downstairs, including looking out of the windows at the garden, I take her by the hand and lead her upstairs – to the reason I brought her here instead of going back to the hotel.

“This is the master bathroom,” I tell her with a grin, after leading her past the bed and built-in double wardrobes. I let her step in front of me to take it in, the white marble tiles, the rainforest shower with a wide space blocked in by clear glass, and the jacuzzi bathtub beside it.

I put my hands on her shoulders from behind, leaning close to murmur into her ear. “Would you like to take a bath?”

Casey nods silently, her eyes not moving from the tub, and I smile to myself. This day is going to be just as special as I had hoped.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Casey

Mood music fills the room from nowhere, as well as a wonderful scent of flowers and honey as the tub begins to fill with water. Jets pour out from four directions, as Edward – still behind me – carefully eases me out of my clothes, pulling my t-shirt over my head, my jeans down to my ankles, and then my bra and panties until I’m again naked in front of him.

Just like before, it doesn’t feel awkward or embarrassing to be bare in front of him. I feel the adoration he has for my body, the way he runs his hands over me carefully like I’m something precious, and I only feel a sense of peace and worth.

Edward holds out his hand and takes mine, supporting me as I climb into the warm water, feeling the jets against my skin before the tub finishes filling and they fade to a gentle bubble.

“Aren’t you joining me?” I ask.

“Just let me worship you,” Edward says, his voice low and husky, and it makes my breath catch in my throat.

I watch as he takes off his jacket and then rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, before opening a cupboard by the jacuzzi and taking out a soft sponge. He dips it into the water in front of me and then squeezes it out carefully, before reaching for my hand. I can only watch, entranced, as he begins to rub the

soapy sponge over my hand, cleaning between my fingers, the soft trace of the material over my skin almost tickling me.

Edward continues to wash up my forearm in slow circling motions, paying attention to every inch of my skin. The glide of the sponge is a light massage across my muscles, as he works his way along my upper arm to my shoulder. There he lingers for longer, working the muscles and easing any last remaining traces of tension out of me, making me feel so relaxed and calm.

The gently bubbling water, the scent in the air, and the music combine to form a kind of paradise moment as Edward moves the sponge over to my left arm, starting from my fingers and moving to my shoulder like before. I can't ever remember feeling as relaxed or as cherished as this.

Edward moves the sponge to my chest, washing across my collarbones, and just when I think he will begin to wash and massage my breasts, his touch disappears. I open eyes that I hadn't realized I had closed to see him fishing in the water, before he brings up my right foot out of the bubbles and begins to soap it down. All the way up my leg he moves in careful circles, making me catch my breath as he moves up my inner thigh. I want him to touch me, but he just teases me before moving to my left leg, working everything over again.

He leans in to kiss me, a sweet and lingering kiss on the mouth, while his hands move under the water to glide over my stomach. The edge of his sleeves are wet now, but he either doesn't notice or doesn't mind. I close my eyes again in bliss, letting my other senses carry me away as he soaps me down.

Then, at last, I feel his touch on my breasts. I lift my chest towards him instinctively, wanting more, but he maintains that smooth pace, washing each of my breasts in turn with concentric circles that eventually culminate in my nipples, to which he gives special attention. I gasp and moan as he teases them, making them stand on end so sharply it almost hurts, sending a deep and throbbing need to the pit of my stomach.

His hands dip lower then, lower and lower still, until the sponge is between my legs, carefully and slowly circling until

it brushes over the nerves that are already on fire with my need. I gasp and cling onto his arm, desperate in case he decides to pull away and tease me again. I want his touch. I need it.

Edward eases into a soft and gentle rhythm, the sponge moving back and forth across my most sensitive parts, making my lips throb and swell with arousal and need. I throw my head back and moan out loud. This is nothing like the other night, when he pushed me to a fever pitch with fast licks and flicks. It's soft and measured, more intimate and loving, and it brings me to the edge just the same.

"I don't think I can hold off any longer," Edward murmurs. I open my eyes and see that his face is tight with need, his eyes hooded with desire. It makes my knees feel weak as I look at him. "I want to take you."

"Then do it," I whisper, because even if he has another fifty hours of the ultimate pampering waiting for me, I would give it all up to be in his bed.

Edward leans forward and, before I can ask what he's doing, his arms go around me under the water. His shirt is soaking wet now as he holds me against him. The muscles in his arms strain and bunch around me as he lifts me into his arms as if I weigh nothing, making me instinctively wrap my arms around him. He doesn't seem to care about the water as he carries me, dripping onto the carpet, into the master bedroom and onto the bed.

Edward lies me down on the covers and moves over the top of me as he did in the hotel, claiming my lips with hot kisses that speak of his need and urgency. There are too many barriers stopping us from being skin to skin all of a sudden and I'm impatient as I reach for the buttons of his shirt, my fingers fumbling and slipping on the water that slicks the fabric tight to his abs. With a growl low in his throat, Edward sits up and rips the shirt open, letting buttons scatter to either side of us as he throws the ruined fabric to one side.

He shifts his hips and slides to the side of me for a moment, undoing his belt and unzipping his trousers, making my breath

come in faster as I realize what comes next. He shucks everything in one go, leaving me to stare at his member, thick and hard like a rod between his legs. It's bigger than I imagined, bigger than I thought would be possible – it has to fit inside of me, after all – and thickly veined.

Then Edward is over me again, his tip brushing a sticky trail against my upper thigh as he lowers himself to kiss me, deeply, his tongue vying with mine, the heat rolling off his body warming me and heating me up in ways I didn't know existed. I run my hands down the sides of his hard muscles, over the ridges of his abs, wondering at the way they feel under my fingers.

It still feels incredible that a man like Edward would want me. But as he guides my hand down to close around him, to feel how thick and hard he is, the heat inside of him, the softness of the skin there, I know that he wants me more than I would ever have thought it possible for one person to want another.

Except I know that it is possible, because that same deep want flows through me. Edward moves my hand away, and shifts his position until he is lined up against me, his head poking at my entrance between my splayed legs. I can hardly breathe with the anticipation – I'm still wet and on fire from the way he touched me in the tub, so ready for him – as he hesitates, looking into my eyes, watching my reaction.

He slowly pushes forward, just a little at a time, and I feel everything in such amazing detail. The stretch as his member pushes through in the first moment, the way it pops inside of me and then glides easier, the feeling of fullness that grows and grows to dimensions I could never describe. I can't help but moan as he moves, his breath heavy and catching with each new movement, his muscles corded with veins that stand out from his skin.

He keeps going, past the initial tightness and discomfort, on and on until I feel like any more will surely burst me open, until he gives a groan of satisfaction and I look up to see him still watching me closely. He bends his head to plant a kiss on my lips, sweeter and more caring.

“You feel so good,” he says, and the words inflame me even more, and I realize that the only thing I want in the world is for him to move.

Even though I have no experience with this, something instinctive inside me knows to move, to roll and grind our hips together, to keep a strange and primal rhythm. Though for the most part all I can do is lie, stunned, and let him move over me, in and out producing new and enthralling sensations every time, I don't miss how he gasps for breath and moans when I roll my hips towards him, when I have the presence of mind to push up as he thrusts down, heightening both our pleasure.

The wave I felt when he touched me before is growing inside me again, but this time more powerful. The feeling of him inside me, as well as the pressure and the friction as he rubs against me from the outside, makes it all the more heady, all the more overwhelming. I barely know who I am or where I am or what year it is anymore, everything else in the universe fading away into inconsequentiality, as I let Edward and the wave carry me higher, higher, higher –

And I gasp out his name as the sensation overpowers me, crashing down and filling my whole body with ecstasy, making me buck and twitch wildly, drawn out longer and longer as Edward makes a few more thrusts and then shudders, and then is still for a moment, resting above me and breathing hard, and I know that both of us have found our satisfaction.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Edward

I catch my breath looking down at her, resting on my elbows. She is flushed and hot, her eyes still glazed with the afterglow, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she breathes again. I was wrong when I thought she was the most beautiful sight in the world before. This – this is it, not just satisfied, but satisfied and glowing with my seed inside of her.

I flop down beside her, rolling myself over, and rest in the soft embrace of the covers. I reach over to trace a hand over the lines of her cheek, down to cradle her head, to pull her in for a moment to kiss her lips. She is everything – perfect, sated, and mine.

“Wow,” Casey says. I smile, letting her know with my eyes that I agree.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, catching sight of the time on the clock over her shoulder. “It’s dinnertime.”

We had our afternoon tea late, but with no lunch and plenty of exertion – all the walking around all day, before we even got into bed – I know I could eat.

“Yes,” Casey says, looking surprised to discover it. “What are you thinking?”

“We can order in,” I tell her, grabbing my phone to start scrolling through a delivery app. “Pizza, or something. Whatever you want.”

“Pizza sounds amazing,” Casey says. She nestles in closer to me so that she can watch the screen, examining the order details. She points out a few things she wants, and I confirm the order, putting my phone back down on the bedside table out of our way.

Because she’s laying next to me naked, and there’s absolutely nothing that would stop me from wanting to have her again right now.

I start with kisses along her collarbone and neck, enjoying her giggles and the way that they turn into gasps and moans. I fondle her breasts and pay special attention to her nipples, which I’ve noticed are very sensitive. I wonder if one day I’ll be able to make her come just by playing with her nipples alone. But there’s plenty of time to explore that in the future.

Right now, I just want to be inside of her again.

Casey’s eyes widen at how hard I am again already, and she strokes me tentatively while I work her with my fingers, moaning and telling her how to do it best. She follows my instructions until I’m leaking precome and so hard it almost hurts, ready to bury myself inside her. Slipping two fingers inside to feel how wet she is, I know that she is ready too – and this time, now that the first time discomfort is out of the way, she can enjoy it all the more.

I push inside of her, enjoying the tightness and wetness of her, the way she seems to fit perfectly around me, like a sheath. We both sigh in pleasure, her filled up inside and me totally enveloped, and then I begin to move. This time Casey is more responsive and active, lifting her body towards mine in time with my thrusts, even starting to move harder and faster than me. I can hardly catch my breath as I appreciate her moves. I would feel the same for her whether she was horny and active or remained coy and passive – being inside her feels so good, no matter what – but I think I could really get to enjoy this new side of her, and that’s saying something. Because I really enjoyed our first time.

I keep a strong and steady rhythm as I thrust in and out of her, watching her face screw up and her eyes close at the sheer

intensity of the sensations coursing through her. I slow my pace deliberately until she whimpers and bucks her hips towards me, then grin and drive into her faster and harder, until her head arches back against the pillows and she grips the sheets so hard I think she might tear them.

I watch her face, feel her body under me, as she reaches ecstasy. I see the moment it happens as the muscles in her face loosen and smooth, giving way to a glowing peace, and feel her contract around me, squeezing tight. With that grip on me I can't hold on much longer, and I find myself reaching the edge as she starts to come down, the pulsing contractions pushing me over the edge.

There's the sound of the doorbell ringing just as I find my release inside of her, filling her up again. I wait for the aftershocks to die down a moment before moving, pulling out of her reluctantly.

"Stay there," I command. "I'll go get it. We can eat in bed."

And with Casey's blissful look and nod, I know that even a pack of wild dogs couldn't force me to stay away from her for long.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Casey

I wake up to soft morning light filtering in through the windows – I realize that both of us wore ourselves out so much last night that we didn't even bother to close them. We didn't get dressed, either – waking up naked with Edward beside me is definitely a new experience for me. I look at him for a moment, his face soft in sleep, and smile to myself.

Last night was amazing. It was everything Edward promised it would be, truly special. I felt like a goddess from the way he made everything about me, saw to my every need, gave me all the pleasure I could handle. We ate dinner naked and put on a movie in his bedroom, and by the time it was over, we had recovered enough for a third round.

My thighs and ass ache from the exertion, not used to having a man drive into me like that. But it's not a bad pain – more like the ache you get from exercise, the satisfaction of your body pushed to the limit.

I get up out of the bed, carefully so that I don't wake Edward, and find a robe hanging over the back of a chair. I should shower, but I don't know my way around yet, and while Edward's sleeping I don't want to wake him with the shower. Or with me knocking things over in the search for towels.

Instead, I wander through the other rooms of the house. I saw all of downstairs yesterday, but up here there is more to explore. There are more bedrooms, each of them with a

comfortable-looking bed made up with fresh sheets. Everything is clean and tidy, making me think that Edward probably has a cleaner to come in and keep everything neat. From the windows I can look down into the garden, the perfect size for a child to play around in.

I know Edward said that he doesn't have anyone else in his life, but this place is so big. Even if he was expecting to have a family one day, it's far too big for just him alone – so why? Why buy a house this size so early? If he hadn't even met anyone yet...

I find doubts beginning to creep their way into my mind. Maybe Edward did meet someone else. Maybe he already has a wife, and she's just away on vacation somewhere. Could it be possible that he was telling the truth?

"Morning, princess." I turn to see Edward leaning against the door jam behind me. "That robe looks good on you."

I look down to take in my body draped in the black robe, which has an embroidered 'E' on the front. Property of Edward. But am I?

"Do you really live here alone?" I ask, coming out and saying it.

"Yes," he says, giving me a puzzled look. He moves to my side. He's thrown on a loose pair of joggers to move around, but his chest is still bare.

"You don't have a family at all?" I ask. I look out at the garden again, because it's easier than looking at him – just in case he's about to break my heart. "Or a wife? A girlfriend?"

Edward's hand lands on my shoulder, warm and soothing. "Of course, I don't. If I did, I would never have invited you here."

"You mean it?" I ask. I'm still not quite willing to believe – to throw everything in. Because if I do, I'll have to accept that I've completely fallen for him, and that means it will hurt even more if everything goes wrong.

"Casey." His soft voice makes me turn my head to look at him. "All my life, I've been waiting. I haven't had other relationships. Other women haven't interested me, not in the

least. I had no idea what or who I was waiting for, only that I'd never met anyone that was my match. But then I saw you outside the college. I saw you and I talked to you, and we walked and ate together, and every moment has made me more sure. It's you I've been waiting for, all this time. You're the one."

I cover my mouth to stop myself from crying. My heart feels like it might swell and burst inside my chest. I feel so much for him that it hurts. Could this really be true?

"Let's have breakfast," Edward says, then gives me a sly smile. I think he's trying to normalize things for me, because he can see the tears of emotion gathering in my eyes. "Unless you want to shower together first?"

I do very much want to shower together, but not while I have this lump in my throat. A little simple domesticity might be a better idea. "I could eat," I tell him. "I want to see what your kitchen is like."

As he leads me down the stairs, I can't stop thinking. Could it be true that I'm the one for him? I'm filled with a painful kind of apprehension, a fervent hope that it might not turn out to be a mistake. Because as soon as he said it, I felt it in my chest. Edward is the one for me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Edward

We eat at the kitchen island, simple poached eggs on toast. I look at Casey as we make small talk while we eat, light and simple things that don't require much thought. Which is good, because my head is in a totally different place.

Looking at Casey sitting here in my kitchen, I see something else, the vision that began last night, clearer now than ever before. Casey wrapped in my robe as she hurries to get the kids ready for school, watching over them as they eat toast or cereal. I picture them rushing around with jelly on their cheeks, until Casey swipes them and wipes it off. Hugging my legs to say goodbye to Daddy before I head off to work. All of us, here in this kitchen. A family of my own.

And I know what I have to do.

"I just have to make a few work calls," I say to Casey, brushing off my hands and moving towards the garden door. It's true, in a sense. I do have to let James know that I won't be coming in again today – or for the rest of the week. I know the business can run itself for a while if I'm not there. There are more important things to focus on right now.

Because my second call isn't work-related at all. In fact, it's a call to an old friend, my best buddy, Rick.

I'm filled with tension as I wait for the line to connect. I know the overseas call will probably cost a fortune, but I don't care.

This has to be done – and now, before Casey goes back home.

“Hey, Ed,” Rick says. “How’s it going? Did you meet with Casey?”

“I did,” I tell him, with a light chuckle. “No thanks to your organizational skills. I managed to give her a tour of the old place. I think she liked it.”

“Yeah? Is she doing okay? I haven’t spoken to her in a couple of days.”

“She is,” I say, glancing back toward the house. Through the glass doors, I can see Casey still sitting at the island, scrolling through something on her own cell phone. “Actually, it’s Casey that I wanted to talk about.”

“Have you been with her for the last couple of days? I thought she might ask you to show her around,” Rick says.

“Yeah, I have. I’ve shown her all the tourist stuff. But it’s not that.”

“Oh, is there boy trouble over there?” Rick asks. I wish he would stop jumping to his own conclusions. I can’t use body language or facial expression to slow him down, and he’s just off on his own track. “I was worried about that. Casey’s innocent, you know? She’s been sheltered over here. I don’t want those English boys with their fancy accents trying to take advantage of her.”

“I don’t think there are any English boys,” I say, opening my mouth to get the rest out – before Rick cuts me off.

“Are you sure? I don’t like to have Casey spending too much time with boys over here. She never brings them back home or anything like that. It’s just not the right time for her. She needs to focus on her education.” Rick sounds like he’s reciting a perfected speech, something he’s gone over time and time again. “Boys come later. She’s such a young girl still, only eighteen. She shouldn’t even be thinking about that yet. When she has her degree, fine, she can start to think about it. I had her when I was twenty, and I wouldn’t change her for the world, but she’s not going to throw her life away like that.”

“Got it,” I say, closing my eyes. What I wanted was to ask for his blessing – but I don’t think I’m going to get it, especially after that speech.

“So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?” Rick asks.

“Oh, nothing. Just – I said I’d take her on her next tour as well. Not that I’ve been to Royal Holloway, but it’s good for her to have someone else there, to ask the questions she doesn’t think of.”

“Thanks, Ed,” Rick says. “I knew I could trust you to look after my daughter.”

“Right,” I say, wishing I’d never made the call. “Well, talk to you later, buddy.”

I look back towards the house for a moment before walking back inside, wondering what the hell I’m going to do about Rick. Backing off the subject for now is fine – but sooner or later, we’re going to have to talk. Because there’s no way I’m giving Casey up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Casey

When I booked my tours last week, I thought I would be doing them alone. But standing here in front of the main reception at Royal Holloway, waiting for our guide to meet us, I'm so glad my plans have changed. I can't think of anyone more than Edward that I would want to have at my side – and I only wish we had more time together.

But looking at schools is what I came here to do, and I can't just take off to spend time with him – I've got to be responsible. This is about my future, and even if I'm having a difficult time now picturing one that doesn't have him in it, I still have to focus on making the right choice of college.

We stand holding hands, and when a rep in a bright orange and slate grey uniform comes up to us, he doesn't even bat an eyelid at us. "You must be Casey," he says, though there's an air of doubt to his statement – he can't be sure, of course, since we've never met.

"That's right," I tell him. "I'm here for the tour."

"Great! And, will..."

"Edward," he supplies.

"Edward be joining us for the tour?"

"Edward will," he intones, solemnly, though I can't help but feel like he's making fun.

“Alright,” the guide says, taking it in his stride. “If you’d like to follow me. We’ll start with the dorms. I will note that if you’re staying on campus, the rooms are single occupancy only. That does mean that off-campus boyfriends aren’t really supposed to visit, though you can get an occasional visitor’s pass if you need to drop by.”

I feel a warmth spreading through my chest, making me squeeze Edward’s hand tighter. With the age difference between us, at first I was a little worried that people wouldn’t see us as a couple. That maybe they would assume he was a father escorting his daughter around, especially considering that we both have American inflections in our accents – even if Edward’s is fading. To be recognized as a couple is strangely empowering. I decide that I like it a lot. I’d like it if everyone could look at us and know that we’re together.

But it does make me falter. As the guide shows us around the dorms, even letting us see what a typical room looks like when empty, and then around the rest of the campus buildings, I find my mind starting to wander. I can’t help but think about the fact that at the end of this week, I’m going back home.

And then I have a big decision to make. Whether to come back here, to England, or stay in the US to study.

It should have been a simple decision, about what the best school will be and whether I want to broaden my cultural experiences or do a more traditional college thing. But now it’s much more complicated, because of Edward. I might be coming back here so that I can be with him. Or I might be coming back here thinking I will be with him, only to find out that it’s over.

I know what he said before, that he’s been looking for someone like me for a long time. He as much as told me that he wants me to live with him, to be his wife, to give him children. Except he didn’t actually make that completely clear, and the thing is, this is just one week. One week of our lives. It feels so good, but what if I go home and Edward decides that it was all just an infatuation? What if he doesn’t want to know me anymore when I come back? What if he’s only saying this because there are just two days left before I go home?

I don't want to believe it. Especially not given the fact that he's been friends with my Dad for such a long time. But I can't help but wonder. Nothing is secure, and I have this big decision hanging over my head, and only two days left to get any idea of what to do.

The college tours are one thing. I've seen enough to know that they're both good schools, and the statistics and league tables tell me the rest. But what I really need to know now is where this is all going – and whether changing my school plans to be with Edward would be the best decision of my life, or the worst.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Edward

I wait outside for Casey as she asks a couple more questions and picks up a few leaflets and other bits of literature to help her with her decision. I made the excuse of getting a phone call from work, which wasn't true at all, so that I could quickly duck out of the room and leave her to it. It's a little white lie, that's all.

Because I have some important plans to make, and I have to make them very quickly. Quicker than most people would think was reasonable, I suppose, but we only have two days left. And I'm used to having things go my own way. I have a good assistant and a lot of clout, and I can get things done when I need to.

"All done?" I ask Casey, looking up as she emerges from the building, stuffing a handful of papers and leaflets into her purse.

"Yeah," she says, giving me a quick and tight smile. I wonder if she's feeling emotional, this was her last college tour. Her time here is getting short, and what's more, she's facing a huge decision. I don't blame her for getting a little in her own head, if that's what's happening. "I'm free now. What's the plan for the rest of the day?"

"Oh, I don't know," I say. "I didn't book anything, just in case we took longer than expected. But how about continuing your tourist attraction tour? Chinatown?"

She laughs. “They have a Chinatown back home, you know.”

I chuckle. “I know. I did live there too. But it’s a good Chinatown, and Soho is right next door. We can wander around until we get hungry.”

“Alright,” Casey nods, ducking her head and tucking her hair behind her ear as we fall into step. Am I imagining it, or was she a little slow to take my arm this time?

We only have two days left, so we make the most of them. I check Casey out of her hotel early to save her money and she moves her things to my place, and I get a preview of the kind of bliss that awaits me when she’s here permanently.

Chinatown, Soho, art galleries, and museums; all of it is framed by mornings and evenings and nights at home, in bed together. And every time we get into bed is just as exciting as the last. I love making her throw her head back and grip hold of the sheets, pulling them up in her fists as she moans my name. The more practice she gets at this whole thing, the bolder she gets, reaching for me to wake me up with a stroke, crying out loudly to let me know of her pleasure, pulling my hands to her breasts when she wants me to touch her. I don’t want any of it to end.

But her last day comes, like we knew it would, and I feel a wrench. I don’t want to lose Casey – in fact, I refuse to. She’s mine now, and that is never going to change. She will wear my ring. She will carry my children. But with so little time together, it was never going to be enough.

And now Casey is not the only one who has a big decision to make.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Casey

I swallow hard, looking at my packed suitcase. All of my things are inside of it, packed up and ready to go home. Not a single piece of clothing left behind, including the things Edward bought me. He insisted that I take it all, because it's mine, and he doesn't want me to go without while I'm back home.

We still haven't spoken about the future, and I don't know if I want to. Edward has been strangely cagey all morning, as if he was avoiding me, and I've barely even seen him. But now the time has come, and it's too late for anything else. My bags are packed, and it's time to go to the airport. If I don't go now, I'll miss my flight.

"I'm ready," I say.

Edward looks up from the kitchen table, where he's sitting with his phone, poring over something on the screen. He gives me a tight nod, smiles, and gets up. "I'll carry your bag to the car," he says, reaching out for it.

I almost stop him. I don't want him to take it to the car at all. I don't want to drive to the airport. I don't want to get on the plane. I don't want to leave him.

But I know I have to. There's more in my life than just this – I have plans, responsibilities. All of my things are at home, my

family and friends. I can't just stay here. That's not how life works.

I get into the back of the car and we sit quietly together as the driver takes us to the airport. I can't say a thing, because my mind is too full of thoughts, about the fact that this is it, the last day, my last moment. After this, it might all be over. It might be the last time I even see him.

I sit in silence, my head taking over, my racing thoughts too loud for anything else to break through. What can I do? What should I do? What should I say? How can I ask him what I'm terrified to know – whether he will still feel the same about me when I am on the other side of the ocean?

I miss what should have been my last look at the streets of London. I can't focus. I can't say whether we passed Big Ben or the Empire State Building – none of it exists for me right now. As we travel closer and closer towards the one place where I really don't want to go at all, I can feel everything slipping through my fingers. What am I supposed to do? How can I stop this from happening?

We pull up at the airport far too soon, and I'm startled from looking out of the window – seeing nothing except my thoughts – automatically unbuckling my seatbelt and getting out. I'm not at all sure how my body is still managing to move. I know for sure that my head isn't behind it, and my heart isn't on board either.

I head to the back of the cab, where Edward has already lifted my suitcase down to the sidewalk. But then he lifts down another case, one I've never even seen before.

“What's that?” I ask, startled. “I only packed one bag.”

Edward gives me a slow smile, digging into his pocket. He digs out a piece of paper and holds it in front of me, letting me read it. For a moment nothing sinks in. It's a ticket for my plane. So what? I already know I'm flying.

“I'm coming home with you,” he says, and my eyes pick out the name on the ticket, not mine, but his. “I need to talk to

your father. Before we make this openly official, I have to get his blessing.”

I cover my mouth with my hand, tears glistening in my eyes for a moment, before I fling my arms around Edward’s neck, holding onto him like I never want to let him go. Because I don’t. His arms go around me in return and we remain close, my heart swelling fit to burst. It’s not over. He does want me for good. Everything I was afraid of was just my own insecurities talking.

“Hey,” the taxi driver says, making us jolt apart in surprise. “Are you two going to get a room or what? I’ve got another fare to pick up.”

And we laugh and pick up our bags, closing the trunk and moving out of the way, so we can get on a plane together and go home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Edward

I should be looking forward to seeing one of my oldest and best friends again, but the second we pull up outside Rick's house, instead I'm ready to just turn around and head back to the airport.

If it wasn't for Casey at my side, and the knowledge that this has to happen in order for us to be together for the rest of our lives, I might just have done that.

"Are you ready?" I ask her, squeezing her hand one last time as we get the bags from the trunk.

"Of course," she says, looking at me with an adoring gaze. It almost makes me flinch. I hope her trust in me is not misplaced – that I can win Rick over the way I've won her heart. Because if I can't, this might make things very difficult and uncomfortable in the future.

"Hey, you're back!" I hear Rick's voice as he rushes out of the house to join us on the sidewalk, but I look up in time to see him falter as he recognizes me. "Ed? What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd make sure Casey got home alright," I say, with what I know is an awkward smile.

"What?" Rick looks puzzled. "You didn't come all the way over here just to do that, did you?" He approaches me for our habitual man-hug even though he seems confused, and when

we part, I have to take a slight step back. I feel guilty. I know he isn't going to like this, but what can I do? Casey is mine, and I can't let the fact that I know her father change that.

"Actually, no," I admit. "I didn't. We should talk inside."

"Well... okay," Rick says, getting the door for us. I carry both my bag and Casey's, and since they aren't very heavy, there's no need for him to help. "Are you staying here, too?"

"That might be a little odd," I say, with a half-laugh, exchanging a look with Casey. "Awkward, maybe. I'll get a hotel after we talk."

"Awkward? What are you talking about? There's no need for that. You know you're practically family here," Rick says, as we head into the lounge and I set the bags down.

"I'd like it to be more than practically," I say. There's no sense in dragging it out, and now that he's given me the opening, I have to take it.

"What's that?" Rick asks, screwing his face up as he looks at me. I can tell he's having a hard time figuring out what's going on. I need to make it as clear as possible.

"Look, Rick," I say with a sigh. "Something happened in London. Casey... we didn't plan it. But Casey's the one for me. I mean it. Somehow, we fell for each other."

Rick blinks at me for a few moments. Just when I'm wondering whether he actually heard me, and if I should repeat myself, he shakes his head a little and sits down. "I know I must have heard you wrong," he says. "Because it sounds like you might be taking advantage of my daughter."

"That's not true," Casey says quickly, rushing forward. "It's not like that at all!"

"Well, let me tell you how it looks to me, and you tell me if I'm wrong," Rick says, raising his voice. His face is flushed with anger. "I asked my best friend to look after my daughter, twenty years his junior, because she needed help looking at colleges. Instead, he – what? Got her in the sack and decided he wants a young mistress to have around when he's bored of work?"

“No,” I say, grinding my teeth. “For starters, not *instead*. I did take her on those college tours. I did make sure she was safe and that she had a good time, and saw all the sights.”

“And you just happened to get her into bed as a reward,” Rick sneers. “I told you how important it is for Casey to focus on her studies! What, is that when you decided to pounce on her? Found out how innocent she was and couldn’t wait to get your rocks off, is that it?”

“Dad!” Casey protests, though we both know that her Dad isn’t listening to her at all. Rick only has eyes for me right now, and I’ve got a feeling that he’s seeing red.

“It was before that,” I say, raising my chin and speaking evenly. “Before we spoke on the phone. I actually called you to tell you that I was falling for her, but after what you said, I couldn’t.”

“This is ridiculous,” Rick snaps. “Why would you come into my own home and say this? Why flaunt your shame in my face? Why not just hide in England with your tail between your legs where my right hook can’t reach you?” He leaps up with those words, his hands really curled into fists – though I don’t quite believe he will use them.

“Because it’s not like that,” I tell him. “It wasn’t just an opportunistic thing. I wasn’t bored. I love her.”

“Edward,” Casey breathes, staring at me. “I... I love you, too.”

It’s not the perfect setting for the first time we’ve ever said it to each other, but I’m not going to complain. Hearing it is sweet enough. I look at her for a moment, a smile creasing my lips, before Rick snaps my attention back to him.

“Answer the question,” he shouts. “What are you doing here? Why rub this in my face?”

“I’m not rubbing it in your face!” I say with exasperation. “I keep telling you, it’s not like that. I’m here to get your blessing. Because it’s important to her, and it’s important to me. We will be together, and your approval will mean a lot.”

“Oh, you *will* be together?” Rick yells, and I groan inwardly. It’s like I can’t say the right thing. “Then why the hell am I

here? You don't need my approval!"

"But we want it, Daddy," Casey says, stepping in front of me. I can tell she senses just how angry her Dad is getting, and how important it is to get him to listen. "I want it. He makes me happy."

"Happy?" Rick blinks, then shakes his head. "You're just a kid. You don't know anything about this kind of stuff yet. You don't even know what you want."

"But I do." Casey takes a breath. "Edward is everything I've ever wanted. He's kind to me, takes care of me, gives me everything I want. I know he'd do anything to make me happy. He appreciates me for who I am. The woman I'm becoming. He wants me to follow my dreams and be a success. He wants to give me a family, and I want that, too."

I can see that Rick is listening, though he isn't quite calm yet. "How can you be sure?" he demands. "It's been – what? A week? Less than that? This hasn't been going on before, has it?" For a second he looks thunderstruck, as if he's wondering whether I was the whole reason Casey went to London in the first place.

"It's been less than a week," I tell him quickly. "But that doesn't matter. I know what I feel for Casey. She's the one I've been waiting for, all this time. You know I haven't had other relationships. I never married. I've been waiting. And I've finally found who I was waiting for. The perfect woman."

Rick shakes his head. "How can you even tell?"

"I can't describe it to you," I tell him. "I just know. When I look at her... I just know." Casey tilts her head to look back at me and our eyes meet, and for a moment nothing else matters. Just the two of us – happy with one another.

But Rick is still here, and he still isn't happy, and I have to do something – some big gesture that will show him how serious I am.

"I was going to save this for later," I say. "I was going to wait to have your blessing first, because that's how you do this kind of thing. That's the way it's done. But I don't know how else

to show you that this is real. It wasn't just some vacation romance, a fling that I'm going to forget now that Casey is stateside. It doesn't matter to me how far apart we are – we're linked forever.”

“Do what?” Casey breathes, her eyes wide and her expression uncertain. I know she can feel it – the way the atmosphere in the room has changed. The new charge all around us. The nervous energy I'm giving off.

I look at her, and make a conscious decision to shut Rick out of my mind and my vision for this moment. This is about her – about me and her. Whatever he does next, it doesn't matter. I know I'll still feel the same. As much as I want for both of us to keep a relationship with her father, I know which of the two of them I would put first.

“Casey,” I say, reaching inside my jacket for the thing that took all of that last-minute planning, that rushing around whenever she was distracted, that panic. I sink down onto one knee, holding up the ring box. “I want to make my life with you. There has never been anyone else for me, and there never will be anyone else, just you. Will you be my wife?”

Casey's hands fly to her mouth, and I can see that she's blinking back tears. For a horrible moment I wonder if she won't say yes without her father's say-so, but then she drops her hands and grabs onto mine, tugging me to my feet. “Yes!” she cries out. “Oh, Edward, yes, yes, yes!”

I pull her into my arms and kiss her deeply, finding my own eyes wet with happiness. I tug the custom-designed ring loose from its case and slide it onto her ring finger, admiring the way it looks on her. Not that it's about the diamond, it's never been about anything but her.

“You're really happy with him?” Rick asks, his voice strangely choked. I look up to see that he, too, has tears in his eyes.

“I'm so happy,” Casey says, the tears streaming down her face as testament.

Rick hangs his head. “Then you have my blessing,” he says, before fixing me with a steely look. “But if you hurt her at all

—”

“Don’t worry,” I tell him, still holding Casey close on one side. “I’ll have my own self to reckon with first. And if anyone else tries to hurt her, they’ll have me to deal with.”

I lean down and kiss her again, my fiancée. And no matter what, I know that Rick has caved, that all he wants is to see Casey smile like that, just like I do.

We might just be able to make this crazy thing work, after all.

EPILOGUE

Casey

At the sound of a key turning in the lock, I gasp and shake the rattle at baby Ricky.

“Who’s that?” I say, making him gurgle and laugh at my excited face. “Is that Daddy? Is that Daddy coming home? I think it is!”

“Hello, princess!” Edward calls out. I hear him put down his briefcase in the hall and hang up his coat, and the thud of his shoes finding their place in the rack, and then he appears in the doorway. “How was your day?”

“Somebody managed to throw a whole bowl full of lunch on the floor, didn’t they?” I say, keeping my tone light as I tease Ricky. “Yes, they did!”

Edward laughs. “Did the maid take care of it?”

“Yes, it was just before she left,” I say, reverting back to my grown-up voice. I pick Ricky up and hold him on my hip, supporting his weight. He’s starting to get bigger, and before long I know he’ll be running around the place without my help. I lean up to kiss Edward, smiling as he chucks Ricky on the chin. “You ready for dinner?”

“Oh, yes,” Edward says, rolling his eyes. “So ready. I thought that last meeting would never end. Here, I’ll take him.”

I hand Ricky over as we head into the kitchen, the marble surfaces I admired so much now mine to do with as I wish. I

grab a few ingredients out of the cupboards and fire up the oven, getting ready to cook us dinner. “His giraffe is on the dining table.”

Edward disappears for a moment to fetch it, and then begins playing hide and seek with the stuffed toy in front of Ricky’s face. Ricky bumbles happily and squeals when the giraffe miraculously reappears, then frowns with dismay when it goes behind Edward’s hands. I keep an eye on dinner at the same time as watching them, proud and feeling my heart swell with it. My boys.

I grab a couple of plates out to start serving up, moving easily around what has so quickly become my home. I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else now, and with part-time college work balanced around looking after Ricky, I know I made the absolute right choice for my future.

After serving up, I sigh and lean back against the counter, watching them for just a moment longer. My husband, tall and handsome, squatting down on his haunches to make funny faces at our baby boy. He doesn’t mind being silly to make Ricky laugh. For a moment I feel so much love for them it’s almost painful, a happiness so pure it should belong only to the angels. I know I’m exactly where I belong.

“Alright, boys,” I say. “Dinner time. Let’s get him into his highchair.”

And even though the spell is broken, I know one thing is true. Nothing can ever take away the happiness that I feel when I look at my husband and my son, my family, my home – everything I’ve ever wanted.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Edward

“Upsy daisy – that’s it!” I say, helping Ricky get up onto the seat that he can’t quite reach. He’s four now, and eschews the idea of any form of baby seat with scorn. He’s in school now, he often reminds me, and that makes him a big boy.

Sarah, Casey’s Mom, chuckles indulgently. “Look at you, Ricky, already sitting in a big boy chair,” she says, making him beam with pride.

“I’ve been sitting in a big boy chair for years, I’ll have you know,” Rick – Casey’s Dad, this time, not little Ricky – says, earning a tsk and a light slap on the arm from his wife. He winks at the rest of us around the table. He’s been milking the mistaken identity joke for a long while now, but he still doesn’t seem to have gotten bored of it.

I look up to see that Casey has our one and a half year old daughter, Poppy, settled nicely into her baby chair. She bangs on the side of it experimentally, then grins mischievously. I wouldn’t put it past her to try to tip the thing over so she can make a break for it. We’re raising a hellion, there.

“Alright, are we all settled?” I ask, looking around the table as I take my own seat. My wife, my kids, and my in-laws, not a group I had ever expected to see around a table with me, especially after twenty years of waiting for the right woman to come along. But here we are, and even if it still seems strange

that my best friend is now my father-in-law, I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Now, do we need to order?" Sarah asks, lifting up a menu and peering at it through her reading glasses.

"No, I've already taken care of it," I tell her with a reassuring wave. "We're all booked in for the special afternoon tea upgrade. You're going to love it."

Casey gives me a knowing smile. We've been back here a few times over the years, for afternoon tea at Brown's. A quintessential London experience, so she loves to remind me. One of our first.

"So, how's work?" Rick asks, getting down to business as usual. Despite Sarah's sigh of boredom, put on dramatically to tell him that work talk is for the boardroom, I indulge him.

"It's going great," I say. "The company's never been stronger. All thanks to this one, of course." I nod towards Casey, enjoying the fact that I can still make her blush.

"I haven't done much," she says.

"Of course, you have," I tell her. "You've given me some time off. Now that's really something."

Amid laughter, Sarah asks, "So, how does it work now? You share the job?"

"Yes, more or less," Casey replies. "That way we can also share the baby duty. It's lucky that with Edward owning the company, there's no one to tell us how we should or shouldn't do things. We get to do it our own way."

"And it does work," I tell them. "We're both more efficient, because we get to spend time with our kids and then come back feeling refreshed. And since we both handle slightly different areas of the business, our team has gotten into a rhythm. They know who to talk to about what, and when we'll be in. We haven't had a single problem yet."

"Well, except when you ran out of clean jackets because Poppy kept spitting up on them," Casey giggles.

“Except that,” I agree wryly, shaking my head at the memory. There’s general laughter around the table, dying down a little as the waiters arrive with our trays of finger food and drinks.

“And Poppy did a poop in the car,” Ricky says proudly, wanting everyone to know how silly his little sister is. “And it smelled really bad!”

The waiters hesitate for a moment before seeing that we are laughing and then joining in.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk about poop at the table, Ricky,” Casey says, kissing the top of his head.

Not that it’s any good, I can already see the gleam in his eyes. He’s gotten a laugh from the whole table and even from strangers with that one. He’ll be telling the poop in the car story every time we’re with company for weeks. I can’t wait.

“She’s getting a bit big now, isn’t she?” Sarah says, reaching out to hold Poppy’s hand for a moment. “Are you ready for another baby yet, Case?”

“Well...” Casey looks at me, and I nod at her to go on. Her face breaks into a grin. “I was going to tell you after we’d eaten, but... actually, Ricky and Poppy are going to be getting another little brother or sister soon.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Sarah exclaims, while Rick reaches over to shake my hand with a happy laugh.

We soon descend into talk of baby clothes and the best playgrounds and cribs and formula, as we dig into tiny sandwiches and scones and miniature cakes. For a moment in the chaos I look around, at three generations of our family seated together, breaking bread and talking happily. And I know without a doubt that it doesn’t get much better than this.

I’m glad I found my princess – the woman who was worth waiting twenty years for. I’d wait twenty more, if it meant being able to have her. I know I’d wait two hundred and twenty – so long as I knew I could hold her in my arms, and sit here like this, and make our home together.

But the best thing is that I don’t have to wait any more at all. Because I have my princess – and as she smiles at me over the

table, I think this must be what pure happiness feels like.

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