

RUSH

DELUXE EDITION

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMA SCOTT

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RUSH: Deluxe Edition
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contents

[author's note](#)

[also by emma scott](#)

[playlist](#)

[content warning](#)

[act i: adagio](#)

[prologue](#)

[chapter one, then](#)

[chapter two, now](#)

[chapter three](#)

[chapter four](#)

[chapter five](#)

[chapter six](#)

[chapter seven](#)

[chapter eight](#)

[chapter nine](#)

[chapter ten](#)

[chapter eleven](#)

[chapter twelve](#)

[chapter thirteen](#)

[chapter fourteen](#)

[chapter fifteen](#)

[chapter sixteen](#)

[chapter seventeen](#)

[chapter eighteen](#)

[chapter nineteen](#)

[chapter twenty](#)

act ii: allegro

[chapter twenty-one](#)

[chapter twenty-two](#)

[chapter twenty-three](#)

[chapter twenty-four](#)

[chapter twenty-five](#)

[chapter twenty-six](#)

[chapter twenty-seven](#)

[chapter twenty-eight](#)

[chapter twenty-nine](#)

[chapter thirty](#)

[chapter thirty-one](#)

[chapter thirty-two](#)

[chapter thirty-three](#)

act iii: cadenza

[chapter thirty-four](#)

[chapter thirty-five](#)

[chapter thirty-six](#)

[chapter thirty-seven](#)

[chapter thirty-eight](#)

[chapter thirty-nine](#)

[chapter forty](#)

[chapter forty-one](#)

[chapter forty-two](#)

[chapter forty-three](#)

[chapter forty-four](#)

[chapter forty-five](#)

[chapter forty-six](#)

[chapter forty-seven](#)

[chapter forty-eight](#)

[chapter forty-nine](#)

[chapter fifty](#)

[epilogue one](#)

[epilogue two](#)

[acknowledgements](#)

[about the author](#)

author's note

This book is an amalgam of *RUSH* and its companion novella, *Endless Possibility*. I'll be vague to avoid spoilers for those who haven't read *RUSH*, but many readers expressed curiosity about certain events at the end of *RUSH* that I alluded to but didn't show on the page. I agreed that those events were quite important, and so I wrote *Endless Possibility*, fixing this error of omission. But when it came time to update *RUSH*'s cover, I decided to right that wrong permanently. I have edited out the novella's unnecessary drama, added three chapters of brand-new content, and married the two books together into one. This is Noah and Charlotte's love story the way it was meant to be told. I hope you enjoy.

also by emma scott

(free through kindle unlimited)

duets

[Full Tilt](#)

[All In](#)

[Bring Down the Stars \(Beautiful Hearts #1\)](#)

[Long Live the Beautiful Hearts \(Beautiful Hearts #2\)](#)

series

[RUSH \(RUSH #1\)](#)

[Endless Possibility \(RUSH #1.5\)](#)

[How to Save a Life \(Dreamcatcher #1\)](#)

[Sugar & Gold \(Dreamcatcher #2\)](#)

[The Girl in the Love Song \(Lost Boys #1\)](#)

[When You Come Back to Me \(Lost Boys #2\)](#)

[The Last Piece of His Heart \(Lost Boys #3\)](#)

[The Sinner \(Angels and Demons #1\)](#)

[The Muse \(Angels and Demons #2\)](#)

standalones

[Love Beyond Words](#)

[Unbreakable](#)

[The Butterfly Project](#)

Forever Right Now
In Harmony
A Five-Minute Life
Someday, Someday
Between Hello and Goodbye

mm romance

Someday, Someday
When You Come Back to Me (Lost Boys #2)
The Muse (Angels and Demons #2)

novellas

One Good Man
Love Game

playlist

Mad World / Michael Andrews and Gary Jules (opening credits)

Broken Boy / Cage the Elephant

Violin Concerto No. 5 / Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Killing in the Name Of / Rage Against the Machine

Violin Concerto in E Minor / Felix Mendelssohn

Unsteady / X Ambassadors

Time of Your Life (Good Riddance) / Green Day

Sharks / Imagine Dragons

Video Games / Lana Del Rey

First Day of My Life / Bright Eyes (closing credits)

content warning

This novel explores themes of grief and loss that might be triggering to sensitive readers. For those who would like a more explicit explanation of the content, please email: emmascottpromo@gmail.com

For Joanne

act i: adagio

To be blind is not miserable; not to be able to bear blindness, that is miserable. —John Milton

prologue



I race down the Grand Couloir, Courchevel, France. The icy wind slaps my cheeks as I slalom between jagged rocks, kicking up sprays of snow, faster and faster, down and down, until I'm nearly vertical. My heart pounds, and my breath in my mask bellows like a charging boar. Adrenaline pumps in my veins instead of blood.

The slope angles up. A cliff. I don't turn; I hunch down to go faster, and then there's nothing beneath my skis and I'm flying...

...I'm flying, gliding, the nylon flaps above me as I hold the bar in a white-knuckle grip. The air is warm, and the sky is gold and blue—twilight has fallen over Kahului, Maui. My glider dips and soars, and I feel the wind's changes. I move with it, flying higher and higher until the islands are puddles of sand bearded in green.

I swoop low, curve up, nearly flip. I let loose a cry of triumph and ride the edge of the current, higher still, until I can almost touch the sun. Like Icarus. Only I don't burn. Not me. I soar.

And when I'm high enough, I drop the glider down into a nosedive, my harness straining until it breaks apart, the nylon tearing away until it's just me playing chicken with the ocean, and I will not blink first. I streak down, hands ready to cut the water like a knife. I'm diving...

...I'm diving off La Quebrada, Acapulco, one hundred and thirty-six feet high with five seconds of safe depth before the waves recede again. My nerves are electric fear—that perfect sizzle that is nearly orgasmic, nearly unbearable. I plummet and crow my triumph, arrogantly, for I am invincible.

The water rushes to meet me and I cut it perfectly; an arrow in the cool green-blue, down, down, where gold motes dance in the viridian infusion. I don't stop. I don't even slow. I can't. Down deeper, and I begin to choke on

my victory. My lungs constrict, my eardrums explode, and still I go down. The water is now dark green, now just dark, now black. I can't breathe. I can't see. My head strikes the jagged teeth of the sea and all I know is pain...

A scream tears out of my throat, one last scream, I think, before I drown in the black abyss. But no. If I can scream, I can breathe. I'm not submerged. I'm not lost in the deep. I'm in a bed in New York City, my body covered in sweat, my hands clutching the sheets.

Relief sweeps through me like the adrenaline once did, and I open my eyes. But my eyes are already open. I'm no longer in the black deep but I'm just as blinded. Blind.

I'm blind.

chapter one, then



Spring 2014

He was as gentle as ever. I wanted to tell him to let go, that it was okay. After eight times—yes, I kept count—it had long since stopped hurting. I told myself he was being considerate. Considerate yet enthusiastic. Maybe a little too enthusiastic. Once again, it was over before I'd gotten warmed up; he collapsed on top of me after a few minutes. But Keith's tired, satisfied smile when he raised his head from the crook of my shoulder warmed my heart, even if my body was left wanting.

I was new to the whole “having sex” thing, but I liked it. Quite a bit, if I were being honest. Granted, I hadn't achieved the Big O yet, but I was twenty-one and still a rookie. I figured I'd get there with practice. And I was more than willing to put the time in with my handsome new boyfriend. My first boyfriend. My first love. My first everything.

I reached for Keith again, but he rolled onto his back and kissed my hand.

“I've got class,” he said. “And you, my darling, have an audition tonight. The most important of your life.”

“So far,” I said with a grin. “After I graduate, I'm going for the Phil. Or maybe Boston.”

And make my big brother proud. Chris's words echoed in my thoughts: “*First Juilliard and then the Phil!*” His parting goodbye as I went off to college. I held on to it like a mantra, vowing to make his words come true. Winning a seat on the Spring Strings—Keith's master project—would be a step in that direction, a notch on my resume.

A thought dimmed my smile. I turned to Keith. “If I kill it tonight, won't they think I got in because of us?”

Keith drew on his jeans, his back to me, his blond hair glinting in the shaft

of light spilling in from the tiny dorm room window. “Probably,” he said. He turned and leaned over the bed, kissing me softly before pulling away and smiling that winsome grin that still, after a month, had the ability to make my heart flutter in my chest like a caged bird. “So you’d better prove them wrong.”



At twenty minutes to six o’clock, I walked up Broadway, violin case in hand. My black A-line skirt, white blouse, and black jacket were a little heavy for the weather, but a light breeze took the edge off the day’s lingering heat. A stunning spring day if ever there was one. But New York City could have been caught in a hurricane and I would have felt invincible that night.

I was going to win the coveted violin seat on the Spring Strings Quartet. I knew this, not because I was filled with arrogance or ego. Since coming to Juilliard almost three years ago, the music that lived in my heart was thriving and blooming in a way I couldn’t have imagined. I didn’t just play the notes of the compositions before me; I created perfect harmonies out of skill and infused them with love. Love for the music. Love for life.

And now, love for Keith. Of all the women who flocked to him like doves around a bronze statue, he’d chosen me. My heart was full to bursting, but I would win my spot honestly. I would give them everything.

I would play Mozart, of course. Mozart, whom I felt was my spirit guide, who called to me from across the centuries with his music that, in my estimation, was absolute perfection. I felt Mozart’s music in my very bones, in my heart and soul. I always played with my heart in my hands, but with Mozart, I stripped myself raw.

The first three rows of the Alice Tully Hall were full of hopefuls, some muttering beneath their breath, some giving me the obvious stink-eye. They all knew I was dating Keith. But it didn’t matter. The music was alive in me, and I was about to unleash it.

I played the fiercely technical cadenza to Mozart’s Violin Concerto No. 5 for Keith and the other two student directors—both seniors like him, both women, both eyeing me dubiously. I was too lost in the music to watch their scrunched-up faces loosen, morphing from surly doubt, to shock, to stunned joy. I was too immersed to see the other hopefuls’ faces lose their scorn as they listened. Until the end. Then the applause, small for the nearly empty

Hall but thunderous to me, came and I awoke as if from a warm sleep.

They surrounded me on all sides, congratulating me even though half of them had yet to play. Some wiped tears from their eyes. Some just shook their heads as they showered me with compliments.

“Amazing. I felt that in my *gut*.”

“I’m crazy-jealous but in the good way, I swear.”

“And here I thought you were just Keith’s latest, but no...”

That one caught my attention. “His latest...?”

But then Keith was there, sweeping me into his arms and spinning me around. “Have we got a superstar, or what?” He laughed and kissed me and then put his mouth near my ear. “I think I love you, Charlotte.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. Now I was sure my heart couldn’t hold another drop of happiness. I kissed him back with everything I had. “I love you, too.”



One week until opening night.

I was hanging out in my dorm room at the residence hall with Melanie Parker. She’d won the Strings’ coveted cello seat, and we’d become best friends before the end of the first rehearsal a month ago. Her pragmatism—and her dark, pageboy haircut—reminded me of Velma from the old *Scooby-Doo* reruns Chris and I used to watch as kids. Now, Melanie and I were talking and laughing as I read dumb jokes off the internet.

“Okay, wait, here’s a good one. What’s the difference between a pianist and God?”

“Seriously, Char...”

“God doesn’t think he’s a pianist.” I wagged my eyebrows at her. “Get it?”

“Yes, I get it. How someone can be as talented as you are and yet such a ginormous dork is beyond me.”

I shrugged, laughing. “Why should musicians be stuffy and serious all the time?”

“Is this another joke?”

“I guess not *all* musicians,” I mused. “Mozart used to write letters to his mother describing particularly satisfying shits he’d taken.”

“Only you would find that admirable.” Melanie glanced at her watch through her cat’s eye glasses. “Damn. We’re late.”

We packed up our stuff and headed out when my cell phone, still on my desk, rang.

At the door, Melanie hoisted her cello case. “Ticktock.”

“I know, but just let me...” I hurried back to the desk and peered at the display. “It’s a Montana number. Someone calling from home.” Not my parents or Chris, or it would have ID’d them.

“You know how I feel about tardiness,” Melanie said, tapping her foot.

I wish I had listened to her. I wish I had left the phone alone and gone to rehearsal. I would have had a few more hours of ignorant bliss before the knife came down like a guillotine, forever dividing my life into Then and Now. Then had been so full of light and love and music. Now was dark and cold and quiet.

“Hello?”

“Charlotte?” A man’s voice. Watery. Tremulous. A voice choked with tears.

“Uncle Stan?”

“Hi, honey.” A heaved breath laced with a sob. “I have some bad news. You might need to sit down.”

My chest tightened, and my heart skipped a beat and then jogged to catch up. But I didn’t move. I felt frozen. “What is it?”

“It’s Chris, honey. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...”

Uncle Stan told me what happened, but I remembered it in bits and pieces, and in the end, only one piece mattered. Chris was gone.

My brother was gone.

Then and Now. Just like that.



“You’re going to miss opening night?” Keith’s eyes, which I had always thought were blue like a cloudless summer day, were icy. “Charlotte, we’re a week out.”

I lifted my own shadowed, swollen, blood-shot eyes to meet his incredulously, though I hadn’t the strength to do more than mutter, “The funeral is in four days...”

“No, I know, I know.” He sighed and stood over me, rubbed my shoulder with one hand. “Christ, what a mess. Poor kid.”

I guessed he meant me, though he’d never called me that before.

“I’ll figure something out here,” Keith said, “but your seat on the Strings... I have to fill it, Char. You know that, right?”

I nodded and wiped my nose with the shreds of an old Kleenex I’d been clutching all morning. “I know,” I said, mildly surprised at how little that bothered me. It didn’t really register, actually. Keith’s words came to me from far away, like a distant transmission from space.

He one-arm hugged me, still standing. My cheek brushed against the rough side-pocket of his jeans. “You’re going to be okay, Char. Just go and be with your family. I wish I could be with you.”

I looked up, his words a faint flicker in the darkness. “You do?”

“It’s impossible, of course.”

I slumped. “Oh.”

“I can’t get away now, but you’re going to be fine, kid.” He jostled me affectionately, as if he were a coach and I were a Little Leaguer who dropped the easy out that would’ve won the game. “Yeah, you’ll see. Just fine.”



Bozeman, Montana. There wasn’t a more beautiful place on earth, as far as I was concerned. Until that trip home. I flew in at midday, but the Gallatin Valley seemed dark, as if it were hungover from the longest night.

The flight had been a blur; the ride from the airport with Uncle Stan was a nightmare. He was afraid to speak to me, as if I would shatter at the slightest sound. We rode in his shiny SUV to my home, and I felt like a prisoner walking on death row. *Not my death. Chris. Chris is dead.*

Chris was dead.

That thought, or variations of it, danced in my brain like the painted skeletons I had seen at a *Dia de los Muertos* festival one fall. But I couldn’t quite grasp the enormity of it. Not while in New York City, or on the airplane, or in Uncle Stan’s car. But as soon as I got home it would be there. I’d never been so petrified to see my parents in all my life.

A wake of sorts was going on and had been since “the incident.” I entered the maple wood paneled living room with the Native American tapestries on the wall and the smell of eight different casseroles wafting in from the kitchen.

I was besieged by old friends and extended family. I had to wade through a forest of tear-stained smiles and comforting words to reach my mom. Elaine

Conroy, an elementary school teacher. She walked around with a tissue clutched in her hand and a panicked look in her eye, as if she had lost something and couldn't think where to look for it. She *had* lost something, her son, and she would never get him back.

She found me and hugged me and squeezed me, again and again, as if to make sure I was real or that I wouldn't slip out of her hands like smoke.

Gerald Conroy, my math professor father, was a silent statue, his brows seemingly permanently furrowed, as if he were trying to work out some great and terrible problem—a problem that had no solution. Because it didn't.

The horse bucked. Chris was thrown. He landed in the worst possible way.

There was nothing else to work out except how those simple facts resulted in the yawning, black void that had opened in our lives.

Two days later, I stood in the First Morning Presbyterian Church, staring at my sleeping brother in a casket. He had to only be sleeping, didn't he? He looked fine. His collar was high to conceal the tangled nest of broken bones in his neck, but otherwise... My big brother. My touchstone. My best friend.

First Juilliard, then the Phil!

No, Chris. First pain. And then more and more until my future was warped and drowned in tears, and I couldn't see it anymore.

I sank to my knees, my forehead resting against the dark wood of the casket in the dim of the church and stayed there until the church somehow morphed into my bedroom at home.

I lay in bed for two days until my parents, fearful I wouldn't graduate, hustled me back to school. They told me they were okay and not to worry, but of course, that was a lie. None of us would ever be fully okay again, and we knew it.

I flew back to New York City feeling as if I'd been submerged in ice water. I didn't expect my seat on the Strings would still exist. I didn't care. I could hardly find my way to my dorm, let alone play.

But I *had* expected that the man I loved would be waiting for me, to comfort me through the worst of the grief. To be there for me when I needed him most. But Keith didn't answer any of my calls, and the next time I saw him, he was walking through Lincoln Center with his arm around Molly Kirkpatrick, the bass player of Spring Strings. My seat had been given away, and life had gone on.

Then and Now.

Joy, exhilaration, love... They had taken me so high, higher than I ever

thought possible. But then the wind changed, the currents dropped, and I plummeted in a free-fall, helpless to do anything but watch the ground rise up to meet me.

I went back to my student apartment at Juilliard, put my violin in its case, and shut it tight.

Time doesn't fly; it ekes by and so did I. The vistas weren't as vast, the colors not as vibrant here on the ground, and it was harder for me to see my future from my new low vantage. But it was safer down here. Much safer.

chapter two, now



Spring 2015

They were going at it again. I threw my pillow over my face, but the walls were too thin. I could hear Reya's ecstatic shrieking and Collin's low grunts, like an underscore. A carnal symphony that had, too often, served as my alarm clock. I peeked out from under the pillow to look at my actual alarm clock. Six thirty. I had to be up in fifteen minutes anyway, so maybe I owed my roommates a thank-you. Maybe their unquenchable sexual appetite had afforded me the shower first for a change.

I threw off my covers and hurried over the hardwood floors to our apartment's one and only bathroom to find Emily had beaten me to it. I heard her humming under the spray of water.

"Damn."

I went down the short hall to the kitchen, thinking I might at least have a moment to enjoy a cup of coffee by myself, only to find Forrest, the fourth roommate, at the breakfast counter spooning cereal into his mouth, the lenses of his glasses aglow with the light of his laptop. He glanced up as I came in.

"Hey."

"Hey," I muttered, grateful he'd already made coffee. "Emily's up early." I tried not to sound petulant.

"She's taking the kids to the Central Park Zoo," Forrest said. "Their mom's having a luncheon or something and wants the house empty."

An empty house. What I wouldn't give...

Emily was a nanny and the primary breadwinner of our little group. That meant she and Forrest got the biggest bedroom, Reya and Collin the next, and I—the loner—was relegated to a tiny room at the back of the place with a stunning view of the neighboring building's brick wall. But smallest room

meant smallest rent—at \$1200—and that was already pushing the outside limit of my budget.

I had to remind myself that it could be worse. A lot worse. I could be in a rat-infested tenement in a scary neighborhood instead of Greenwich Village. I was making it *in Manhattan*. Okay, maybe not so much “making it” as squeaking by. Hanging on by a thread, really, but in Manhattan. That had to count for something, didn’t it?

I yawned so wide my jaw cracked and Forrest looked up at me. “Did Collin’s impromptu poetry slam keep you up last night?” He jerked his chin at the living area that bore the scars of Collin’s get-together: butt-filled ashtrays, empty bottles, and sheaves of paper strewn all over. A thin haze of smoke—cigarette and pot—still lingered in the air.

“What else is new?” I said, pouring a cup of coffee.

“You should have played for them, put them out of their misery.” Forrest grinned. “The sad whine of a lone violin is probably all it would take to send them over the edge into the black abyss of their pain.”

I forced a smile. My application to rent here just said I’d graduated Juilliard with a Bachelor of Music, but I rarely practiced and never at home. If they were curious at all as to why I didn’t audition somewhere, they never asked.

Emily emerged from the shower in a robe, her short blond hair still damp. “Work this morning?” she asked me and gave Forrest a peck on the cheek.

“Of course,” I said, heading back down the hall. I’d worked the same schedule every day for the last nine months, not that anyone bothered to notice.

Jesus, stop feeling sorry for yourself! The lack of proper sleep for God knew how many nights was making me whiny. A hot shower and a non-hurried subway ride uptown to work would cure me.

Except when I went back down the hall, I found the bathroom door was closed and the shower running. I rapped on the door. “I’m going to be late for work!”

“Two minutes, I swear!” Reya called.

I might’ve believed her until I heard Collin’s low voice behind the door too and Reya’s answering laughter.

I leaned my head against the door and closed my eyes. I envied Reya and Collin as much as I loathed them. They seemed to be so in love they could hardly keep their hands off each other. Or maybe it was just lust. Sometimes,

like now, I wished that they'd just evaporate in a cloud of their own passion. Emily and Forrest too, with their steadfast devotion to one another, that wasn't fire and fireworks but sweet and stable.

The deep ache in my heart throbbed when reminded of what I'd had and lost, and it throbbed then, standing in the hallway of our tiny, overcrowded apartment.

It's amazing how you can feel so lonely without ever being alone.



Thirty minutes later, I was finally showered, dressed, and grabbing my purse and sweater. I struggled at the door to get my shoes on while my roommates congregated leisurely in the kitchen.

"Don't forget rent," Emily called by way of send-off. "Monday."

The tension in my back ratcheted up a notch. I almost spat that it was infinitely easier to make rent when I wasn't afraid of losing my job, but what was the point? I ran through the beautiful hustle and bustle of my Greenwich Village neighborhood, taking the briefest of moments to admire the tree-lined street and red brick buildings. It bolstered my mood a bit...until I made it down to the subway just as the One was screeching away.

I sagged as the train's aluminum wind blew my coat up and tousled my hair. It wasn't strong enough to push me, but I staggered back anyway. I felt the tightness in my bones and muscles grow tighter, as if I were lashed together on the inside.

I wondered how much time I had before I buckled under that pressure and just shattered completely.



"Eight fifteen, Charlotte," Maxine said, tapping her watch with a blood-red nail. Her steel-colored hair was pulled so tight in its bun I pitied her scalp.

"I know, I'm sorry," I told my manager as I threw open my locker and grabbed my waist apron. "You know how the subway is..." I pinned my nametag to my white button-down blouse, poking my thumb in the process.

Maxine crossed her arms over her black turtleneck. "The subway runs on time. You, on the other hand..."

I tied my hair up in a ponytail. "I promise it won't happen again."

"Mmmhmm."

My manager slipped out and Anthony Washington—a graphic artist and my work BFF—peeked his head in. His eyes were the friendliest things I’d seen all day, as brown as his skin and warm with kindness.

“Getting busy,” he said. “Four-top in your section. Want me to take their drinks?”

“You’re too good to me,” I said, stuffing my order pad into my pocket. “Thanks for covering, but I got it.”

Anthony stood over me, towered really, but then everyone did; I was barely five-three. He adjusted the pale-yellow tie we all had to wear. “Bad day to be late, sweetness,” he said. He nodded in Maxine’s direction. “I heard from Skeletor that some shit’s going down today.”

Icy dread filled my veins. “It is?”

But there was no time to talk. The restaurant was filling up.

Annabelle’s was a breakfast/lunch bistro that catered to the leisurely diner—it didn’t even open until eight a.m. But the diners now were more impatient than leisurely; I spent the entire shift playing catch-up while trying my hardest to keep the smile plastered onto my face. Maxine watched me like a hawk. All it would take was one complaint about cold spinach Florentine or a too-slow coffee refill and I’d be toast.

I made it through the rush without a complaint, but I was off my game. We wouldn’t get cashed out until the end of the shift, but I could do the math. It had been a slow March already, and I’d have to have two killer nights—and I mean *killer*—at my second job bartending this weekend if I had a prayer of making rent.

I smoothed my hair and took a breath, determined to have a better lunch than breakfast...and then my morning was saved. The bussers were moving tables together in my station.

“Ten-top,” Anthony crowed as we watched the group of well-dressed people come in. He clutched my arm. “Girl, that’s Neil Patrick Harris.”

“What? No...”

I looked and sure enough, at the center of the group was the handsome actor, talking and laughing easily with his friends.

Anthony nudged my elbow and flashed me his own brilliant smile. “Your knight in shining armor.”

“You got that right.”

Neil Patrick Harris’ ten-top was going to save my month. I heaved a steadying breath, determined to not make a fool of myself in front of the

celebrity and his friends, and readied my notepad.

Behind me, at the register, a young man in a backward baseball cap jabbed an angry text into his phone. “Screw this fucking guy!”

The entire restaurant stopped to look—Annabelle’s wasn’t the sort of place for outbursts. But this was also New York City; the customers went back to their conversations a moment later, unperturbed, as the young man threw up his hands.

“Tell that bastard he can get his own damn food,” he told Maxine and stormed out.

Commotion over, I turned my focus to my table when Maxine’s cold, clipped voice stopped me dead.

“Charlotte, if you please?”

I hurried to the register. “Yes?”

She pushed a short stack of to-go boxes wrapped up in a plastic bag toward me. “I need you to make this delivery.”

My heart dropped. “But...I just got sat...”

“Anthony can take it. This is important.” She jerked her pointy chin at Anthony.

He hesitated, but Maxine waved her hand at him. Anthony looked at me helplessly, mouthing *I’m sorry*, and I watched him walk up to my table, in my section, to wait on my Neil Patrick Harris.

Maxine pursed her heavily painted lips. “This is the Lake delivery. I know it’s not the same as a Broadway star, but all of our customers are equally important, aren’t they?”

“But the big party...it’s *my* section. Why not send Anthony? Or Clara?”

Behind us, Anthony said something and the entire NPH table burst out laughing. Maxine arched a pencil-thin eyebrow at me knowingly. I sighed and nodded. Anthony was warm and personable and could make ten people—including a famous entertainer—laugh in a heartbeat. I would have done an adequate job, but I was “tense” and sometimes “a bit silly.” Whatever that meant.

“You need to hurry,” Maxine was saying now, handing me a slip of paper with an address. “It seems Mr. Lake has lost another assistant but let’s not lose *his* business, hmm?”

I nodded dully. Mr. Lake, whoever he was, ordered from Annabelle’s at least once a week, and some surly or bored-looking assistant—they seemed to change every so often—came to pick it up. Judging by the angry young

man's outburst, Lake had lost another one.

I took up the sack of takeout, cast a last, lingering glance at Neil Patrick Harris' party, and went out. I tried to look on the bright side: maybe this Lake guy was a fantastic tipper.

Yeah, dream on.

From what I'd heard, he was some kind of temperamental shut-in. Even if he was a twenty-percenter, there was no way the tip on this delivery would match the gratuity on a party of ten. The best I could hope for was to make the delivery and hurry back before the lunch rush ended.

The address was a townhouse at West 78th, about a ten-minute walk. I hurried out at a brisk pace. If the guy had ordered eggs, they were already cold and the last thing I needed was Lake calling up Maxine and bitching that I'd been too slow.

I walked down Amsterdam Street and took a right on 78th. It was a gorgeous spring day. The air was warm but not yet sticky with summer humidity, and the sky was bursting with sunshine. 78th was a clean-swept, tree-lined street with typical New York buildings rubbing shoulders, one to the next. The Lake residence was a red brick three-story townhouse wedged tight between two brownstones. I walked up the three steps to the front door and rang the bell.

No answer.

I rang again and was about to ring a third time when a hard, young man's voice answered over the intercom, his tone brittle with sarcasm. "What, did you come back for a reference?"

Is this Lake's son? I wondered. I cleared my throat and pushed the button. "I'm not him. The assistant? He quit. I think."

"I'm aware," the voice replied. "So who the hell are you?"

I scowled. I did *not* just lose Neil Patrick Harris' table to put up with some rude shut-in's even ruder son.

"I'm from Annabelle's," I snapped and then tried for a more neutral tone. "I have your order, if you want it."

Another pause, and just when I thought there wasn't going to be another reply, the door buzzed.

It opened on a lovely foyer with a small chandelier glittering above me. Straight ahead was a narrow hallway and what looked to be a very small living area—darkened and cluttered with boxes and furniture. Despite the fact it was being used for storage, the first floor was clean, with expensive

hardwood flooring below and crown molding up top.

I took the staircase on the left, passing several expensive-looking paintings on the way up. The second floor opened on a living area, elegantly furnished in beige with various shades of blue to accent it. Tasteful art hung on the walls and crystal vases—empty of flowers—rested upon classy end tables in rich mahogany. A glass coffee table in front of the fireplace held the remains of a Big Gulp, potato chips, and ropes of red licorice.

“Breakfast of champions,” I muttered, guessing the mess must have belonged to the former assistant whose job I was currently losing my rent money for.

To the right of the living room was a spacious kitchen—all elegant quartz counters and stainless-steel appliances. But the sink was full of dirty dishes and empty takeout boxes from neighborhood restaurants—none of them cheap—were stacked on the counter. Despite the minor messes, it was obviously the home of a wealthy person. Uptown and a stone’s throw to Central Park, the owner would have to be. Though the second floor was too large for me to see the rest of it, I knew it was empty.

“Hello?” I called. “Mr. Lake?”

Another pause, and then, from the third and last floor, where I assumed the bedrooms were located, came that same young man’s voice, hard-edged and cold. “Just leave it on the counter.”

If *bitter* had a sound, it was that voice.

I set the stack of boxes on the kitchen counter beside the rest. I knew the bill had already been paid, but did it include gratuity? Normally, I would have just left it to fate or luck, but I needed every dollar I could get.

“Okay,” I called. “Um, is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. You can get the fuck out of my house.”

I felt the blood rush to my cheeks—a rush of both anger and humiliation. I shouldn’t have let it; I worked in customer service after all, but it still stung a little. Not to mention, it was kind of a shock to hear that sort of talk in such an elegant house.

“Prick,” I muttered under my breath. I thumped heavily down the stairs, threw open the door and let it slam shut on its own.

I hurried back to Annabelle’s. I still had some of the lunch rush left to try to make up the lost money, and maybe the rude bastard had left a tip already.

I was wrong on both counts.

The “shit that was going down” Anthony had spoken of earlier was now

going down. Annabelle Pratt—the eponymous owner—had a nephew who had just moved to New York to pursue an acting career, and he needed a job. Harris Pratt had arrived to learn the ropes while I was out on delivery. Maxine pulled me aside to tell me that each of the six waiters and waitresses would lose one shift to give this guy a full boat.

That kind of bald-faced nepotism would have made an instant enemy out of anyone else in the eyes of the current staff—it certainly did me. But Harris was sweet, attractive, and suffered a ridiculous abundance of good-natured charm. I watched, disgusted, as Clara—who was losing a lucrative breakfast shift to him—flirted shamelessly while showing him the computer ordering system. Digging her own grave with a smile on her face.

My own shift was over. The lunch rush wasn't enough of a rush for me to finish out, and I yanked out my nametag in the back room, willing myself not to cry. Maxine came around to pay out the credit card tips.

“Did that Lake guy leave anything? From my delivery?”

Her arched brow stabbed her severe hairline.

“I only ask because he was rude as hell to me.”

“Not surprising.” Maxine counted out my money. “He goes through assistants like some people go through toilet paper. Treats them about the same too.”

“What's his story?” I asked. “He's younger than I expected.”

She shrugged. “Young. Old. He's good business.” She peered at me sternly. “I hope you weren't rude back.”

I shook my head. Certainly, the guy hadn't heard me call him a prick. Not unless he had supersonic hearing.

“Good.” Maxine laid forty dollars in my hand. “See you Monday.”

I sighed. That sixty, plus the thirty-five from cash tips, was short of what I needed by half. *Half*.

Anthony—still working the rest of lunch—hurried into the backroom and tried to press some money into my hand. “NPH is generous and that was your table to begin with.”

Fresh tears welled in my eyes at my friend's kindness, but I quickly averted my head. If Anthony saw me cry, he'd never let me turn him down.

“*No way*, Anthony. You earned it.” I stood up to shut my locker, in too much of a hurry to even take my apron off. I hugged him, concealing my face against his shoulder. “I love you. Have a great weekend.”

I hurried out before he could speak a word of protest. Out on the street,

headed to the subway, I found a twenty dropped into the front pocket of my apron and promptly burst into tears.

chapter three



Lucky 7's, thank God, was busy that Friday night. I hustled behind the Greenwich bar to a backdrop of noisy music, shouted conversations, and clinking glass with two other bartenders—Sam and Eric with whom I worked with every Friday and Saturday night. They weren't twins or even brothers, but that didn't stop me from forever referring to them as one entity: Samneric, like from *The Lord of the Flies*. I mentioned it to them when I was hired three months ago, thinking it a clever coincidence. Neither had any idea what I was talking about.

Now, Samneric hustled around me, chatting easily with the customers while I stumbled my way through small talk. I wasn't cut out for being a bartender. I was too "wound up" and "slightly goofy," whatever that meant. But Janson, the owner of Lucky 7's, had been desperately short-handed when I applied, and I could remember the cocktail combinations with perfect accuracy. He was forever encouraging me to pour one for myself now and then to loosen up.

"And for God's sake, would it kill you to flirt a little?"

I knew what he meant, but I just didn't have the flirting gene. I tried, but I had no filter. Words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them, and unfiltered honesty wasn't necessarily the first thing a tipsy guy at a bar looked for.

Sometimes I thought Janson only kept me because he felt sorry for me. Samneric told me it was because I looked like a pixie dream girl from some indie movie.

"Guys dig that. A lot," they told me.

"Dig what?" I'd asked.

Sam and/or Eric had clarified, "You're cute in a sad, smart kind of way."

I didn't know what to do with that either, but I did my best to look the part of a bartender chick in a dark, dive-y bar. For Annabelle's, I looked clean-cut and conservative. At Lucky 7's, I wore black tank tops that enhanced my not-inconsequential boobs, dark eyeliner, and let my hair run wild. It was like a costume to me. I was neither clean-cut, nor a hard partying girl.

I didn't know what I was.

At around ten, Melanie Parker shouldered up to the bar through the crowd of Greenwich Village bohemians, artists, and wealthy hipsters that were gentrifying the neighborhood at an alarming rate. Or so my best friend was fond of telling me. She gave the stink-eye to one young guy in a too-expensive sweater and jerked her chin at me by way of greeting.

"Good night?" she commented. The blue neon lights behind me lit up her cat's eye glasses. She looked pretty gentrified herself in a white cardigan and brown suede skirt, but that was her "work costume." Melanie gave cello lessons to the children of Manhattan's elite when she wasn't playing in the pit for some off-off-Broadway experimental musical act. She brushed the fringe of dark bangs out of her eyes. "How's rent looking?"

I poured her the usual—an Old Fashioned—and shrugged. "Ask me again tomorrow night. I need two killer shifts to make it."

"Screw this job," Melanie said, spearing the cherry in her drink with a tiny plastic sword. "Screw both your jobs."

I was glad another customer demanded my attention. I had been about to reply that it was easy for Melanie to say that when she had a rent-controlled apartment she shared with her stable-as-a-rock girlfriend of two years. But I knew what she was getting at, and sure enough, she reached across the bar to touch my hand.

"You know what you should be doing," she said in a softer tone. "When was the last time you practiced?"

"Wednesday," I said, and that was the truth. "And it cost me thirty bucks for a practice room at the Kaufman. Thirty bucks I don't really have."

I thought that was pretty brave of me considering the sorry state of my finances. Doubly so, since it had been a waste of time. Most of my practice sessions were a waste of time; I made the notes but felt none of the music.

"Any thoughts about an audition?"

I wiped the bar with a rag. "Maybe."

"Char, it's been a year."

"Not now, Mel. I've had a rough week, okay?"

Melanie pursed her lips, though her eyes were soft. She started to say something, but I didn't hear her. My heart seemed to drop to my knees as the front door of the bar opened to let in three guys and a woman. One of the men had his arm slung around the gorgeous brunette.

Melanie stopped talking and made a face. "I don't even have to turn. It's that fucker, Keith, isn't it?"

I nodded and tore my gaze away as the group settled down at a corner table. "I'm fine. Totally fine."

"Are you? Your hands are shaking."

I glanced down at the ice scoop in my hand, a glass in the other. Both trembled. I put both down and wiped my hands on my apron. "What the hell is he doing here? There are eight billion bars in the city..."

My voice trailed away as it seemed Keith had been designated to buy the first round for his group and was now wending his way through the bar. I cursed myself for not slipping out the back for a break before he could spot me.

"Charlotte?" Keith sidled right up to the bar without so much as a glance at Melanie. "I never expected to see you at a dive like this, let alone tending the bar! How are you? It's been a while. Last I saw you..." His face suddenly scrunched up into a look that was half sympathy, half pity, and one hundred percent fake to everyone but him. "Oh, damn, I remember. Your brother—"

"What can I get you?" I asked loudly.

Keith ignored my question and leaned forward, talking to me in a gentle, intense manner, as if I were the only woman in the room, in the whole world. It was a patented Keith Johnston move, one of many that made me fall for him, made me trust him and believe he was sincere when he told me he loved me.

"Charlotte, listen. I'm not good with grief. You know that. I mean, I feel things so *hard*, so *deeply*, that your pain...it was just too much. So I ran. It was cowardly and I'm not proud, but I had to. Your eyes... You know it was your eyes that drew me to you—those big doe eyes of yours..."

Those "big doe eyes" of mine stung with tears at the way he talked about my grief and my pain as if they were things I'd done to him. Impositions.

"And when you came back from the funeral, those gorgeous eyes were filled with so much sadness, there was nothing left. The Charlotte I knew was gone, and in her place was someone I didn't know. Someone I couldn't reach. I should have told you that then, but I just wasn't strong enough. I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry."

Melanie stared at him with slack-jawed awe. "Are you kidding me? You think she's going to buy that bullshit?"

Unruffled, Keith turned to her, a plastic, polite smile on his lips. "Hello, Melanie. Nice to see you again, too. If you don't mind, I'm talking to Charlotte."

I shook my head faintly at Melanie and she narrowed her eyes. "I'm going to the restroom. *I'll be right back.*"

"She's right, you know," I said when Melanie had gone. "It's all bullshit what you just said, and even if it wasn't, you should have talked to me a year ago. *A year*, Keith. Instead, I come back from the funer—from Montana to find my boyfriend with another girl and my chair in the Strings gone."

He cocked his head, a perplexed smile on his lips. "Is that what you're upset about? The Spring Strings? Charlotte, you were going to miss *opening night*. I had to do *something*. The show must go on, right?"

I rubbed a spot on the bar with the rag. "What about us, Keith?" I asked in a low voice, hating how pathetic I sounded. Why was I entertaining his excuses instead of just throwing a drink in his face? But some part of me needed to hear answers, even after all this time. Closure, they called it. Maybe it wouldn't hurt as much if he had a good reason. Something I could believe. Something more than the one I had been living with—that he and I had been a lie.

But his ridiculous, perplexed smile reappeared. "Us? I don't recall that we ever got exclusive, Char. We were 'together'"—he actually made air-quotes—"for a few weeks, right?"

Two months, one week, and four days, I thought. I could probably count up the hours if I really thought about it.

"I got busy with the Strings, then graduation..." Keith shrugged, his smile widening. "But it's good to see you again, and as much as I'd love to catch up, my friends are going to send a search party if I don't get back with the booze."

He slung his arm on the bar as if we were in a saloon and winked at me like a cowboy in a bad western. I was suddenly overcome with embarrassment that this insincere asshole was part of the reason my bruised and battered heart couldn't find my music.

"Sorry," I said, tossing the rag down. "I'm on a break."

I pushed past Samneric to get to the alley outside, sat on an overturned

bucket used for hauling ice, and burst into tears. Not for what Keith had put me through, but for the awful déjà vu of those awful months after Chris's death. Keith's pleasantly indifferent face brought it all back to me in a rush.

I cried for what I'd thought I'd had with Keith, which was—as it turns out—nothing at all. But mostly I cried for Chris. I sobbed for my brother, the ache in my heart throbbing along with my pulse. I could have sobbed all night, and the tears would never stop. There was an endless well of them that never seemed to dry up.

Ten minutes later, I stymied the geyser and went back inside. Thankfully, Keith was back at his table and Melanie had returned, along with some other friends of ours from Juilliard: Mike Hammond, Felicia Strickland, and Regina Chen. They all recognized Keith and surrounded me at the bar, like a protective barrier. My eyes threatened to turn on the waterworks again at their kindness.

“You missed it, Char,” Regina said over her martini. “It was an epic party—even by my high standards—but could have been even *more* epic if you had been there.”

“I tried to drag her out,” Melanie said, “but—”

“But I was busy,” I said quickly. “Sorry, Regina. I'll try to catch the next one.”

“I'm going to hold you to that,” Regina said. “I'm thinking late May. Save the date, Conroy, or your ass is grass.”

Regina Chen's parties were legendary among the Juilliard crowd. Everyone had to bring their instruments, and a bunch of people would play the themes from popular TV shows. I'd attended a few before Chris's death and none after.

Regina and the rest of my Juilliard friends thought I was taking a break from auditions. Only Melanie knew the truth. That I didn't like to play in front of people anymore. Not when my music was so hollow now. Rote. Notes on a page and nothing more.

My friends kept me talking and laughing about other things, and before I knew it, my shift was over.

I closed the night with ninety dollars in tips. Pretty good but not quite enough.

Pretty good but not quite enough.

It was amazing—and depressing—how much of my life those days could be described with that sentence.

chapter four



I bolted upright from that same damn nightmare, the dream that was both fiercely terrorizing and mercilessly glorious at the same time. I gasped for breath, drowning on nothing, while trying to hold on to the images that painted my darkness with vibrant color. There was white snow and blue sky, gold sunset tints and blue-green water. In the dream I could see again.

Sometimes that made it worth the terror.

Sometimes it made me wish I'd never woken up at all.

I vaguely wondered what time it was. It might have been morning. It might have been three in the afternoon. My sleep patterns were fucked since the accident and what difference did it make anyway? Dawn or dusk, it was all the same black nothing to me.

I threw off my sweat-drenched covers. They stank and so did I. I needed a shower and Lucien needed to hurry the hell up and hire another assistant. It had been three days since some chick from that restaurant delivered food along with the news that Trevor—the useless prick—had quit. Good riddance. Trevor was slow, stupid, and if he'd walked out of here without stealing something, I'd be shocked.

Not that I'd know.

I lay back on the pillows, a sigh gusting out of me, and listened. The street traffic was quiet. No voices. No cars. I guessed it was three a.m. and decided to check with the precious little wristwatch they gave me at the rehab facility. Especially designed for blind fuckers like me, it chirped the time at the press of a button.

The time is 3:22 a.m., Tuesday, March 31st.

Pretty close. I pushed it again. And again. The robotic voice filled the silence. I couldn't handle silence. If I lay still enough, if I held my breath and

didn't move, I could pretend I was in a cave deep beneath the ground where no sunlight ever reached. Like that old mining cavern in Colorado I once visited. I remember thinking then that this kind of ultimate darkness was impossible. There was always light in the world, even in the blackest night. There were always shadows and shades, never just...nothing.

Ha. Life—bitch that she was—sure showed me.

Lying perfectly still was a bad idea, anyway. I felt as if I were buried alive, a mind floating in the black ether. Bodiless. Weightless. And utterly alone.

I pushed the button again. Over and over, but it wasn't enough.

"Alexa," I said to the voice-activated system Lucien had acquired three months ago when I first got out of rehab. "Play: Rage Against the Machine."

Alexa started "Killing in the Name Of," and I told her to play it louder and louder—as loud as the little device would go—but only for a few seconds. If it got too loud, the neighbors would call the cops. They'd ring, and then I'd have to make my way down two flights of stairs like the fumbling, clumsy idiot I'd become. I'd have to open my door to total strangers who *said* they were police, but how the hell would I know?

I modulated the music to normal levels, letting the lyrics scream and rage for me. I wanted to scream too, but I sometimes worried that if I did, I'd never stop.

I clenched my teeth, my eyes squeezed shut so tightly my head hurt. Had to be careful there. Too much of that would awaken the Monster and that was the last goddamn thing I needed. But I needed to *feel* that my eyes were closed.

At least then the darkness made sense.

Finally, I couldn't stand my own stink another minute. Another goddamn curse—every sense worked in overdrive to make up for my useless eyes. Like hearing that girl from the restaurant call me a prick. I know she thought she had gotten away with it, but I'd heard. I'd heard and remembered. It was the last voice—besides old Lucien's scolding—I'd heard in three days. The girl had a nice voice. Pretty. Better than that Trevor's nasally whine, anyway.

I told Alexa to shut the fuck up and found the edge of the bed with my legs and the bedside table with my left hand. My fingers brushed a small plastic bottle—in my mind it was orange with a white cap—and I heard it roll, then fall off the table. It hit the ground near my foot and then rolled some more.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered even as a pang of something really damn close to panic lanced through me. I couldn’t lose track of those meds. They were the only things that kept the Monster asleep.

I knelt on the hardwood floor, keeping my bearings between the bed and the table, and felt around for the bottle. I found it against the bed’s leg and gripped it tightly in my hand. I stood the bottle carefully on the table next to the small lamp—useless fucking thing—orienting the pills to its base so I would know where they were.

Then I let go of the end table and stood up in the empty black.

This wasn’t my house. Before the accident, the entire planet was my home: flats and apartments, mansions and hotels... I slept in fancy resorts, crashed on friends’ couches, slept in village huts or under the open sky. On every continent.

This was my parents’ “little place in the city,” and before the accident, I’d only been here a handful of times. My mother was forever redecorating when they lived here, so I had no idea what the fuck it might look like, and even after holing up here for three months, I still didn’t know the layout. It was still an alien landscape I couldn’t quite map.

But the journey from bed to bathroom was familiar, as it was my most frequent trek. Six steps to the bathroom door and the cool hardwood under my bare feet became cold porcelain tile. Four steps to the dual sinks on my right, three more after that and my pathetic, groping hands touched the glass enclosure of the shower. The bathroom was huge. Cavernous. Every sound amplified.

I found the knob in the shower and began the ridiculous trial-and-error dance of trying to get the temperature just right. A two-second, counter-clockwise turn was usually about right, but sometimes I over or undershot it and either scalding or frigid water rained down. It never ceased to amaze me how fucking complicated the simplest of things had become.

I stripped off my sweatpants, boxer-briefs, and the T-shirt that reeked of old sweat. I managed to make it through the shower without dropping anything or using hair conditioner instead of soap, and carefully—really damn carefully—stepped out and felt around the rack for a towel.

Empty.

Of course. Because both towels were on the floor somewhere, either in this huge bathroom or lying discarded in the bedroom. And since Trevor quit, there’d been no one to do laundry.

I stood on the bathmat, dripping water and getting cold. Now what?
Now. The fuck. What.

Why did I bother with a shower? Why did I bother with anything? I vacillated between not giving a shit and trying. Trying to carry on, or move forward, or whatever psychotherapy bullshit mantras I'd heard during the grueling, torturous months of my physical rehab. Sometimes, I really wanted to break out of this rage that was wrapped around me like a straight-jacket and figure it all out. Try to *adjust*. Put some real effort into being *well-adjusted*.

Oh, how that would make Mom and Dad proud.

Most times, like standing there in the shower with no clean towel and my skin raising goose bumps, I just wanted to put my fist through the glass. I wanted to hear it shatter, feel the hard pain, the hot blood dripping. I fought to control the urge, taking deep gulps of air. I felt my way back into the bedroom, naked.

My dresser was in one of the walk-in closets, across from the bed. I made my way in and felt for the handle on the third drawer. It was almost empty. Only two T-shirts left. I used one to dry myself and pulled the other over my head. I felt the scratch of the label on my throat.

The irritation was swift and sharp.

I tore my arms out, spun it around, put it back on right-side front because God knew I didn't want to look like a ridiculous, pathetic blind asshole who couldn't put his fucking shirt on the right way for the legions of No One who inhabited my world now.

I found clean underwear in the second drawer and one last pair of sweatpants, then hit the button on my watch.

The time is 4:10 a.m. on March 31st.

Good God, it had taken me nearly an hour to do what used to take me fifteen minutes. But I'd done it. That should have counted for something. Right? Didn't I deserve an A for effort?

Instead, I felt the first twinges at the back of my head—a faint, warm glow of pain that would burst into an inferno if I let it.

The Monster was waking up.

I felt my way around the bed and grabbed the pill bottle off the side table. I didn't dare fumble my way to the bathroom sink for some water. I pushed and twisted the cap off, sucked one capsule into my mouth, and swallowed it dry.

Dirty sheets be damned, I hurriedly climbed back into bed and lay perfectly still on my back, willing the Monster to go back into hibernation. I eased a sigh that it seemed I'd caught it in time. The pain got no worse than a mild headache and then began to recede altogether.

And still, I didn't move. I listened to New York wake up outside the walls of this house, from inside my prison of black. The city was right outside the door and yet it seemed so far away. Another world. A world of color and light and yellow cabs and red brick, and I was trapped in this well of darkness, only able to remember but never know it again. I choked down a scream and then slept, diving into oblivion.

I prayed I wouldn't have that horrible nightmare again.

I hoped that I would.

chapter five



Monday morning was April 1st, and I thought that was apt. It felt like someone was playing a joke on me. Maxine was out sick and the owner, Annabelle, was here to watch her nephew work his first real shift...which meant I was on the register. I'd be tipped only on to-go orders—always a shitty prospect—and I was still short on rent.

I worked through the shift with a heavy stone of dread in my gut, knowing I'd have to go home and face Emily, tell her she'd have to cover for me, and then I'd spend the next few shifts making it up, putting me behind for next month.

Around noon, a kind-looking gentleman with neat white hair and wearing an expensive navy-blue suit with a pale-yellow ascot, bypassed the hostess stand and approached me.

"I'm here to pick up an order for Mr. Lake?" he said in a smooth, French-sounding accent that I recognized from over the phone when he placed the order.

"Oh," I took up the plastic bag of takeout and set it on the counter. "This is for...um...*him*?"

The man smiled kindly. "It is. And you must be new to not have recognized the order. He's a bit of a regular customer, I'm afraid."

"Uh, yes, he is. But I'm not new. I just never take his orders and usually some younger guy comes and gets them." My cheeks burned. "Oh, jeez, I'm sorry. I just meant, you um...you don't look like an assistant."

The man's smile widened. "That I am not, although necessity demands it today." He pulled out his wallet meaningfully.

"Oh, right." I rang up the order. "\$32.29, please."

The older man—I guessed he was in his late sixties—handed me a credit

card and I stole a glance at the card before I swiped it on the machine: a Platinum Amex. The name said Lucien Caron.

“I actually delivered last week’s order after the other guy quit,” I told him. “Mr. Lake was pretty young too.”

“Oh?” The man named Lucien raised his eyebrows. “You *met* Noah?”

So the prick had a name. Noah. A nice name, anyway.

“Not exactly,” I said. “I only heard his voice. He let me in to drop off the food and then *requested* I leave the house. *Immediately.*”

Lucien pursed his lips. “I’m afraid Noah suffers a deplorable lack of manners. I apologize on his behalf if he was overly rude, which I must assume he was.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. I was a little surprised at first, but we all have our bad days, right?”

Like today. Or the rest of this week or month...

“Charlotte?” Annabelle sidled up to me—a plump woman in blue silk and a cloud of perfume. She offered Lucien a tight smile as she tugged me back from the register a step. “Did you give that homeless man outside a cup of soup?” She nodded her puffy helmet of sprayed hair toward the front windows where a man in a dirty coat was eating out of a small to-go container, spilling corn chowder into his straggly beard.

“I did,” I told her, conscious that Lucien was listening discreetly. “But I paid for it. I always do.”

“You always...?” Annabelle bristled and flashed Lucien an even tighter, more plastic smile. “Finish this gentleman’s transaction and then meet me in the back office, if you please?”

I nodded faintly. “Uh, sure.”

Annabelle moved away and I felt my neck redden as I went back to the register.

“No good deed goes unpunished, does it?” Lucien smiled gently. He turned toward the window where the homeless man was finishing his soup. “And sometimes, all it takes is a kind word or gesture to make a bad day a bit more bearable, n’est ce pas?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, mustering a small smile. “Here you go.”

I passed him the receipt, which he signed with a beautiful looping signature and a twenty percent tip.

“What is your name, mademoiselle?”

“Charlotte Conroy.”

“And I am Lucien Caron.” He bowed smartly. “What time are you finished with your work today, if I might enquire?”

I blinked. A come on? Impossible. He was too nice, too refined to try to pick up girls more than forty years younger than he was. Still, I couldn’t imagine why on earth he was asking me that.

“I’m off at two o’clock.” I glanced at the back office where Annabelle was waiting for me. “If I don’t get fired first, that is.”

Lucien smiled and took the to-go bag. “If I may, I’d like to return at that time and perhaps have a coffee?”

“Uh...sure?”

He gave me another short nod of his head. “At two then, Miss Conroy.”

“Yeah, see you then,” I said, wondering what it was I just agreed to.



Annabelle laid a long lecture on me about company property and how it was to be distributed (spoiler alert: not to homeless people), but she didn’t fire me. She was close, though. I could practically see her thinking of how the calendar would look with her nephew’s name written next to all my shifts.

And to add insult to poverty-stricken injury, the restaurant was busy all day. Had I been working my regular station, I would have been in the clear, tip-wise. As it was, I made less than half that with piddling to-go tips. I planned to get out of there as soon as two o’clock rolled around, and then Lucien Caron strolled back into the now near-empty restaurant.

Oh right. My hot date.

But I liked Lucien, and when he offered me a polite smile in greeting, I smiled back. He took a table near the window and waited.

“Who’s Vincent Price over there?” Anthony murmured as I started over.

“I just met him this afternoon,” I muttered back. “He works for Lake and wants to talk to me about something. Seems nice enough.”

Anthony grinned. “All serial killers do. It’s how they keep their cover. Cough three times if you need rescuing.”

I laughed and elbowed him in the ribs. There wasn’t anything creepy about Lucien Caron, though he did look a bit like Vincent Price: old-world charm from a bygone era. He also reminded me of my favorite grandfather who had passed away when I was ten. Grandpa Harold was always pulling quarters out of my ear. Lucien looked like he could drop a fifty and never

notice.

I joined him at the window-side table and Anthony took our order. “I have an employee discount,” I told Lucien.

The older man waved his hand. A pinky ring with a sapphire the size of a dime glinted in the afternoon sun. “Given this restaurant’s policies on such things, safer that I pay, don’t you think?”

I shifted in my seat. “You’re probably right.”

“Besides, it hardly seems fair to this establishment to take more from them than perhaps I already will.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve asked you to meet with me, Miss Conroy, to talk a bit with you about some...possibilities.”

He fell silent as Anthony returned with a black coffee for me and a cappuccino. When he’d gone, Lucien sat back in his chair and stirred his drink with a small spoon.

“I am starting at the end when I should be starting at the beginning. I’d like to get to know you and tell you something of my situation. Then we shall go from there, yes?”

“Uh, sure.”

“So.” Lucien sipped his cappuccino. “Tell me about yourself, Charlotte. What brings you to New York? Or perhaps you’re a native?”

“Oh, no. Montana transplant. I came here for school.”

“NYU?”

“Juilliard.”

Lucien’s blue eyes lit up. “Really? And are you a dancer? Actor?”

“Musician.”

“Of course. And what do you play?”

“The violin. At least, in theory. I graduated last June but...I haven’t been able to do much with it since.”

“I see. Yes, often artists have a difficult time taking their first steps toward greatness.”

“Uh, yes,” I said for lack of a better answer.

“But a graduate of Juilliard,” Lucien said. “You must be quite talented. And what is it that you love most about the violin?”

“I haven’t thought about that in a long time.” I started to toss off something safe, something about how I’d been playing since I was a kid. Instead, I said, “I love that when it’s played right, the violin sounds as if the

player's soul is singing."

Crap, where did that come from?

But I realized that was the truth, at least for me. A truth I had been in danger of forgetting.

"But I don't play that way lately."

"You haven't quite found it yet," Lucien said gently.

I shifted in my chair. *No, they called me a prodigy. The next Hilary Hahn...* "Something like that."

"I feel that you will, Miss Conroy. You seem to me a young woman possessing of a great heart. Would you say that's true?"

"I've been told that before, by my family mostly. But to be perfectly honest, I don't know, Mr. Caron."

"Please, call me Lucien."

"Okay, Lucien. I've been so busy trying to keep my head above water since I graduated. I guess I don't really know what I am."

He smiled as if this answer pleased him. "I find that honesty is a very undervalued and rare commodity these days."

"Yeah, well, I try. I don't have a filter sometimes. A compulsive blurter." I laughed shortly then cleared my throat. "Anyway..."

Lucien sipped his coffee then glanced around Annabelle's. "This is a fine establishment. It must become rather busy at peak times, oui?"

"It can."

"And to survive in this city, one requires a steady income."

"Or two," I said. "I work here and as a bartender on the weekends to help make ends meet."

"Do you?"

I shrugged. "Rent's not cheap, and neither was Juilliard. I'll be paying student loans off until..."

"Until you're as old as me."

I laughed and not just to be polite, either. "Yeah, probably."

"You are industrious," Lucien said, the thoughtful expression returning.

"I guess so. Sort of have to be, to keep up in this city."

He nodded his silver-haired head. "Very good, Miss Conroy. That is very good."

"What is, exactly?" I asked. "Look, Mr. Caron, why are you asking me all this? You seem like a real gentleman, but these questions... Maybe I'm just a naive girl from Montana, but I'm really confused. Like maybe you're actually

some doomsday cult leader about to whisk me off to a dungeon in France or something.”

Lucien laughed heartily. “Oh, ma chère, you are a delightful young woman to indulge an old man these questions, so let me assure you they do have a purpose. A benevolent one. A lucrative one for you, perhaps.”

Oh God, he’s a pimp. Or a mob lord. Neither seemed true; there was nothing about Lucien that was threatening. I realized then that I’d been in New York for slightly less than five years and was already jaded. Even so, everyone knows it’s better to be safe than sorry.

I sipped my coffee, waiting.

“I am the executor of Grayson and Victoria Lake’s finances as pertains to their New York City investments, property, holdings, and...as of six months ago, I take care of the personal needs of their twenty-four-year-old son, Noah.”

“What’s his story?”

“Not a very good one, I’m afraid.” Lucien looked at me. “Have you not heard of Noah Lake?”

“Should I have?”

“I suppose not, unless you follow the events and news of what they call ‘extreme sports’?”

“You mean like snowboarding or dirt bike racing?”

“Yes and hang-gliding, rock-climbing, base-jumping...” Lucien set down his cappuccino cup with some finality. “Noah Lake was an avid participant in all manner of extreme sports and worked as a journalist for a magazine devoted to such endeavors. He was not content to merely report on the thrills and danger but participated as well.” His smile grew fond and reminiscent. “Always a daredevil, since childhood. There wasn’t a time I can remember where Noah wasn’t frightening his poor mother to her wit’s end with his stunts. It was no surprise to anyone that he made a career of it. A free spirit.” His smile slipped away. “Until the accident.”

I felt a lump form in my throat as my fertile imagination conjured up all sorts of terrible injuries to go with the bitter voice I’d heard the other day. “Was Noah hurt badly?”

Lucien looked at me directly, seriously. “Yes, Miss Conroy, he was.”

“What happened?”

The old gentleman’s face grew pinched, his blue eyes heavy. “He had been on assignment for the magazine he wrote for—*Planet X*. They sent him

cliff diving in Mexico. Extraordinarily dangerous cliff diving, but Noah was experienced...and utterly fearless. However, on that last dive, he misjudged the depth of the water that received him and struck the back of his head on the jagged rock. He spent twelve days in a coma as a result.”

I gasped involuntarily. “Oh, no. Is he...paralyzed?” But the house had two flights of stairs and not a ramp in sight.

“He is not paralyzed. By some miracle he avoided permanent spinal damage.”

“That’s a relief.”

“He is, however, utterly blind.”

I sat back. “Blind.”

It sounded simple. Painless. Almost un-tragic, compared to the myriad debilitating injuries he could have wound up with. *Or something worse. Like Chris...*

I banished all thoughts of my brother and thought of Noah Lake. I tried to imagine what it would be like to have my sight stolen from me—thick black curtain coming down, blocking out the world’s colors, its views and lights, and the faces of those I loved.

“How awful.”

“Before we delve into those somewhat gruesome details, I come—at last—to the purpose behind this interview.” Lucien leaned forward, over the small table. “I see in you an industrious young woman, unafraid to speak her mind, yet with the heart and soul of an artist. A woman of thick skin and an unwillingness to surrender—for you must have both traits to suffer the competitive nature of your musical profession, oui?”

He spoke so kindly and was so considerate. I couldn’t let him go on thinking I was something that I wasn’t. I turned my coffee mug around and around, watching the black liquid swirl.

“I don’t play anymore, Mr. Caron. I haven’t auditioned in a year. Some things happened, and...” I glanced up at him. “I’m just telling you so that you don’t get the wrong idea about me.”

“I do respect such honesty,” he said gravely. “Nevertheless, I have high hopes for you.”

“High hopes for what?”

Lucien folded his hands on the table. “I would like you to become Noah’s next assistant. Not merely an assistant who runs errands and keeps house but a personal assistant in the truest sense of the phrase.”

I sat back, absorbing this. “Mr. Caron, I’m not qualified or trained to help a blind person.”

“Nor would Noah permit such a person anywhere near him. Your lack of qualifications in that arena is an asset, for our intents and purposes.”

“Being underqualified is a good thing?”

Lucien chuckled, though it was a refined chuckle. “I have interviewed and hired six professional assistants in the last nine weeks. All of them quit or were dismissed by Noah shortly thereafter. None of those six interviews were quite like this one.”

“Maybe that’s because I didn’t know this was a job interview,” I offered with a weak laugh. “I mean...why me?”

“Because, Miss Conroy, I require—*Noah* requires—someone with tenacity and compassion, who is able to see through the rough veneer to the suffering young man beneath. Someone who will treat Noah with kindness despite the fact that he might never return a fraction of the same courtesy to you.”

“He won’t? What’s wrong with him? Besides the blindness, I mean.”

“The accident stole more than Noah’s sight. It stripped him of all of the joy and happiness he’d possessed from doing what he loved most, leaving bitterness and anger behind.” Lucien leaned forward in earnest. “He is suffering, Miss Conroy, and I fear that unless he can begin to find acceptance, that suffering will consume him, and the vibrant young man I knew will be lost.”

“I...don’t know what to say.”

“Say nothing yet.” Lucien pulled out a business card from a sleek silver case and slid it over the table to me. “When you go home tonight, go online. Google his name and then call me after you have done so. Any hour this night and I will answer any questions you may have.”

There was a short silence. I took the card, turned it over and over in my hand. Lucien was looking at me with such hope in his kind blue eyes.

“Can I ask, at least, how much this job pays?”

“Of course, my apologies,” Lucien said with a short laugh. “The nitty-gritty, as you Americans are fond of saying. The salary is \$40,000 per annum, plus a food allowance and full health care benefits.”

I nodded, trying to play it cool. “Yes, that sounds fine. Perfect. Great.”

Oh my God! Suddenly this conversation wasn’t so strange anymore; it was a gift dropped into my lap. I could hardly keep from flying out of my chair

and throwing my arms around Lucien's neck. He was like a fairy godfather, come to rescue me from noisy roommates and lousy tips.

"I must warn you, Miss Conroy," Lucien said gravely, "what you will find when you research Noah's accident will not be easy to see. But I need you to see it, so that when he is severe or harsh with you, you will know you are not the source of his pain."

"Okay," I said slowly. "And then what?"

"If you're willing to accept the post, you'll meet with Noah—tomorrow, preferably. He demands approval of all new hires. A formality, more than anything else, but it's only fair that he be afforded a bit of agency, even if he uses it to bully and torment."

Bully and torment? That didn't sound promising, but—I had to admit—the salary was dancing in my head with actual dollar signs around it. And benefits? Health care? That was icing on the cake to a girl like me who had to sit in a crowded clinic for four hours with a 103-degree fever last winter.

"I'm afraid I must go." Lucien rose and offered his hand. "I leave you with this parting thought: I am hiring a personal assistant, Miss Conroy. That is the job on paper. But I have high hopes that if you take the post, you will become more to Noah. Someone he needs more than a maid or cook."

"What does he need?"

He smiled sadly. "Someone who stays."

chapter six



I was sorely tempted to get on my cell phone and google “Noah Lake” on the train home. But Lucien deserved that I give this my undivided attention. Not to mention, I was a little bit worried about what I was going to be looking at. “Gruesome details,” Lucien had said. Things about Noah that were “not easy to see.”

I got home close to four p.m. Emily wasn’t yet back from her nanny job, but she would be soon, demanding rent money I didn’t have. Forrest and Collin were there, hanging out in the living room because God forbid, I’d ever, *ever* have the place to myself for an hour.

I breezed past them with a muttered hello and locked myself in my room. I fired up my laptop and typed in “Noah Lake.”

A score of headlines popped up:

Extreme Sports Athlete In Coma After Acapulco Cliff Dive

***Planet X* Journalist/Photog Airlifted To Hospital Naval De Acapulco In Critical Condition**

Extreme Sports Journalist, Noah Lake, 23, Arrives At UCLA

I clicked through a few more and then began reading. The gist was the same. Last July, Noah had been cliff diving off of a one hundred and thirty-foot outcropping in La Quebrada, Mexico. The cliffs were notoriously treacherous, allowing only an eleven foot safe-depth for divers for a few seconds at a time.

Noah had been a skilled cliff diver, but something had gone wrong. One of the local divers speculated that Noah had mistimed the dive; the water was too shallow, and he struck the back of his head on the rocks that littered the

ocean floor. He was taken to the local Naval Hospital and later flown to UCLA, in a coma all the while. Every one of these articles declared he wasn't expected to live for a week, let alone survive the surgery that would replace the back of his shattered skull with a metal plate.

I dug deeper, my heart aching for what I was reading.

Noah remained in a coma for twelve days. When he finally awoke, he was blinded and hardly able to speak. Two weeks later, he was declared well enough to begin the grueling series of surgeries on the skin and muscle tissue of his neck and back. Apparently, the rocks had bit at him like a shark, tearing the flesh from his body. He'd needed a grand-total of six surgeries—including skin grafts—to repair the damage and then nearly died again as the grafting site on his leg became infected. All the while, he remained blind, though the doctors were hopeful that, as his brain healed, his sight would slowly return.

It never did.

I found my hand on my heart as I read, and I was more than a little sick to my stomach.

The poor guy, holy shit.

The latest articles spoke of Noah being moved to Lenox Hill Hospital in New York about a month after his last surgery and then to a rehab facility in White Plains. There, he underwent physical and cognitive therapy. He had to relearn even the most basic of tasks: walking, talking clearly, holding a spoon, making a fist. But his progress on these fronts was swift: his doctors were shocked and frequently mentioned being impressed by his determination. "Especially," one rehab therapist was quoted as saying, "given the fact he is simultaneously coping with blindness."

The last article about his accident mentioned Noah had finished his rehab sometime in January of this year—just three months ago, I marveled—and was holed up somewhere out of the public eye.

I sat back, my heart bruised for what I had read. What a horrible thing to endure. No wonder he was bitter. I thought I'd be too.

I went back to Google and typed in 'Noah Lake *Planet X*.' Another slew of articles came up. Happier, more exciting articles from before the accident, all of them written by Noah himself.

Planet X, I learned, was a successful magazine—both in print and online—dedicated to documenting extreme sports all over the world, with an intense focus on geography, history, and local people. A cross between

National Geographic and *Sports Illustrated*. Noah Lake had been their most popular journalist and photographer and a talented extreme athlete in his own right. He participated in many of the sports himself and then wrote first-hand accounts of the experiences. His own breathtaking photographs or Go-Pro videos accompanied the death-defying events. Everything from skydiving to base-jumping to windsurfing, he did it all. Or had.

And each article seemed to come from a different corner of the world—France and South Africa, Thailand and Hawaii... He'd been a nomad. A thrill-seeking drifter, welcome among the wealthy elite and the poorest of villagers, and at home with all of them. The entire world had been his home, and I knew then why Lucien had me google Noah's story instead of telling me himself. Because everything Noah had suffered was bad enough, but here in front of me, in full-color glossy photos, was everything he had lost, too.

Here were his photos of lush rain forests, black-sand beaches, frothy white rapids, and scarlet deserts at sunrise. I stared at a picture Noah had taken in Nepal as he hiked to Mt. Everest base camp. The entire world was spread out before him in breathtaking color: white snow glowing with sunset orange, mountains that stretched into forever, brown faces of smiling Sherpas and their multi-colored flags. I felt tears spring to my eyes despite myself.

And then I clicked one more time, on Google Images, and my heart plummeted somewhere to the vicinity of my stomach as I got my first real glimpse of Noah Lake.

“Oh...my...God,” I said aloud to no one. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Most of the images were of him wearing various protective headgear: goggles, ski masks, or plain old sunglasses. He was always bulked up in snow clothes, climbing gear, or wet suits that highlighted what I thought had been a rather attractive athletic build: tall and lean. But one photo...

Planet X had a promotional headshot of him that looked like it could have come straight out of a men's fashion mag, and it made my heart flutter ridiculously just looking at it. Noah Lake was stunning. There might have been a better word for him, but my brain wasn't quite able to cough it up. I just stared.

In the photo, he wore a black shirt under a black jacket. His hair was dark brown, almost black, and cut short but for a cute flyaway mop on top. His face was angular, chiseled, shadowed with just the right amount of light stubble. He had thick, dark brows, a straight nose, soft mouth. I'd gotten from

some of the other photos that he was tall, and somehow his gorgeous, somewhat narrow face confirmed it in my mind.

But it was his eyes that seemed to defy nature. Was that color real or some kind of crazy Photoshop trick? Hazel was the precise color: brown but flecked with green and gold, like brown velvet strewn with crushed emeralds and gold flakes. I'd never seen anything like them before or since.

And to think, those astounding eyes are now useless.

Almost reluctantly, I kept scrolling past that picture to others, photos of him walking European city streets with his arm slung casually over some stunningly gorgeous woman or another. Just before the accident, he had taken up with a French model named Valentina Paquette. Tall, blond, stunning.

Valentina, for crying out loud. I realized I was clenching my jaw.

“Don't be stupid,” I scolded myself, still scrolling, and then gave a little cry, flinching away from my screen.

Below all the photos of Noah on some ski slope or hanging from a rock (with taut, lean muscles straining with exertion) there were three photos, illicit ones judging by the crappy quality. Cell phone photos taken quickly in a hospital room.

Two were of Noah apparently before he'd had any surgeries for the damage done to his back. He was lying face down, his head all but completely swathed in white bandages. Tubes and lines ran from all parts of his body, as if he were bionic. But his back...I'd never seen anything so horrific in my life.

On the right side, three jagged gouges—as if some lion had scratched him—ran down his neck to mid-shoulder blade. On the left, I honestly couldn't understand what I was seeing: a striated mess of blood and torn flesh and pools of white liquid...or maybe that was bone? I couldn't tell, but it was repulsive. I quickly averted my eyes. The third pic was of his leg, his inner thigh, where a long, rough rectangle of skin had been removed. The skin graft.

I quickly scrolled back up to the *Planet X* promo shot, marveling that this beautiful man had endured so much horror and pain...and that Lucien had inflicted a fraction of it on me, so I'd feel sorry for him. Tears welled in my eyes for what I had seen; I couldn't help it. “A big softy” my brother had always teased me, especially when he caught me wiping my eyes over a sentimental commercial.

I thought about calling Lucien and giving him an earful when a knock

came at the door.

“Char? It’s Em.”

“Yeah?” I called, glad my voice sounded mostly normal.

“Um, you know what today is, right?”

I tugged a lock of hair, glancing between my phone, the pic of Noah, and the bedroom door where Emily was waiting on the other side.

“Give me a minute, Emily,” I called. “I’ve got to make a phone call, then we’ll talk.”

Emily muttered something I didn’t quite catch, and I guessed she walked away. The sound of voices was filling the living room. Another impromptu get-together that I knew was going to last well into the night. Another night of no sleep. Not even an hour’s worth of peace of mind to make a very important decision that could be the best thing I’ve ever done or the worst mistake of my life.

I grabbed a notebook, pen, and calculator. Trying my hardest to not let the grim circumstances of Noah’s accident influence me, I crafted my answer to Lucien.

Ten minutes later, with music going full blast in the living area, I stuffed pillows in the crack under the door to help muffle the sound, heaved a breath, and dialed the number off the card I’d received earlier that afternoon.

He picked up after two rings. “Allô?”

“Lucien, it’s Charlotte Conroy.”

“Ah, Charlotte, ma chère.” He sounded warm but wary. “I had not expected to hear from you so soon...and I fear that is not a good thing.”

“Depends. I have some questions, some conditions. I googled Noah’s accident. God, the pictures...”

“I do apologize if they were too disturbing, but I wanted you to see why ___”

“You wanted me to feel sorry for him so I’d take the job,” I said. “Didn’t you?”

“Not so that you would take it, my dear,” Lucien said, his tone turning grave. “But so that if you took the job, you would feel empathy toward your charge.”

“Especially when he’s a raving asshole to me?” I shook my head and gentled my voice. Lucien could be my new boss, after all. “You talk about all this empathy for him, but what is going to happen to me? Am I going to be subjected to verbal abuse and insults every day, all day? Because if that’s the

case, then I can see why those other professionals quit.”

“Noah will not abuse you, verbally or otherwise.”

“I believe you said ‘bully and torment.’”

“A poor choice of words on my part.”

“I’m just trying to protect myself, Lucien.”

“And you have every right,” he replied. “Noah is angry, bitter, and ill-tempered, and he will make no attempt to hide that from you. But he is also a good man, deep down. It will not be easy to work with him, Charlotte. That I guarantee. But I’ve known him and his sister since they were small children. His bark is unpleasant, but he has no bite. I promise.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. Nerves jangled in my gut, but determination conquered them. “When I made that food delivery last week, I saw that the first floor of Noah’s house looked vacant.”

“It is.”

No guts, no glory, I thought. I squeezed my eyes shut and blurted, “I want to live in it.”

Silence.

I felt my grand escape-plan start to unravel in that silence, and then Lucien said, “I had long wanted a live-in assistant for Noah. I worry for him...”

My hopes soared and then crashed.

“But Noah will not permit it. It has been suggested before and he is adamant.”

“And if I could convince him?” I said, twisting my bed cover.

“Charlotte—”

I glanced at the bedroom door. On the other side, it sounded like a full-blown party. On a Monday. I turned my back and cupped the phone with both hands to my ear.

“Look, Lucien, I’ve had...kind of a rough year, and I need a little peace. And that’s what’s going to make me a good assistant to him. Your Google plan worked. I feel awful for Noah and if you think being with him, helping him out would help ease some of his pain, then I’m all for it. And I’ll also do my best because, on a more selfish note, I can’t afford *not* to.”

Lucien made a sound like the exhale of cigarette smoke. “I will tell Mr. and Mrs. Lake the situation. I know they are anxious about Noah living alone, but I can’t make any promises. Noah can be quite the stubborn mule, lately.”

I nodded quickly. “Okay, I understand. Thank you.”

“The terms of your salary will need to be renegotiated, to account for rental fees—”

I squeezed my eyes shut and said quickly, “Same salary. \$40K.”

“You wish to live rent free,” he began.

“I’d be working twenty-four seven, right? I mean, if Noah falls and hurts himself in the middle of the night, I’ll be there. Isn’t that what you want?”

Lucien sighed. “More than anything.”

“So what’s peace of mind worth to you? Or to Mr. and Mrs. Lake?”

I gave my hair a tug, knowing I was pushing it. But desperate times and all that...

“And now it is you who are manipulating me, Miss Conroy,” Lucien said, though I could hear his smile over the phone.

“I won’t fail you, Lucien,” I said, hope rising. “Or Noah.”

“My dear, that is a lot to take on. Perhaps more than you realize...”

“I can do it,” I said. “And I won’t give up. Draw up a contract. For one year, and I’ll sign it. I promise I won’t quit. Not for one year, at least.”

“I shall discuss it with the Lakes, Miss Conroy, but Noah must agree to hire you first.”

I nodded, worrying my lip between my teeth. “What are my chances?”

“A month ago, I’d say you hadn’t any. But I think the reality of the situation is something that the Lakes—and possibly even Noah—cannot ignore any longer. The instability of these strangers coming in and out of his life is not good for him. We might find him amenable. *Might.*”

That wasn’t much but I took it. Lucien and I hashed out a few more details and made plans to meet after my shift at Annabelle’s, then walk to the Lake’s townhouse for my official interview.

We were about to hang up when Lucien said, “Bring your violin.”

“Why?”

“Noah has very few entertainment options these days. He might be more open to your living there if you demonstrate your talents.”

I started to remind him I wasn’t much for performing anymore, but it occurred to me that if I could live in the townhouse, I’d have time to practice, to maybe find my music again in relative peace and quiet.

“I’ll bring it.”

We said our goodbyes and I bit back a smile. The party outside my door was in full-swing and I danced on my bed to the muffled music. It wasn’t a good idea to get my hopes up like this, but I couldn’t help it. What Lucien

had said about me getting in over my head was probably true, but I'd learn to handle it. More than handle it. I wasn't a moocher, after all. For forty thousand dollars a year and no rent, I'd be the best assistant I could be.

I just had to convince Noah Lake.

I flopped back to the bed and brought up the *Planet X* promo pic again.

Gorgeous guy. Nice smile. There must be a good man lurking under there, right?

I traced the curve of his lips. "There must be."

chapter seven



Lucien met me at Annabelle's after my shift. We walked to the Lake townhome through a beautiful spring afternoon, me with my violin case in hand. I'd had a pretty good day tips-wise, which meant the rent check I'd given Emily that morning—hopefully my last, though I didn't tell her that yet—wasn't going to bounce. Lucien and I had hashed out the finer points of my employment. I'd get to keep the \$40K salary, have Sundays off, practice time, and have the living space on the first floor all to myself.

My living space. All to myself.

I practically skipped beside Lucien in giddy joy, but my stomach twisted with nerves. Knowing I was going to meet Noah face-to-face was intimidating as hell...on multiple levels.

I wondered if he was still as good-looking as that *Planet X* promo pic or if his injuries had altered him somehow. I wondered if he was really going to be as rude as he had been the first time we'd "met" or if a lot of that asshole-ness had just been an act. After all, I was a stranger in a blind guy's house; I could have walked out with one of the crystal vases and he'd never even know it. Maybe he was just trying to protect himself.

But mostly, I wondered if he was going to agree to everything Lucien and I planned to propose, because although I'd only had the barest glimpse of that living space on the first floor, I was already making it mine.

"The house belongs to Noah's parents, who reside permanently in Connecticut," Lucien was telling me as he smoked a Dunhill cigarette. "When I told them last night that you wished to live there, they were thrilled. Aside from worrying constantly about their son, they've had valid concerns about the upkeep of the property."

"Do they not see Noah very much?"

Lucien's lips made a thin line before he answered. "I'm afraid not. They did at first, to be sure. They visited him regularly at the various hospitals and the rehabilitation facility in White Plains. But after they gave him the townhome—to recuperate in—Noah has made it very clear he wants no visitors of any kind."

"Not even his family?"

"Not his parents, not his sister, and not the scores of friends he made during what he calls his 'other life.'"

The bounce in my step vanished. "If he won't even see family, why would he agree to let me live there?"

"It will not be up to him, not entirely, though let us keep mum on the living arrangements for now. I told him that you were coming today to interview for the position. I said nothing about you being a live-in assistant."

I bit my lip. "That sounds a bit dishonest, doesn't it? I thought you would have at least broached it with him."

"I could have," Lucien replied. "And Noah would have denied me outright and refused to interview you at all."

"Oh."

Lucien stopped and patted my hand. "There are times in this life in which we must do what is best, and so often what is best is not what is easy."

We arrived at the townhouse, and I stared up at the three-story residence, trying not to think too hard about all that was at stake.

"Interview as you would a normal position. Be honest. Be yourself. Let him warm up to you—such as he is capable—and leave the rest to me."

He unlocked the front door and stepped aside to let me in. "Noah? Nous sommes arrivés."

No answer.

Lucien motioned for me to walk ahead of him up the stairs. I know he was doing it out of etiquette, but I felt like a human shield until I remembered Noah couldn't see me. I could've been wearing a sombrero and a pink tutu, and it wouldn't have mattered. No, his first impression of me would form when I spoke.

Not a comforting thought.

On the second floor, the kitchen to my right was cleaned up a bit; I guessed Lucien had been here over the weekend. The square glass coffee table was free of clutter—it sat between a beige leather couch and a matching chair.

Noah Lake was in the chair.

For a second, all normal, rational thought flew out of my head. The only one that made any sense was that the *Planet X* promo shot didn't do him justice. At. All.

He wore a black V-neck T-shirt, gray athletic pants, and running shoes that looked brand new. His legs were literally spilling over the edge of the deep chair, confirming my suspicion that he was tall. Well over six feet, easy.

The accident hadn't robbed him of his beauty as I had wondered, though his skin was a bit paler, his hair a bit longer in the back. He wore the same growth of stubble on his angular chin and cheeks. If anything, he was even more handsome in person than in the pic—a stunning example of masculine beauty if I ever saw one. But something was missing.

His smile, I thought. *The accident stole his smile*. The guy in the promo headshot was a beaming young man full of life and *joie de vivre*, as Lucien might say. The Noah who sat before me now looked as if a scowl were permanently etched into his striking features. As if it had been months since he'd even *thought* about smiling.

I was dimly aware of Lucien's hand on my back, gently pushing me forward so that he could step into the room. He guided me to the couch facing Noah, and I wordlessly sank into it. I set my violin case on the floor next to my feet.

"Noah, comment ça va? Bien?"

Noah made a noncommittal noise. Those astonishing hazel eyes were fixed on the glass coffee table in front of him.

"Noah, this is Charlotte Conroy," Lucien said. I noticed he wasn't sitting down to join us.

"Pleased to meet you," I said to Noah, thankful I had enough wits about me not to offer my hand.

Noah's head came up and he swiveled in my direction, trying to zero in on me by sound. His beautiful eyes swept over me, and his gaze landed just below my chin.

"Prick," he said, his voice deep and smooth, but cold too.

I flinched. "I'm...I'm sorry...?"

"Noah! Tiens-toi bien!" Lucien scolded, but Noah ignored him.

"You're the girl who delivered food last week. I recognize your voice." His lip curled. "One of the parting gifts from being whacked blind is a keen sense of everything else." He cocked his head toward Lucien. "This is who

you think would make a good assistant?”

Above me, Lucien rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Mon Dieu, Noah...”

“Still surprised I’m not *behaving myself*?” Noah scoffed. “You can go, Lucien. Let’s get this over with.”

Lucien frowned and then put his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll return in forty-five minutes. You have my number should things wrap up quicker. Noah, s’il vous plaît être gentil.”

“Toujours,” Noah muttered. His accent was almost as perfect as Lucien’s.

Lucien sighed and gave me a parting smile that was both hopeful and pitying, then left us. I heard the front door close, and then I was alone with Noah Lake.

The afternoon sunlight suffused the room with warm light. Some of it caught in the gold of his eyes and my stomach flipped. I thought I could stare at those eyes all day, become lost in their beauty.

Incredible. And to think, they’re only a sort of decoration now.

“Not much in the way of manners, eh?” Noah said, jerking me from my thoughts.

“I’m sorry...?”

“Staring at the poor blind guy is bad manners,” he said slowly, as if speaking to a dense child.

“I wasn’t staring.” I shifted on the leather couch. “Well, maybe a little. You’re not what I expected. And besides...”

“Besides what?”

“Nothing,” I said, cursing my loose tongue.

“Besides *what*?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “If you insist, I was going to say you don’t have much room to complain about bad manners.” I tensed, ready to be evicted from the interview before it had even begun.

Instead, Noah shrugged. “No argument there. And you said I’m not what you expected. What did you expect?” His sneer returned. “Sunglasses and a cane?”

“I’ve been working at Annabelle’s since before you began ordering from there. I thought you were older.”

And less visually stunning.

“I’m older than you, aren’t I?” he asked. “You sound young. Twenty?”

“Twenty-three in October.”

“Have you ever been an assistant before?”

“No. I’m a mus—”

“Good,” he said, sitting back. “The more experience these so-called professionals have, the more fucking irritating they are. So let’s get to it. I’m going to tell you the requirements of the job. The *actual* job. Not whatever goodwill, compassion-outreach bullshit Lucien’s spiel might have given you. What I’m looking for and what he or my parents want are two different things. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Hello?”

“Oh, I...sorry...”

He sighed irritably. “Here’s a helpful hint: I can’t see nodding. Or head shakes. Or shrugs. Or middle fingers. Or interpretive dances. When I ask you a question, you need to actually speak.”

“Okay, sorry,” I said and heaved a breath.

Don’t let him rattle you. Think of the private living space. The peace and quiet...

“And don’t say sorry,” Noah snapped. “Christ, if there’s anything I hate more than nodding, it’s apologies.”

“I got it, but you’re making me nervous as hell.”

“Am I? And I’m having one of my good days.”

This was a good day?

Maybe Lucien was right. Maybe I’m in over my head.

I shrugged out of my light jacket before I started sweating. “I’d like a glass of water. May I?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Thanks. Would you like some?”

I wasn’t trying to score points with the offer. Contrary to what Noah might’ve thought about my manners, my parents had raised their children to be polite. But the question seemed to throw him slightly. His intense hazel gaze sought me and missed; he locked on to a space just to my right. So close. I had only to lean a little and our eyes would have met.

“Uh, no,” he said. “No.”

I started to nod and caught myself. “Okay. I’ll just...”

I rose and went to the kitchen. I found a glass in the rich dark wood cabinets to the left of the sink and took my chances with NYC tap water. I wasn’t about to go rummaging in the fridge for bottled or filtered. All the while, I felt Noah’s keen attention on me just as strongly as if he’d been

staring with working eyes.

I took a long pull, mentally fortifying myself.

He's rude but he's in pain. Remember that.

I also decided that if he crossed the line, I would walk.

But with free rent and a livable salary, would I know the line when I saw it?

I resumed my seat on the couch and put my glass on a coaster that had the Eiffel Tower on it.

“Better?” The cutting tone to Noah’s voice was back. “Can we start now?”

I found my head nodding again and said quickly, “Yeah. Yes. I’m ready.”

“All right, I’ll make this quick. Being my assistant means keeping the hell out of my way and making sure that everyone and everything else does too. You’re here to clean up after me, ensure I have what I need to survive, and that’s it. Do the dishes, take out the trash. You’ll mop the floors, and if you’re not a sadist, you’ll warn me ahead of time they’re still wet. You’ll dust and vacuum, do my laundry, fold and put my clothes away, and maybe even iron. I hate wrinkles, and God knows I want to remain presentable to the scores of nobody I’ll be entertaining. Do you cook?”

I blinked at the sudden question. Noah spoke in a sharp, rapid-fire manner, his brain firing on all cylinders. But the last question was an opportunity to score some points toward getting the job. Or so I hoped.

“Yes, I cook,” I said brightly. “Nothing fancy, but my mother taught me all the basics. I make a great baked chicken—”

“Forget it,” Noah snapped. “You’ll do my grocery shopping for shit like cereal and snack food, but no cooking. Not for me, anyway. I have several places I order from, and you’ll make those orders and pick them up.”

“You order out for every meal?”

His eyebrows went up. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Just seems like a lot of money...”

“So kind of you to be concerned, but wealth management is not one of your duties. Neither is questioning what I eat.”

“Okay, okay. Just...don’t you get sick of takeout?”

He cocked his head; the sneer on his lips was back. “It’s very low on my list of things I’m sick of.”

I sat back. “Oh. Right.”

“You’ll buy all my books. Audiobooks, because I’m not learning fucking Braille no matter what the counselors tell me. I listen to a lot of books, so

when I tell you to get something, do it immediately. I don't want to wait. Ever."

"Audiobooks? So I'd just download them to your phone or something?"

"Gee, you catch on quick, don't you?" he asked in a mockingly amused tone. "I'm so lucky to be surrounded by such competence."

I bit back a sharp retort. His rudeness, I realized, wasn't directed at me, but at himself. Noah oozed self-loathing like a vapor, and I decided to show him that I could see beyond the cutting remarks and make a connection.

"What kind of books do you like? I ask because I'm a big reader too. Always have been. Since I was a kid, and I...uh... Anyway."

I fell silent under Noah's withering stare. He couldn't meet my eyes, but damn if he wasn't intimidating anyway.

"I like all kinds of books. May I continue? Or would you like to know my favorite color next?"

So much for making a connection. "Go on," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

"You'll run all my errands, and that will probably consume the bulk of your time—should I decide you can have the job. It will keep you out all over the city. Are you familiar with New York, or are you some yokel fresh off the bus?"

"I'm familiar," I said, my voice growing frosty.

"Good." He leaned over his long legs, his eyes still cast slightly downward. "And lastly—and this is the most important aspect of your job, I can't stress this enough—you are not, under any circumstances, to talk to me, touch me, or help me unless I specifically ask you to."

My hands fell into my lap. "Wait, I can't *talk* to you?"

"If it pertains to your duties, then by all means. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise, nothing? Ever?"

"Why would you want to?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just common courtesy. Hi, how are you...?"

"Let's get something straight," Noah said. "You and I are not going to be friends. We are employer and employee, and that's it. If Lucien has filled your head with notions about drawing me out of my shell or showing me a silver lining, forget it. *You do not exist until I require you to.* This isn't going to be like the story where the snotty little girl visits the sick cripple and gets him walking outside again."

I sat back, sort of shocked. *Did he just reference The Secret Garden?* He

wasn't kidding that he read a lot. It sounded like that's all he ever did.

"You also might be thinking that so many other people have dealt with their adversity better than I am," Noah went on, his voice dripping with contempt. "You might want to give me that tired song and dance that blindness, for many, isn't even a handicap but just 'a part of who they are' or some equally nauseating crap. Forget it. I've heard it all a thousand times. I'm not heroic or stoic, and I couldn't give two warm, steaming shits what people think of me. I had a life and it was obliterated and I'm fucking pissed off. But guess what? *That's none of your business.*"

I thought of what I'd seen on Google and felt a blush creep up my neck. Lucien had made it my business, and now that felt wrong. I'd bet a million dollars Noah had no idea the graphic hospital photos existed. I put myself in his shoes and felt the vulnerability, the complete lack of control, the loss.

I'd probably be just as angry.

"Still here?"

"Yes," I said pointedly. "I'm still here."

The hard edges of his expression softened ever so slightly at the quiet determination in my voice...but only for an instant. Then the wall came down again. "Huh. You must be desperate for the job."

"That's none of *your* business," I said. "But I'm willing to do it and do it well. So what else? I can't talk to you—no, better than that—I *don't exist* until you need me to. What else?"

If Noah was put off by my inability to filter myself, he didn't show it. Maybe he even preferred it. It was the only reason I could think for why he didn't kick me out.

Kick me out? He's lucky I don't walk.

"Yes, what else?" Noah mused. "You don't come running when I bark my shin or stub my toe. You *do not help me*. Is that clear?"

"What if you get really hurt?"

"When the smell of my rotting corpse alerts you to my predicament, you're permitted to call the authorities."

I rolled my eyes. "And what if you fall and hit your head? What if you're unconscious?"

"In that case..." His sharp retort tapered away, and the sneer fell from his lips. He stared at the table—or nothing, I guess, since he couldn't see the table. "In that case, let me sleep."

I sat back, my stiff shoulders wilting a bit. He'd been so sharp and cutting,

and then, just like that, the pain flooded in, like a hole in a dam.

“I can’t do *nothing*. I won’t...”

His head snapped up as if waking from a reverie. “What? No, of course you won’t, God forbid. But save your concern.” The sneer that ruined his handsomeness returned with a vengeance. “I believe—but don’t quote me on this—that I’ve already taken the worst fall I’m ever going to take, so all you need to concentrate on is keeping the hell out of my way. Can you do that?”

I nodded, caught myself. “I can do that.”

“Good.” He suddenly looked so tired. Exhausted. But he mustered some fake enthusiasm and clapped his hands once. “Congratulations. You’re hired. You start Monday at eight a.m.” A thought occurred to him. “You probably don’t live uptown. How far away are you? Because if you live out in some borough and I have to listen to excuses as to why you’re late every day, we can just spare each other the hassle right now—”

“I live in Greenwich Village.”

“Then you’ll have no reason to be late. Ever.”

“Right, but...um...”

“But what? This interview is over. You’re free to get the hell out. I’ve got a jigsaw puzzle to finish and some skeet shooting later, so if you don’t mind...” He cocked his head at my silence. “Not a fan of poor blind guy humor? I’ll work on it.”

Noah remained in the chair, even though I could see he was itching to leave it. I had the feeling he didn’t want me to watch him feel his way out of the room, that he didn’t want to acknowledge his blindness in any way.

“Well?” he snapped. “What?”

“Um, I think we should call Lucien.”

“Why? I’m done. You can hash out the details and paperwork with him later. Right now, you need to get the hell out of my house before I change my mind about hiring you.”

“Just...call him,” I said. “Or I can.”

Noah, wearing that ugly sneer, waved me off and dug his phone out of the pocket of his pants. “Call Lucien.”

I said nothing, my hands twisting in my lap, waiting. Whatever thrill I had at being hired—and it wasn’t a whole lot at that particular moment—was tempered further by the fact that Noah was about ten seconds away from losing his shit.

“Lucien,” he spat when the call went through. “I’ve concluded my

interview with what's-her-name, but she won't fucking leave until I talk to you. Any idea why?"

I watched as Noah's eyes widened at whatever Lucien was saying, a snarl of rage twisting his handsome features. "I believe I've made myself very clear on that subject, *numerous* times." A pause. "No. Plain English not good enough? Je vis seule et c'est final. Vous m'entendez? Final, goddammit!" He jabbed the phone and dropped it in his lap, his gaze downward. "Get out."

"Um, did Lucien—?"

"*Get out!*"

I flinched and got to my feet just as a text from Lucien came in on my phone.

I'm on my way.

I wasn't about to sit and wait for him. I hurried down the stairs, leaving Noah to seethe alone, and met Lucien outside just as he was coming in. His face was drawn with concern.

"Charlotte, I can only hope he hasn't done or said anything unforgivable..."

"No, but he's pissed. We should have told him about me living here."

"I will handle him. Does this mean that he hired you?"

I gave a snort. "Yeah, but I can't say I'm super excited. I mean, he treated me like a bug beneath his shoe, but at least he didn't actively *hate* me. He's going to hate me, Lucien, and fire me before I even start."

"Impossible." The kindly old gentleman patted my cheek. "Wait here. Please. Ten minutes."

I nodded and sat on the stoop, hugging myself despite the warmth of the afternoon. I sat there for almost exactly ten minutes, waiting. At one point, I thought I heard shouting coming from inside, but with the street noise, it was hard to tell.

Finally, Lucien emerged. His face was drawn tight like a drum, but he smiled brightly at me as he came down the steps.

"Very good, ma chère. I will have the first floor cleaned out so that you may move in this weekend and begin work Monday. Unless you need to give more notice to either your landlord or employer?"

"No, it's fine on both counts," I said, a thrill blooming in my chest, despite the terrible way the interview with Noah had ended. It was really happening. My crappy living situation, my crappy jobs, my struggle just to keep my head above water—all of it over. At least for a little while.

“But wait, what happened?” I asked as we walked back down the street. “Noah’s suddenly okay with me living there?”

Lucien’s smile was tense. “Not quite yet, but I’m sure he’ll come around.”

I bit my lip. “I’m giving up a lot to do this. I mean, it’s stuff I’m happy to give up, but once I do, there’s no going back.”

“Nor will you have to. Noah’s parents have given him an ultimatum which I have just passed on to him: allow a live-in assistant or lose the use of the townhouse.”

I snorted. “So it’s blackmail. No wonder he’s pissed.”

Lucien’s smile slipped. “It’s for his own good. You are here, my dear, for his own good.”

“But the whole interview was for nothing.”

Lucien stopped and regarded me gravely. “Until or unless Noah learns to live as a blind man and not as a man who *used* to be sighted, he will always need an assistant. His parents know this, I know this, and Noah knows this.” He smiled at me and patted my hand. “And I, for one, am thrilled that now that person is you.”

I forced a wan smile, and we kept walking. *That makes one of us.*



I mulled everything over on the subway back to Greenwich, and all my apprehensions faded under the anticipation of telling Emily I was moving out. No more late-night parties, no more waits for the bathroom, no more carnal alarm clocks. I’d be free of all that and have plenty of time and money to try to find my music again.

My music.

My violin.

My violin was at Noah’s house.

I had never been without my violin, ever. It was a Samuel Eastman, not some cheap toy. My parents had worked hard to save up for that violin four years ago, as a going-to-college present. Irrational panic gripped me.

Noah can’t see it. What if he trips over the case and gets mad? He’s already pissed off. What if he SO pissed off he throws it out the window? Or decides to mess around with it and breaks a string?

The chances of Noah doing any of those things were probably slim, but I couldn’t leave my violin there. I had to go back.

“Crap,” I muttered.

The lady sitting next to me nodded. “Mmmhmm. I hear that, honey.”

chapter eight



I buzzed the bell at the townhouse, still trying to catch my breath from my subway run. I waited for Noah to answer. And waited. And waited.

I buzzed again and then a third time. My finger was poised for a fourth when the intercom came on.

“*What?*” Noah snapped, anger still ripe in his voice.

I flinched, reluctant for a second dose of Noah’s particular brand of charm, but my violin was in there. I hardly touched it anymore, but even the thought of being without it made me queasy.

“It’s me. Charlotte. I left my violin in your living room.”

“Your *what?*” And before I could answer, “Why the fuck did you bring a violin?”

“Lucien asked me to.”

“He must be getting senile.”

I bristled instantly, surprised how fast Lucien had become important to me. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Can’t it wait?”

I scrunched up my face. *Is this guy for real?* “I’ll be two seconds, in and out.”

Another pause. The door buzzed open.

I went in and jogged up the staircase, intending to get my violin and get out—maybe steal a peek at my soon-to-be living quarters. I also expected Noah would be upstairs, not wanting anything more to do with me. Instead, I found him in the living room, sitting on the last three stairs that led up to the third floor, his hands dangling off his knees. His gaze was cast downward and didn’t move when I came up.

“Um, hi,” I said.

I figured I could stare all I wanted while I waited for a reply, and stare I did.

My God. He's like a work of art. A rude, surly, bad-tempered work of art.

Eventually, I realized Noah couldn't be bothered to reply. I spotted my instrument on the floor by the couch and blue nylon rain jacket on the arm. I scowled. Noah had barked at me to get out and I'd scurried away like a scolded puppy, forgetting everything.

I'm not going to let him get to me again, I declared and then nearly jumped out of my skin when Noah spoke.

"Quite the plan you all concocted."

"I didn't know anything about—"

"Don't embarrass yourself with excuses," he snarled. "And I thank you and Lucien for the nice fat dose of condescension. For wasting my time with an interview, the outcome of which was a foregone conclusion."

"Funny, I could say the same about you."

He blinked and his eyes sought me, widening with surprise. "And just how the hell do you figure that?"

"You weren't really interviewing me. You didn't even ask me any questions, or about my qualifications, or references. Hell, I have my doubts that you even know my *name*. You just rattled off your list of duties, end of story."

"Your point?"

I shrugged into my jacket and crossed my arms. "My point is, I don't think it mattered at all who sat in front of you. It was the same 'interview' you've done half a dozen times, probably intending that the person quit a few weeks later."

He smirked. "So far I'm six for six."

"You're six for seven. You may not care what kind of trouble you put Lucien through each time he has to go and find another assistant, but I do. I care about him and so it's for him I'm going to do the best job I can."

"Right," he snorted. "And the salary and free rent have nothing to do with it."

"No, you're right. They had quite a lot to do with it. I was sort of... running on empty until this opportunity came around." I firmed my voice. "I have a lot at stake here, so you can snipe and snarl at me all you want, but I'm not going anywhere. Fair warning."

There was a silence, and I thought I'd probably crossed the line. Or that

he'd laugh at me. He could wait a week and fire me, telling Lucien that I just didn't work out. Feeling foolish, I waited until he spoke, waited for the derision and sneering.

Instead, Noah cocked his head, his brow furrowed. "Are you always this honest?"

"Um, well, yes. I don't *intend* to be rude to you or anything..." I shuffled my feet. "I don't get that you feel the same."

"Honesty is better than pretending everything is rainbows and sunshine and infinitely better than pity."

"Is that why you're so rude to people? To avoid pity?"

"It works."

"Not with everyone." I softened my voice. "I...I know about your accident. Lucien told me and I—"

Noah put up a hand as if to ward off my words. I could hear his voice strain for the sarcastic tone of earlier, but he just sounded weary and deeply grief-stricken. "I can't think of one single reason why we need to discuss the accident, can you?"

I shook my head. "No, I guess not."

"Your quarters are on the first floor," Noah said dully. "Mine, the third. Unless you're carrying out your duties, stay out. The second floor is yours too, if you want it. I'm hardly ever down here, but that doesn't mean you get to bring your friends over for a party every other day. Or *ever*. It's still my fucking house."

"Uh, okay, no problem," I said and then watched, shocked, as Noah carefully stood up.

Oh my God...

I knew he was tall, but I didn't expect six foot four, maybe even five. I was barely five-three.

If we were slow dancing—with me in heels—I might come up to his chin.

Dancing with Noah? Where on earth did that come from? I shut my gaping mouth and watched as he walked slowly into the living room. He kept his hands to his sides, straining to appear casual, until his hip found the back of the chair he'd been sitting in earlier. He maneuvered around it and sat.

My heart ached for him a little bit then—not for his blindness, but because he was trying so hard to appear as if it didn't exist.

"My Spidey senses are tingling," he said. "You're staring at me, aren't you?"

“Yes. You’re a lot taller than I had thought.”

He mustered some of his usual derision. “I’m taller than you thought, younger than you thought, and yet *somehow* you remain a complete mystery to me. So, let’s unravel. What do you look like?”

I froze. “Pardon?”

“Is it a difficult question? And sit down, if you don’t mind.” He tapped the corner of his eye. “I have piss-poor aim as it is. The least you could do is give me a fighting chance.”

I sank back onto the couch. *Interview, round two.* My pulse quickened a bit, as this conversation, I could tell, was going to be a whole lot different than the first.

“You want to know what I look like?”

“Is it an unfair request, all things considered?”

“I guess not.”

He recoiled at the softness in my voice. “If it’s too much for you to process all at once, I’ll break it down. Hair color?”

“Uh, brown.”

“Brown.” Noah scrubbed his face. “Jesus, and I’m the blind one. Dark? Light? What does it look like in the sun? Reddish tints or gold? Or is it just plain old drab dishwater brown?”

“It has some light blond in it. Especially in the sun.”

“Chestnut then. Progress. Is it long? Short?”

“Shoulder-length. I wear it up though most days since it’s really thick and can get out of hand.”

“Fascinating. Eyes?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Blue.”

“Just blue?”

“They’re *just blue* if you’re going to be that rude.”

He sighed and carved his hand through his own dark hair. “I remember colors, okay? Lots of them. All combinations, shades, and tints. When you say ‘blue,’ I don’t know what that means.”

“Blue with a little bit of gray.”

“Hallelujah. Skin?”

“Yes, I have skin,” I said and laughed shortly. He made a face. “It was a funny question.”

The corner of his mouth twitched but he said nothing.

“I have pale skin with a few freckles. I can tan if given the time, which I

don't have. Not to mention, New York's not really known for its white sand beaches."

"No. It's not."

His face took on a faraway expression, and I guessed he was remembering real white sand beaches he'd visited in his "other life." I made a mental note to at least *try* to watch what I said. But then he opened his mouth again, and any sympathy I had flew out the window.

"Height, weight, build? You sound short. Are you short?"

"Am I...?" I crossed my arms again. "My *build* is irrelevant, and it's inappropriate to even ask."

Noah barked a harsh laugh. "Oh, Christ, don't flatter yourself. My dick seems to have been broken along with my skull, so if you're afraid I'm going to come on to you in any way, don't be."

I squared my shoulders. "I'm five-three, and that's all you need to concern yourself with. And don't talk to me about your dick—broken or not. I'm your employee now and that's sexual harassment."

I was shocked to see him look the littlest bit contrite.

"Whatever you say."

There was a silence then, and he seemed to be waiting for something. I had a feeling that, despite the scowl seemingly carved onto his face, he sort of enjoyed our conversation.

Well, I'm not scarred for life just talking to him, I thought. May as well start earning my salary now.

"So. You read *The Secret Garden*?"

"What?"

"Earlier you talked about the girl visiting the sick little kid. That's *The Secret Garden*, right?"

He shrugged. "I read it a long time ago."

"Have you always liked to read?"

"Yes. Does that surprise you?"

"A little."

"Why? Because I was a dumb jock who liked to throw himself off mountains?"

"Maybe," I admitted. I also had to admit—to myself—that Noah's handsomeness had prejudiced me too. I never expected a man this good-looking to be into books, let alone classic literature. Shame burned my cheeks.

Noah shrugged. “You can’t write for shit unless you read a lot, and I used to write the articles that went with my photos. For the magazine I worked for.” A grimace of pain flashed over his face. “Fucking hell, never mind. We’re done. You can go and don’t forget your damn violin this time.”

“I won’t.” A strange twinge of disappointment nipped at me as I gathered up my case and jacket and got to my feet.

“Why did Lucien want you to bring it, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he thought you’d want to listen to me play. He said you probably won’t hear me from downstairs, but I’ll be practicing every day...”

“*Probably* won’t hear you?” Noah snapped. “I can hear *everything*. You’ll be practicing every day? Are you good? Or am I going to be treated to the sounds of cat torture and nails on a chalkboard?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve been playing since I was five years old and graduated Juilliard last year. At the very least, I don’t suck.”

“What are you practicing for? An audition for some big orchestra? Sort of defeats the purpose of working here, doesn’t it?”

“No, no, there’s no audition. I have to practice to keep my skills sharp.”

Noah narrowed his eyes that were staring just to my left. “Okay, go.”

I blinked. “Go?”

“Play something.”

“Oh. I don’t play much in front of people.”

He cocked his head. “You blew \$40K a year on a school that teaches you how to play in front of people and you don’t play in front of people?”

“I do, sometimes.”

“Now is sometime. Let’s hear it.”

“Really?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“Sounded more like a demand, but okay.” I sat back down. “Any requests?”

“Surprise me.”

I opened the case, took out my violin, and set my chin to the rest. A hundred different pieces floated around in my head. I set the bow to the strings, thinking I’d try Paganini’s 24th Caprice. It was insanely hard, and while I wasn’t a show-off by nature, I sort of wanted to see the smug, dubious expression slide off Noah’s face.

Instead, out of nowhere, the adagio to Mozart’s Concerto No. 5 came

pouring out of my violin.

I played, the notes swirling and filling the living area, like honey infused with fire. I was merely a vessel, watching my fingers vibrate and the bow glide up and down the strings. This sort of sublime experience hadn't happened to me since the audition for Spring Strings. I thought it was lost forever but here, now...

Before the melody could change to a faster, fiery tempo, I ended off, letting the last note hang gently in the air before I let it go. My heart raced and I stared at the bow, surprised it was *my* hand that held it.

I looked at Noah. He was sitting back, stunned.

"Why did you stop?" he asked, only a shadow of his ever-present bitterness lingering in his voice.

I stammered for a moment, unable to answer, and then returned my instrument back to its case. "I'm going now. I have to go."

"Charlotte?"

I spun around. "What?"

"You should play for people more often."

I had nothing to say to that either. I felt strangely exposed, betrayed by the music that just poured out of me for the first time in almost a year. I zipped up my jacket.

Noah turned his head toward the windows that overlooked the street. "Is it raining out? I don't hear rain."

"Uh, no. It's not."

"Then why are you wearing a rain jacket?"

I glanced down at my sleeve. "How did you know?"

Noah's expression soured again, and his voice hardened. "I can hear the whisper of nylon. Never mind. Go."

Whisper of nylon? *Who is this guy?* "Okay. I'll see you Monday." I winced. "I mean, I'll *come back* Monday. Eight a.m. sharp."

I was nearly at the stairs that led down when Noah said, "See you then, Charlotte."

chapter nine



The rest of the week flew past, and on Saturday, I enlisted Anthony, Melanie, and Samneric to help me move. Between the five of us, we had my meager belongings moved into the first floor of the townhome before lunch. Out of respect for Noah, I kept everyone to the first floor and curtailed all talk about him until we were done and grabbing pizza at a local joint after.

“It’s so weird that he’s not a crazy old man,” Anthony said. “I thought there was a minimum age limit on shut-ins—sixty-five or older.”

“He’s not a shut-in. Not really. He’s just trying to cope with his blindness. The accident was so terrible, and he lost so much...”

“I hope you’re careful,” Melanie cut in. “You hardly know this guy, and you’re going to live in his house?”

“He’s safe,” I said, “and I have a lock on my bedroom door. I’ll use it.” That was mostly for her, as I knew I would never need it. Noah was a rude jerk, but he wasn’t dangerous. I couldn’t explain how I knew that so I didn’t bother to try.

My friends and I talked about my new duties and how Annabelle’s and Lucky 7’s were going to get along without me. Turns out the answer was just fine on both counts. Harris was given two more of my shifts, Clara the third. At Lucky 7’s, Samneric told me that Janson had hired a “smokin’ hot blonde” who was basically their dream come true.

“We love you, Char,” Sam said, “but this chick...” He whistled low through his teeth.

“Tending bar was never your thing anyway,” Eric said a bit more diplomatically. “You always looked like you had something else on the burner. Win-win for everyone, right?”

I hoped he was right. Working for Noah could turn out to be just the thing

I needed or a complete nightmare. I smiled thinly. "I'll let you know."

Anthony walked me back to the townhouse. "You'll call me if things get weird, right?"

I hugged him and was enveloped in his long-armed embrace. "I'll be fine."

"Annabelle's is going to suck without you," he said, a grin splitting his face. "Scratch that: it always sucks. Now it'll suck more. Promise you'll visit?"

"Are you kidding? Given how often Noah orders from there, it'll be like I never left."

"I can live with that."

I hugged him and watched him stride away, a tiny twinge in my heart. I met Anthony when I was still shell-shocked from the double-whammy of Chris and Keith. Not for the first time, I wished I'd met him before Keith. Or *instead* of Keith. But people occupy certain places in one's heart, and to try to cram them in somewhere else only causes misery in the long run. Anthony and I were friends and that's all we'd ever be.



When I was finally alone in my new space, I smiled so long, my cheeks began to hurt. My bedroom here was the size of the living room in my old apartment, with plenty of room for my desk, dresser, and two side tables I'd picked up at a sidewalk sale. I had a bathroom across the hall with a bathtub and shower and a living area that looked out onto a cute little backyard. The yard was a fenced-in patch of grass with a small patio and nothing more, but who cared? It was green space in the city, and if I needed more, Central Park was a mere fifteen-minute walk eastward. If I wanted a water view, the Hudson was right there, five minutes to the west.

I'll bet Noah has a spectacular view of the river from his bedroom, I thought and then remembered with a small pang that Noah didn't have any kind of view at all.

I flopped on my bed and called Montana. My mom picked up on the second ring.

"Charlotte? Is everything okay?"

That was her new greeting since Chris was thrown. She said it with forced cheer, but I guess once you've lost one of your two children, you can't really help but obsess a little over the remainder.

“I’m good, Mom. Pretty great, actually.”

I told her about my new job and living arrangements. She made a lot of noises that made it sound like she was listening, but I know she wasn’t truly there. They had her on all kinds of medicines. I was lucky I’d reached her at a more lucid moment. “How’s Dad?”

“What? Oh, fine. At work. Honey, it all sounds great but what about your music? Have you given any more thought to an audition?”

“Not yet, Mom. I’m just looking forward to some peace and quiet. And maybe a little extra money. Speaking of which, I can send you some...”

I hated to offer as much as I had hated to ask. We weren’t poor but not exactly flush, either, and since my mom had had to quit her job two months ago, I figured things were tight back home.

But she declined, and I could practically see her waving my offer away with her hand. “Oh gosh no, dear. You work hard but rest when you can. Will you be home soon?”

Just the thought made my skin break out in shivers of dread. To see Chris’s headstone and know he was somewhere else instead of with us, smiling and making stupid jokes and being one of the best people I had ever known...

I bit my lip. “If you need me there, Mom, I’ll come.”

“No, I think it’s better if we don’t make a fuss, don’t you?”

I felt tears sting my eyes. She sounded like a little old lady. My mother had aged ten years over the course of one. “Whatever you want.”

“Yes, you just enjoy your new job and new apartment, and call again soon, okay?”

“Okay. I love you, Mom. Love to Dad.”

“I love you, Charlotte. More than the earth and sea and the big sky above.”

The tears were rolling now. It was something she used to say to Chris and me when we were little. “Me too, Mom.”

I waited until she hung up because I couldn’t do it first. Not ever again. She got to choose when and how we ended a conversation, so she wouldn’t have to listen to silence where my voice used to be.

It wasn’t much, but it was one small thing I could give her, anyway.



On Sunday, Lucien gave me a tour of the upper floors of the townhouse. I

followed him up the stairs that opened on a hallway that ran perpendicular to the stairs.

“Down the hall to your right is a small guest bathroom and beyond that, a guest bedroom. You won’t be required to do more than dust a bit and air it out, as they are largely unused.”

To our left, the hall was longer. Lucien opened a door to an office-looking space on the left side that had gym equipment strewn about and a treadmill under a window. The view wasn’t much—the neighboring building’s wall—but natural light from the glorious spring day spilled in.

“Mind you don’t move things around, his barbells and such,” Lucien said, smiling at me. “A good rule, in general, to not move things without his knowledge.”

“Of course.”

On the right, a small laundry room with state-of-the-art appliances.

“Only buy unscented detergent and never fabric softener,” Lucien said. “The perfumes are overpowering to Noah. And be spare with your own perfume if you wear it. Do not burn incense or light scented candles, if you please, but do make use of these machines for your own clothing. We don’t expect you to use a laundromat when we have these here.”

I clutched his arm in mock shock. “No more scrounging up quarters and dragging bags of clothes on the bus? Lucien, you’re a saint.”

“Yes, well, the easier we can make it for you, the better.”

I knew he meant “the longer you’ll stay.” I had signed a year’s lease for my rooms in the townhouse, but I knew Lucien would break it if I were truly miserable.

Straight ahead was what I presumed was the master bedroom. Noah’s room. The door was slightly ajar, and I could tell by the crack of dimness that the curtains inside were closed.

Lucien knocked and then opened the door. “Noah? I’ve brought Charlotte.”

The room was huge, elegantly furnished, its centerpiece a modern king-sized four-poster bed, covered in a beige duvet. There was no canopy, but four posts attached to beams that made a cube-shaped frame. From one post, a long white drape was artfully hung and tucked around an upper corner.

Across from the bed, a flat-screen TV hung on the wall, gathering dust. Flanking the TV, two walk-in closets. His and hers, I presumed, from when Noah’s parents resided here. At the end of the room was a sitting area with a

table and two plush, French-looking chairs set before a large window. I imagined this room must have a spectacular view, but heavy black drapes were hung across the window and closed tight. Compared to the rest of the room, that was crisp and beige and modern, the drapes formed a black backdrop, shutting the world out completely.

Noah sat in one of the chairs in front of those drapes, his back to us, shoulders hunched, earbuds in his ears.

Lucien smiled, his voice tinged with sadness. “He’s reading. Again.” Louder, he called, “Noah, *allô!*”

Noah didn’t turn but waved his hand dismissively, acknowledging our presence and nothing more.

“His book must be engrossing, else I’m sure he would have set it aside to greet you properly,” Lucien said, his smile turning dry.

I returned his smile with a wry one of my own. “Oh, I’m sure.”

As Lucien led me toward the walk-in closet on the left side of the TV, I stole a quick glance at Noah. He wore a black T-shirt and gray athletic pants, and I couldn’t help but admire his long legs and the cut of muscle on his arm visible from under his short sleeves. I only wished he weren’t sitting so slumped over, his elbow on the desk, one hand over his eyes, as if he were in deep concentration.

I hated to even think the word “tortured”—it sounded so melodramatic—but that was the impression he gave. His body was meant for swimming in oceans and racing down ski slopes, not sitting hunched in darkened rooms.

“This is quite the disaster.”

I tore my gaze away from Noah and joined Lucien in the walk-in. I had to agree with his assessment. Clothes spilled out of the dressers and were hanging half-on their hangers, if they were hung at all.

“Nearly all is in need of being laundered,” Lucien said. “Perhaps we can make Monday the laundry day?”

I nodded. The walk-in was a mess but somewhat intoxicating. The air hung heavy with the scents of expensive clothing and cologne, overpowering anything else. Fine suits, pants, and dress shirts lined both sides of the walk-in but looked unused.

I followed Lucien to the bathroom that was on the opposite side of the room from the windows. It was a huge, cavernous space, and the most beautiful—and unique—I had ever seen. Done in modern, vibrant colors: the pebbled tiles in the enormous shower and around the huge soaker tub were a

gorgeous blue-green color, while the double sinks were swathed in yellow marble. But for the mess of towels lying in piles on the floor and remnants of messy tooth brushing in the sink, it looked like something out of a home and garden magazine.

“Wow, Lucien. I’ve never seen yellow marble.”

“Mrs. Lake was forever redoing the house to suit her fancies.” His cell phone rang, and he held up one finger. “A moment, please.”

Lucien left to take his call...and kept going, all the way to the second floor. I made a face at the messy bathroom, not terribly eager to clean it, and then Noah spoke. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“I hired a cleaning service,” he said from the desk by the curtained windows. “You’re laundry, food, and errands only.”

“Oh, I thought I’d be cleaning too,” I said, coming into the bedroom. “I just assumed...”

“You assumed wrong.”

“Okay...but, why?”

“You’d prefer to clean toilets?”

“Um, not exactly.”

Noah sniffed and shrugged, as if that answered my question. He had turned slightly so that his handsome face was in profile, his gaze on the wall in front of him, one earbud in, one out. I began to understand how many social cues we take from people’s eyes; their facial expressions, when and how they look at you. Noah couldn’t look at me, so I found myself wondering what to do next.

“What are you listening to?” I asked lightly. “Good book?”

“Good enough.” The earbud went back in, and he turned his back to me.

Noah, on the other hand, had his own brand of social cues.

Downstairs, Lucien finished his call, and I told him what Noah had said about hiring a cleaning service. “I thought cleaning was part of my job duties.”

Lucien’s smile came back, brightening his entire face. “That was Noah’s idea, ma chère, and I’m quite astounded by it. Never mind the fact he seems to have adjusted to the idea of you living here with lightning speed.” He rocked back on his heels, pleased. “If that’s not progress, I don’t know what is.”

I frowned. “But why hire and pay another person? Why not just let me do it?”

Lucien raised his feathery white brows and shrugged coyly. “Je ne sais pas. He insisted upon it. Most astonishing, given that while the Lakes are paying your salary, the cleaning service is coming out of Noah’s own pocket.”

I scrunched up my face. “How? He doesn’t even have a job.”

Lucien lowered his voice. “During his tenure with *Planet X*, much of Noah’s expenses were paid by the magazine. As a consequence, he saved the bulk of his pay, hardly spending a dime.”

“Oh. That’s smart.”

Lucien rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “No, now, I’m mistaken. He did have one indulgence: an old car. A 1968 Chevy Camaro. Black with white detailing, if I recall. You Americans would call it a ‘muscle car’ or ‘hot rod.’ He had it restored to its former glory and would race it now and then, giving his mother a fresh dose of worry every time. But Noah always loved to move fast and that car, I’m told, was the love of his life.”

“Where is it now?”

“Stowed in a garage in Florida. I have broached him on the subject of selling it. Once.” He raised a brow meaningfully. “*Once.*”

I could only imagine how that went over, but I could understand why Noah held on to it. As a keepsake of his former days where speed and danger were his norm. And to think, it was now holed up in a dark garage somewhere, never to be driven again.

“And now, my dear, we come to the most important of duties.”

Lucien pressed a slip of paper into my hand. It was a prescription order, signed by several doctors and listing my name at the bottom as “authorized to refill.” There were several antidepressants listed and a drug called Azapram. I’d never heard of it.

“This is the refill order for Noah’s medications. He won’t take any of the antidepressants, so you don’t have to bother with those unless he asks, but the last, Azapram, is for his migraines. He is only permitted twelve tablets at a time, as this drug is extremely powerful—and likely addictive—but it must be refilled before he runs out.” Lucien pressed the paper into my hand. “I cannot stress this enough. Noah must *never* run out of these pills. If he were to do so and then suffer one of his migraines, I shudder to think what would happen.”

I shivered. “They’re really bad, these migraines?”

“They are abominable.” Lucien’s blue eyes clouded with sadness. “I

remember, in the days before they created this drug, his suffering. Only morphine could stop the pain that wracked my poor boy.”

I felt my throat go dry. “Does he get them frequently?”

“They seem to make an appearance once every month or so. But so long as he takes the Azapram immediately, his suffering is minimal.”

I nodded solemnly and took the paper. “I’ll stay up on it. I promise.”

Lucien made to leave, and at the front door, he took my hand in his and patted it gently.

“I’m so pleased that you are here. I live in the city but am frequently away on business, always fearing what may happen to him in my absence. For the first time, Noah will have constant support. Given time, he can’t help but warm to you and then perhaps...” His blue eyes shone as his words trailed. “I can’t help but feel a sense of hope for my Noah. Thank you, Charlotte, for being here.”

I know Lucien didn’t mean to, but I felt the weight of the pressure put on me by his hopeful smile and heartfelt words. I wanted to tell him that I “didn’t exist” for Noah until he needed me to and that the idea of him warming to me seemed as far-fetched as unicorns suddenly prancing through the townhouse.

But Lucien was looking at me with such kindness.

I plastered on a smile. “I’m sure we’ll get along great.”

chapter ten



My first day on the job I woke up to an alarm clock, not to roommates having sex on the other side of paper-thin walls. The shower—*my* shower—was unoccupied, and when I made coffee in the kitchen upstairs, I had time to myself to savor it in peace. I sat and listened to the street noises outside, thinking the whole of New York City was open to me in a way it hadn't been before. I wasn't rolling in dough, by any stretch, but for the first time in a long time I could grab drinks with friends or see a movie without stressing over the dent those small expenses would put in my bank account.

I glanced down at my clothes: jeans and an old T-shirt. Not much in the way of style, but then I'd spent most of my days in a work uniform. I didn't know what my style was. Now that I had a bit of discretionary spending, I thought I'd find out. But first, I had a job to do, and I meant to do it well.

Lucien had told me that since his rehab in White Plains, Noah's sleep patterns were irregular. I sipped my coffee and listened for movement upstairs that would tell me it was okay to go up and gather the laundry. Silence. No creaking floorboards or anything else. Noah's breakfast was at nine o'clock. I figured I'd wait until I made that delivery to start on his clothes.

I made a simple breakfast for myself—eggs and bacon—then went out to retrieve Noah's order. Every other Monday, it came from a little café on 75th. Just a Danish and a latte. I made the walk under brilliant spring sunshine, a bounce in my step and a smile on my face that I wasn't rushing around, waiting tables and praying for good tips.

I returned to the house with the breakfast and went up to the third floor. The door was ajar, but the room beyond was dark. I peeked my head in. Noah was sitting where he'd been the day before—at the table and chairs near the

window—in exactly the same position: hunched at his desk, earbuds in. Thick, heavy curtains were drawn shut, keeping the room dim.

The scene was so identical to yesterday, I almost wondered if Noah had moved at all. But his clothing was different: black pants instead of gray and a white T-shirt.

Is this his entire life now? Just reading. Not even reading, listening to someone else read.

“Noah?” I called from the door. “Breakfast.”

He waved a hand without turning and I brought him the pastry and coffee. He didn’t look up when I approached, but then he couldn’t look—would never *look* at me. I set the coffee and little white bag on the table.

“On your right,” I said in a slightly louder than normal voice.

“Fine, thanks,” he muttered, his head down, eyes closed.

“I’m going to start laundry, if that works for you.”

He pulled out an earbud and cocked his head toward me, his gaze landing on my chin. This, I would soon learn, was his way of making eye contact.

“Are you going to check with me before you carry out all of your duties?” he asked. “Or can you manage to...you know...just *do them*?”

I crossed my arms, trying my best not to let his sarcasm get to me. “Since I’d be in and out of your room, I wanted to see if it was a good time for you.”

“I’ve got nothing but time,” Noah muttered.

I also figured by now that his non-answers were probably going to be all I could expect, so I set about doing the laundry.

The bedroom as a whole was dim, but the walk-in was pitch black. I stood for a moment, thinking that this was Noah’s world, permanently. He would never be able to find the light switch on the wall and flip it on as I did then.

I’d be pissed too. More than pissed. Devastated.

I gathered up the clothes strewn all over, not knowing precisely what was clean and what was dirty, but I’d rather have chewed tinfoil than ask Noah. *He wouldn’t know anyway*, I realized, and wondered how, aside from texture, he knew what he was putting on when he got dressed.

I washed, dried, and folded his clothes, and when I came back an hour and a half later, Noah was still seated in the chair, the remnants of his breakfast on the table before him.

I went back to the closet but instead of putting the clothes back randomly, I devised a quick system to pair up the scores of athletic pants with T-shirts that matched. Pleased yet hesitant, I returned to his side. He was listening

intently to his book, with his forehead resting on his hand.

“Noah?”

He heaved a sigh. “Now what?”

“I just wanted to let you know that I finished your laundry and I wanted to show you how I arranged your clothes...”

He rounded on me, hazel eyes blazing. “You *rearranged* my clothes?”

“Just...so that your shirts match up with your pants,” I said quickly. “So that you don’t have to wonder if you’re color coordinated.”

He narrowed his eyes, thoughts working behind their seemingly vacant stare. I knew he was acutely self-conscious about looking foolish because of his blindness—he would hardly walk in my presence—and so I wasn’t surprised that he accepted this small change.

He nodded once, curtly. “Fine.”

“Do you want to check it out?”

“I’ll pass.”

It was a dismissive response, but I felt good for having made the effort. And that small sense of triumph was my undoing. I grew bold. Or maybe I was just overly optimistic.

“It’s a beautiful day out. Would you like to go for a walk?”

He went back to his book. “No, I would not.”

I should have just left him alone, but I hesitated. The bedroom was dim, musty, in need of airing out. But mostly the lack of light bothered me. I know it made no difference to Noah—the brilliant sunshine was lost to him—but wouldn’t he enjoy feeling the warm rays on his skin?

“Are you sure? It really is the perfect day for it.”

I found the curtain cord and gave it a pull. The heavy material made a *shrrking* sound and Noah flinched. He swung his head wildly, tearing the earbuds out of his ears.

“What the fuck...?”

It was uncanny how Noah didn’t so much as blink as a brilliant shaft of light fell across his face. He braced himself on the table, his features twisted in rage.

“This is your first day,” he snarled, incredulous. “Day *One*, and already you’re breaking the one fucking rule I asked you to follow.”

I froze, my heart pounding in my throat. I swallowed it down. “I-I’m sorry, I just thought you’d like—”

“*One fucking rule*. Do you remember it?”

“Yes. I—”

“Did I ask you to open the goddamn drapes?”

“No, but—”

“No, I did not. *So why are you opening the drapes?*” He rose to his feet, towered over me, his hazel eyes hard. His gaze swept over me, through me, trying to pin me down.

I held my ground, crossing my arms over my chest and trying to firm up my voice. “I thought you might like to feel the sunshine. It’s so dark in here and—”

He laughed, a bitter, ugly sound. “Is it? Well guess what?” He tapped his temple. “It’s really fucking dark in here, too.”

“Look, I’m just trying to—”

“I know what you’re trying to do. There is a reason I have that rule about not doing things unless I ask. I’m not a fucking idiot. You didn’t open those drapes for me. You did it for you. And you do not get to do things for me in order to make yourself feel better, got it? Pity, I’ve found, comes in many shapes and forms, and I know them all. So nice try, thanks but no thanks, and get the hell out.”

“You do *not* have to be so rude,” I retorted, my voice shaking.

Noah held up his hands. “Hey, this is how I roll, sweetheart. If you don’t like it, you can go. No one is forcing you to be here, least of all me.”

I could have quit. I almost did. Almost.

“Fine,” I snapped. I shut the curtains, plunging the room back into semi-darkness. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” he said sourly. “See that it doesn’t happen again.”

I moved quickly to the door. “Believe me, it won’t.”

Screw him, I thought as I tore down the stairs. *I didn’t do it just for pity. It is a beautiful day, and he shouldn’t shut it out.*

But I realized that my feelings or opinions weren’t important to Noah, and if I didn’t learn that lesson real quick, I wasn’t going to last a month in this job.

But when I went back up that afternoon to bring him his lunch, he still hadn’t moved from the desk. The darkness in the room had thickened, and I left him his food without a word exchanged between us. And it bothered me. All of it. The dimness, the audiobooks, the takeout dinners, and the fact that Noah spent so much time living—no, not living, *existing*—in this small world.

I didn't know why it troubled me as much as it did—why I cared so much—and that bothered me most of all.

chapter eleven



“He hates me.”

Melanie glanced up from the faux leopard-skin jacket she’d been considering. “Already? It’s only been a week.”

It was Sunday, my day off, and Melanie and I had walked from her place in the Village to Lafayette Street for some shopping and lunch. We perused the choked racks at Screamin’ Mimi’s for vintage clothes, as I was hoping to liven up my wardrobe.

“I didn’t even need a week. It only took one day.”

Melanie laughed. “What did you do?”

“I opened the drapes.”

“And that’s it, huh? This guy sounds like a complete asshole.”

My shoulders hunched. “He’s not all bad,” I said, straining to sound casual as I sifted through a morass of faded concert tees. “I mean, he is rude, but he’s not an asshole. Okay, maybe a little. But he’s just...trying to recover from his accident.”

Melanie narrowed her eyes at me through her cat glasses. “Speaking of recovering, you look good. Rested. All assholes aside, seems like the job is good for you.”

“I guess so,” I said cautiously, running a hand through my loose hair.

“Uh huh.” Melanie smirked. “You know, it’s okay to tell me you’re doing better. As your friend, that’s actually the kind of stuff I want to hear.”

“I’m afraid if I tell you I’m doing better, you’ll start hounding me about auditioning.”

Melanie’s eyes widened in mock surprise. “Now that you mention it, the Philharmonic just posted a call for section violinists. What a coincidence!”

I looked away. *First Juilliard, then the Phil!*

Her smile fell. “Just...nothing?”

“Mel, I just got settled in. Give me some time—”

“How much time?” Before I could answer, she tossed her selections over a rack and took me by the shoulders. “Give me a deadline. Give me *one clue* that tells me you’re serious about your career, because honestly, I can’t tell. I hear you say you’re not done yet, but I’m really fucking worried that you’re lying. And you, my friend, cannot be done.”

I shrugged out of her embrace. “I’m not done,” I said, thinking of how the Mozart adagio had poured out of me in front of Noah. “But even if I were, it’s not the end of the world. There are a million other careers I can have.”

“Other careers...?” She pushed her glasses up her nose—the Melanie Parker equivalent of rolling up your sleeves in preparation for a fight. “Okay, the time has come. It’s clear I’m going to have to get all *Good Will Hunting* on your ass.”

“You have to what?”

“Remember that movie, when Will says it’s perfectly okay for him to squander his genius brainpower and be a bricklayer, or a construction worker, or whatever? And his friend, Ben Affleck, tells him that’s bullshit? Do you remember?”

I shrugged helplessly. “I guess...?”

“So that’s you and me. I’m whoever the hell Ben Affleck was, and I’m telling you that you have a gift and you’re wasting it. A gift that half the student body at *Juilliard*—for crying out loud—would kill to have. And you’re Will, and you’re telling me that, no, no, it’s totally cool for you to quit and become...what? A personal assistant?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Melanie sputtered. “That’s exactly what Will said! And just like Ben Affleck, I’m here to tell you that’s crap. It’s insulting to the rest of us who would give our left tit for a fraction of the talent you’re just throwing away.”

“Don’t do that,” I said, shaking my head. “That’s ludicrous. And unhealthy.”

“Just the facts, ma’am. You’re *crazy*-talented. You’re Mozart-level talented, and it just fucking *kills* me to see you neglect that.”

“You’re overstating it, to put it mildly. Mozart was a legend. To even compare me to him is...well, it’s almost blasphemous.”

“I’m not that far off the mark and you know it. Mozart wrote his first concerto at age four. You *played* one of his concertos at the age of six. You

played Sibelius's No. 47 at age fourteen. *Sibelius*. You think that happens every day? That kind of talent...it's a *miracle*."

"A miracle? Do you even feel the weight of what you're throwing on me?" I hefted my armful of clothing. "I'm doing my best, Mel. That's all anyone can do, right?"

Melanie dropped her hands to her side. "Charlotte, you've been through some serious shit. You got knocked on your ass, and then that prick, Keith, kicked you when you were down. So you took some time off and if you need to take more, you should. But if you're considering giving it up, I think that would be a tragedy."

A tragedy. Losing Chris was a tragedy. Nothing else came close. I shook my head.

"Do you know how hard it is to practice every day and feel nothing? And I do. I practice every day now at the townhouse, and every day I feel *nothing*. I'm just making noise."

"You have to go there. You have to dig in. If it's not rising up like it used to then you have to go prospecting for it."

"I'm trying, Mel. I really am."

"So audition for the Philharmonic. You have plenty of time to prepare. Get your Mendelssohn in shape, and then get over there and kill it."

"Melanie, I just signed a year lease to work as Noah's assistant."

"Leases can be broken." Melanie quirked an eyebrow. "Are you trying or are you not?"

I sighed. "I'll think about it. But don't be surprised if I crash and burn because I sure as hell won't be."

"Ah, there's that optimism!" Melanie hugged me. "I'm proud of you. And you'll thank me someday. When you're rich and famous and stealing all of Hilary Hahn's gigs."

I snorted a laugh but was secretly glad the topic was dropped. The idea of an audition didn't thrill me or give me butterflies like auditions had in the past. Instead, I felt dread, like a phone was going to ring and a voice was going to tell me something horrible. It didn't make sense, but my psyche had tangled everything up for me and I didn't know how to unravel it all.

We continued perusing, and I found myself gravitating toward bohemian-style shift dresses in colorful patterns and billowy pants and blouses. I soon had an armful.

"Boho chic, are we?" Melanie commented.

“Looks like it. An improvement on Annabelle *couture*.”

Melanie held up a leather jacket, its sleeves attached by hundreds of safety pins. “I think Sasha needs this jacket. She’s always been the Sid to my Nancy. Without the drugs, punk rock, or murder.”

“She’s a lucky gal, and so am I.” I tugged her sleeve. “Come on. Lafayette’s beckons.”

“Oh yeah? You buying?” Melanie grinned. “Clearly I should give obnoxious, overbearing lectures more often.”

“Don’t push it.”



At Lafayette’s, around the corner, we sat by the window at a white-clothed table and were presented with the little bistro’s midday menu. Melanie’s eyes widened at the numbers. “How do you say ‘out of my price range’ in French?”

“I don’t know. If Noah were here, we could ask him. He’s fluent. Lucien—the guy who hired me—taught him and his sister, I think, since they were little.”

I glanced up into a sudden silence to see Melanie watching me curiously. I waved my hand at the menu to distract her. “And don’t sweat the prices. I got this.”

“You sure?”

“I’m celebrating my liberation from the customer service industry.”

“Speaking of celebrations,” Melanie said slowly, “Regina set a date for her next musical shindig. May 20th. That’s in a few weeks.”

“Melanie...”

She held up her hands innocently. “Just putting that out there. Let’s get a waiter over here and order overpriced raw fish salads and talk about Noah Lake instead.”

I blinked at the sudden change of topic. “What’s to talk about?”

Melanie’s dark eyes bore a mischievous glint. “Oh, how about how fluent he is in French? Or maybe how your whole face lit up at the mention of his name.”

“It did? No, it didn’t.”

She blinked cheekily at me. “So?”

“So what?”

“So now you’re blushing.”

I forked an olive from a little dish between us. “Look, he’s...hot. That’s just a fact. And as a warm-blooded human woman, I can’t help but *appreciate* that about him. But given that I’m still a mess over Keith, I’d be an idiot to think about getting involved with someone right now. And Noah doesn’t want to get involved. He hates me, remember? And between the two of us, we’d need a forklift to carry all of our baggage.”

“Well, there’s ‘getting involved’ and then there’s ‘mind-blowing meaningless sex.’” Melanie smiled slyly.

I waved my hands, laughing. “No, no... You know me. I don’t do the casual sex thing. I need it to mean something real. I can’t go back and give my first time to someone worthy, but I can make the second time count.” I heaved a sigh. “I do miss sex, though. Not that I’m a pro or anything. Not that Keith was any good at it.”

Melanie rolled her eyes and tore a hunk of bread off the roll in the middle of the table. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“With Keith there was always the *possibility* that it would be mind-blowing, but it just never happened, and I was too ecstatic to finally be doing it at all to complain.”

“And now you’re living with this Noah guy—alone. The possibilities haven’t crossed your mind?”

“Aren’t you the same person who warned me to put a lock on my door?” I asked dryly. “Besides, he’s my boss, in a matter of speaking, and that’s just asking for trouble, on multiple levels.”

“A brilliant non-answer, if I ever heard one.”

“No, it’s not like that,” I said. I wanted to tell her *we* weren’t like that. Noah and I were like planets orbiting the same star: on similar trajectories but only crossing paths once in a great while. “Besides, he would never consider me.”

“How the hell would you know that?”

“He used to date supermodels, Mel.”

“So? Are you saying you’re not his type or that he’s out of your league? Because the first I might believe. People have types. But the second is pure horseshit, my friend. You’re gorgeous. And I’m certified to tell you that with all the authority vested in me as a lesbian woman.”

“Oh, stop. You know what I mean. Certain guys want their women to look a certain way, and given Noah’s dating history, it’s obvious I’m not in his

category.”

Melanie’s sly smile returned. “Mmm, given it a lot of thought, have we?”

I threw an olive at her. “He’s not about to date anyone anyway. He won’t even step out of the house.”

“Maybe he just needs proper motivation.” She popped the olive into her mouth. “Put his hands on your boobs and see what happens.”

“Very funny.”

Melanie held up her water glass. “In any case, to your new job, that has provided us a lavish feast. In theory. If a waiter ever decides to take our order.”

I lifted my glass, silently toasting the fact we were no longer talking about Noah’s hands and my boobs in the same sentence.

“I do wish Noah would go outside, though,” I said after a moment. “I guess it’s too nerve-wracking for him. Hell, his own house must be a mystery.”

“How’s that possible? I thought you said he’d been living there for months.”

“He has, but he hardly leaves his room. He wants nothing to do with learning to live as a blind man.” I toyed with my water glass. “I mean, I tried to open some drapes and he bit my head off.”

Melanie shrugged, more interested in tracking down our non-existent waiter now. “Sounds like a lost cause.”

I frowned, turning her comment over and over. Noah wore his pain like a spiky set of armor. Mine was buried down deep where I could pretend it didn’t exist so I could get through the day, but in the end, it was the same thing, wasn’t it?

I thought of Melanie’s silly *Good Will Hunting* speech. I was lucky to have a friend who wasn’t willing to give up on me. Aside from Lucien who was too busy, Noah didn’t have that. He didn’t have anyone.

But me.

chapter twelve



Since the accident, time had a way of oozing past me without me being able to distinguish one day from the next. But as April ended and May came around, I had a greater grasp of the passage of days after a month of schedule-keeping that never varied.

Some woman named Lola came to clean up after me once a week. That was one marker. She came on Tuesdays, and she was my idea. For Charlotte, though I never told her exactly why. And it was Charlotte who mostly ordered the black sameness of hours and minutes of my life with a routine that never wavered. How she persevered when I gave her no reason to stay boggled my mind. Other assistants had had the same salary and never seemed to do their jobs with the same kind of thoughtful diligence as she did.

We rarely spoke. I couldn't trust myself. Rage and pain coiled in my heart like a viper, ready to strike. I was afraid it would snap and hurt her in a way that couldn't be forgiven, that I would poison her inherent sweetness with my venom. Or maybe I had already done that when I cursed her out over the stupid drapes.

She was different after that. More aloof. I felt the shame and regret of that incident for a week, like a stinging sunburn that only faded when I realized it had kept her away from me. Kept her safe from my vile tongue and temper. She said nothing to me now beyond what was required.

And slowly, over that month, it became a horrible way to live. I don't know what made her different, but I *wanted* to talk to her. There was something about her that I felt drawn to—a pain that shadowed even her most cheerful words. She was living with something heavy inside, and it was weighing her down somehow. I wanted to know what.

Or maybe I just wanted a normal conversation, but any step I took toward

a “normal” life felt like defeat. It meant accepting my fate, the blindness, the loss of everything I’d had and everything I had yet to do.

Fuck. That.

I kept my mouth shut and the rage locked behind clenched teeth and just listened.

Afternoons between three and five p.m. were my favorite time of day. I would listen for the sound that Charlotte’s practice time had started and then creep down to the top of the stairs on the second floor. Normally, she was diligent about closing the door to her room, so as not to disturb me. I could still hear her play—my hearing was borderline bionic—but sometimes she’d forget to shut the door. Those days felt like little gifts, as if she were singing to me, filling the house with the voice of her incredible talent.

I wanted to tell her that it was okay to leave the door open, but the words stuck in my throat. Then she’d know I was listening. Maybe she’d become self-conscious and not play the same way. Or maybe she’d feel creeped out by the poor blind asshole lurking on the stairs. I couldn’t take that, so I just listened. Even the closed-door days were better than nothing.

She played one piece more than others. I didn’t know its name; classical music was never my thing, but she played it over and over, and I came to realize she was searching for something too. Some slice of perfection, I guessed. She was hard on herself. Demanding. She didn’t know how good she was and that, I think, was part of her frustration. But holy hell, she was talented.

And to think, she was just walking around with that gift, and you’d never know it. At three o’clock she’d play, and I’d have to remind myself that this was the same person I’d just sent to fetch me lunch. It didn’t make any sense. I had already hired someone to clean for her. I wondered if I should get that same person to do the laundry. Was laundry bad for the hands? I didn’t think so, but it bothered me anyway that Charlotte was forced—for whatever reason—to work for me. Charlotte Conroy belonged in a huge music hall somewhere, bringing the house down.

And so that’s how it went for an entire month, each day growing more painful for the both of us. It couldn’t have been easy for her to live in fear of pissing me off. I added another layer of disgust and repulsion to my strata of self-loathing. It was already miles deep, layer upon layer, with a molten core of rage at the center that erupted now and then.

I hadn’t had an eruption in a month, but one was coming. Soon. And I

made a vow that it could destroy me, but I had to protect Charlotte at all costs, even if it meant she hated me. That was for the best. For her.

I didn't let myself consider what was best for me.



I awoke one morning with my stomach growling. I hadn't eaten dinner the night before; I'd been in a particularly foul mood and hadn't touched the food Charlotte had brought for me. Chinese takeout, which meant it was Thursday.

I wouldn't admit it, but I was growing sick of all the damn takeout. Charlotte had cooked something for herself downstairs that smelled a million times better. But I couldn't ask to join her, and eating in front of someone else was out of the question anyway.

My takeout grew cold, and when I could no longer stand the smell of congealing sauces, I flushed it all down the toilet. Consequently, a ravenous hunger woke me the next morning.

I found the button on my watch and pushed. Not quite six a.m. I still had time. With any luck, I could slip down, grab some cereal, and head back up before Charlotte woke up.

I threw off the covers and made my way to the door. Twelve steps and there was the handle. I pulled and felt for the door's edge to ensure I didn't clobber myself. Fifteen steps down the hallway, my fingertips grazing the wall to keep oriented. Then the banister, down the stairs, and then I was in the living room.

I felt my way to the low, square-shaped chair that marked the halfway point, then continued, one hand in front of me, feeling for the kitchen's breakfast counter. I touched cold granite, made my way around, and the hardwood beneath my bare feet became tile. My mother had redone the kitchen between my last visit and the accident, so I hadn't the faintest clue what it might look like. Modern and expensive, whatever the colors, with a stove and oven and microwave I could never use.

Who the fuck cares what it looks like?

But it still bothered me. I sometimes felt like the butt of some terrible joke, as if the entire world was taunting me with everything about it I could no longer perceive.

I found the cabinet that held the cereal and pulled down the first box I touched. I checked to make sure it was cereal and that Charlotte hadn't

changed things around as vengeance against her blind bastard of an employer. I opened the box and sniffed. Raisin bran. I could live with that.

I moved left, felt the stove hood and then the cabinet. I found a bowl, set it down next to the cereal. So far so good, but the fridge was a different story. It had been a near-empty wasteland when I lived alone. Now it was full of Charlotte's food. On my first pass, I found a box of soup broth, but a couple of stumbling attempts later, my hand landed on the milk carton.

Irritation gripped me—aided and abetted by my ravenous hunger—and I slammed the carton on the counter. I found the utensil drawer, grabbed a spoon, and then poured the cereal, feeling the edge of the bowl to make sure I didn't overload it. I opened the milk carton, poured, and set it back down on the counter.

Or that was the plan.

I was careless and set it on the edge of the sink. Too late, I felt the damn thing teeter and then fall. I made a grab, missed, and heard it smack the floor. My ankle was splattered. I bent and quickly found the carton, but the damage was done. I couldn't guess how far and wide the spill went, but the carton had been nearly full and now it felt about half.

My hands itched to hurl the cereal bowl into the sink, when a waft of sweet-smelling soap and vanilla caught my attention.

Charlotte.

"Hey," she said softly. Hesitantly. "Need some help?"

I gritted my teeth against the tired old anger. "No, I do not. I told you—"

"To not help you under any circumstances," she said, her voice stiffening. "I don't *exist* until you need me, but since I don't want to walk around on a sticky floor, consider me cleaning up the mess helping me out. If that makes you feel better."

It doesn't, I wanted to say. Nothing ever made me feel better, least of all imagining Charlotte on her hands and knees, cleaning up my spilled milk.

"I can do it. Where are the paper towels...?"

I started to move but she stopped me. "Wait! You'll slip... Just take one big step to your right."

I did what she said, and my foot found dry tile. Huzzah. But now what? I was going to look like a goddamn idiot trying to clean up a mess I couldn't see. Doing my very best to corral the anger, irritation, and gnawing hunger, I turned in Charlotte's direction and said slowly, "You can go now, thanks. I got this."

“Are you sure about that?”

At that moment, an image of Charlotte tried to form in my mind, like a wavering desert mirage. In my mind, she was a chestnut-haired, blue-eyed shifting amalgam of other women I’d known in my past life—and I’d known a lot of women in my past life.

I couldn’t keep a solid idea of Charlotte’s face pinned down, but I could imagine she was standing with her arms crossed, lips pursed, eyebrows raised in that universal pose that women take when the guy they’re talking to is being too stupid to live. My irritation dimmed slightly.

She drew closer and pressed my shoulder—a gentle shove out of the kitchen. Her small hand was warm and soft but firm, too. I moved around to the other side of the counter and anchored myself to a barstool as she began to lecture me with her pretty voice.

“I’ve seen worse messes. If you spent less time in your room and more time down here doing...well, anything really, you’d probably learn to manage just fine.”

I heard her rummage around, heard cabinets open and close, listened to her clean what mustn’t have been a huge spill after all since she was done quickly.

“In fact, I know you’d be able to handle it yourself, given time and patience. You have a lot of the former but none of the latter...”

She stopped, and I could practically feel her gaze on me—feathery light and sweet.

“Are you hungry? I was going to make eggs and bacon. Would you like some?”

I did. The part of me that still gave a shit wanted to have breakfast with her. The part of me that loathed what I had become, that recoiled with humiliation for how the smallest of tasks were potential disasters waiting to happen, wanted to slink back to my room, alone. But she wasn’t some fool Lucien hired who’d be gone in a week. Maybe I could eat in front of her like the fumbling klutz I was, and it would be okay.

Maybe.

Man up, asshole, I told myself. You’re hungry? So eat. Fork, food, mouth. It’s not fucking rocket science.

“Yeah, okay.”

A smile colored her words. “Great! Just give me a minute.”

I listened to her rustle around in the kitchen, heard a pan hiss, and eggs

crack. Then she set a place for me on the counter.

“Um, fork is on your left. Spoon and knife on your right—”

“I remember how silverware is set.”

“Okay,” Charlotte said, and I could practically hear her roll her eyes at me. Another few minutes or so of not uncomfortable silence, and a plate was set in front of me. “Here you go.”

I could feel the heat of the food and its scent wafting up to me. My stomach growled, and had I been alone, I would have just dug in, using my fingers and fork in equal measure, shoveling food in without a shred of manners. Or dignity.

But now that the big moment of eating in front of someone else had arrived, I froze up.

“Coffee?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes. Black.”

“And orange juice?”

“Sure.”

I heard the thud of a ceramic mug on the counter, then the clink of glass.

“Coffee is on your right. Juice on your left.”

I didn’t move.

“Noah?”

“I don’t eat in front of people.”

“I noticed. Why not?”

My lip curled automatically, a reflex whenever I was reminded of my own ridiculousness. Which was often.

“Why do you think? I’m worse than a fucking toddler. I have to use my fingers to find the damn food, I knock shit over, and it feels like I’m being stared at. Not that I would know.”

“Okay.”

I heard her setting another plate next to me on the counter. Charlotte came around and pulled out the chair next to me and sat down. Not across, but side-by-side.

“Eggs are on the left side of your plate, bacon on the right, and a crescent roll at the top. I don’t care if you have to use your fingers, and if you spill something, I’ll clean it up. No big deal.”

No big deal. The way she said it, I could almost believe her.

“Noah.” Her voice was gentle but firm, too. “It’ll get cold.”

I took up my fork and started to eat. Slowly. Mindful that I wasn’t alone

for the first time in four months.

The food was simple; nothing fancy or professional about it, but it was the best breakfast I had eaten in what felt like years. An ache clenched my heart so hard I nearly gasped. Companionship. Someone in my space, touching me, talking to me, just sitting next to me and sharing a meal, as if I were whole.

But I wasn't.

I reached for the orange juice and nearly knocked the damn glass over, catching it just in time. A splatter hit my wrist, but I thought that was the extent of the damage.

"Nice save." Charlotte put a napkin in my hand.

"It's not the stuff of miracles." I wiped off my hand and tossed the napkin down. "That's twice in one morning. Ridiculous."

"You're just out of practice," Charlotte said. "And it doesn't help that this house isn't set up for you. Not really. The furniture is all in your way and a *glass* coffee table? With sharp corners?"

I could imagine her shaking her head in disapproval.

"Not to mention, every single drinking glass in these cabinets is tall and skinny or some sort of fragile crystal-ware *I'm* afraid of breaking. You need some of those short, fat little glasses that can take more than a finger bump to knock over."

I was at a loss. I'd been nothing but a complete jackass to her, but she didn't give up. And while some part of my shriveled little black heart warmed at her consideration, I couldn't fathom why she was wasting her time on me.

"Why are you here?" I demanded, my head cocked to my left where she sat.

She froze in whatever it was she was doing. "I *work* here." Her words came out tinged with hurt.

"I meant, why the hell are you working for me and not playing for some symphony orchestra somewhere?"

"Oh." I heard her pause, thinking, and then take up her finished dishes. Her voice moved around and then in front of me as she put them in the sink. "I'm taking a break."

"Are you afraid you're no good?"

"No," she said faintly. "They called me a prodigy, once upon a time."

I loved her honesty. No bragging, just the facts, and she had the talent to back it up. I would know; I heard proof every day between three and five. But

the pain in those words... It was as if she were speaking of her talent in the past tense.

“So why not audition?”

“*I’m taking a break.* And if I did audition and got in, I’d have to break my lease here.” A pause. “I’d have to quit being your assistant.”

“Good.”

“Good?” No mistaking the hurt now; that one syllable was saturated. I felt the air tighten between us.

“Yeah, good, Charlotte. You don’t belong here, cleaning up my shit. You’re wasting your time.”

“Is that a fact?”

I felt a line was drawn and I was dangerously close to crossing it. I didn’t know what was wrong with me; I hardly knew her, but she was meant for something better than this. I’d heard it when she played that first day for me and every day since. There was nothing wrong with being a cleaner of messes, but it wasn’t for *her*. Especially if the mess was me.

“Yeah, it’s a fact.”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“What’s complicated about it? Do you want to play or not?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Then *play.*”

“Oh, because it’s just that simple, right?” she snapped at me, her voice like a whip. “You’ve got all the answers. You’re a font of psychological wisdom. Fixing me is so easy. Just get me to an audition and—bam! Problem solved. As if that will help. As if you know anything.”

I tapped my fingers on the counter. “I’m only pointing out the obvious.”

“*I’m wasting time?* So speaketh the guy who stays holed up in one room, not going anywhere or doing anything, ever.”

I gaped. The idea of this girl having anything in common with me made me sick to my stomach.

“You’re not trying to compare us, are you? I hope to God you’re not thinking that your cute little stage fright is anything close to the wreckage that is my life. Not even the same *league.*”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice full and strangely thick. “Stage fright sounds like a pretty good phrase for both of us.”

“No, Charlotte. I’m done. I’m a cautionary tale. Don’t waste your life waiting for something to come to you. Go out and grab it. Take it. Because

you never know when it's all going to come crashing down.”

“It already did,” she whispered.

Her soft words cut through my harsh, know-it-all tone like a knife through butter, and I froze, my pulse rushing in my ears. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind. I shouldn't have said anything,” she said and sniffed.

She was crying. Dammit to hell, I'd made her cry.

“Charlotte...”

“You're not the only one who's lost something, okay?”

Here it was. The pain I'd heard echoing behind every word, right here. The depth of it made my heart clench painfully. “Who?”

Who did this to you, Charlotte, so I can kick their ass?

“My brother.” I heard her swallow down tears. “He passed away. Last year. He left us and took my music with him. Or it's lost. I don't know how or why but...I just can't find it. So that's why I don't audition. Okay?”

I felt an unseen hand sock me in the gut. I didn't just cross the line, I tromped all over it. Me and my blundering, stupid mouth. I hadn't expected that answer or any like it. I don't know why—I was a fucking idiot, I suppose—but I'd assumed her pain had to do with a blown audition or something. But her brother...

I thought of my twin sister, Ava, and what I would do if I lost her. I'd evicted her from my life along with everyone else months ago, but she had been the hardest to push away. Impossible, actually, if not for her job that required her to live overseas. As kids, Ava and I were every twin cliché in the book, and I couldn't imagine her gone for good. Like having half my heart cut out.

“I'm sorry, Charlotte.” Shame twisted my gut until I thought I'd be sick. “I don't know how to talk to people anymore.”

Her voice sounded muffled, as if she were wiping her nose. “Yeah, I noticed. You're like a walking internet comment, just spewing whatever pops off the top of your head. You can't do that with people in real life.”

“Real life.” I snorted. “Is that what I have? Never mind. I'm sorry. For what I said, for ruining breakfast, for making a mess of the damn milk...”

“It's okay.”

“No, it's not okay. Not one bit of it is okay.”

“I guess not. But you didn't know. And most people feel the same way. My family and friends...they don't get what's holding me back.”

“What is holding you back?”

“It hurts,” she said simply. “To dig deep for it *hurts*. I don’t know why I’m like this, but I just am, and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t give me a hard time, okay?”

I nodded, wishing mightily I could suck back every stupid word I’d spoken. I climbed carefully out of my seat and oriented myself to the stairs, then let go of the chair, like an astronaut pushing off into the void.

“Noah?”

I stopped. “Yeah?”

“You’re not done.”

“What?”

“You said that you were done. But you’re not. It may feel like it, but it’s not true.”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. Was she really saying this to me? After all my blundering, tactless arrogance, she was trying to make me feel better? The depth of her kindness and generosity astounded me, but she was wrong. I was done. I’d had the perfect life and it had been ripped away forever.

I retreated to the solitude of my room. I intended to go to bed, to dive into sleep, away from the memory of my own biting voice that had brutally yanked the buried pain out of Charlotte and dragged it into her light of day.

Instead, I found myself at the window, my hand on the curtain cord. I pulled it, heard the grating sound as the heavy drapes opened, then leaned forward and felt for the catch. It stuck from disuse, but I wrestled it open, and cool spring air wafted into the stuffy bedroom.

I closed my eyes, letting the breeze whisper over me. I reached my hand out and found a shaft of warmth. The sunshine spilling in. With a heavy sigh, I sat in one of the chairs and oriented myself so the sunlight fell across my face. Nothing. But I could feel the sun’s orange and gold on my skin and the blue of the breeze. I could hear the yellow of passing taxis, the rusted brown of shouting voices, the green of rustling leaves in the trees that dotted this city street in my memory.

Maybe, Charlotte, I thought. Maybe.

chapter thirteen



The rest of the week droned on with Noah saying almost nothing to me. I got the feeling he was afraid of speaking to me like he had that morning over the spilled milk. I couldn't say I was too disappointed. I could do without being sniped at, but he said he was sorry, and I forgave him, because that's just how I was raised. I tried to be cheerful, to show him I was over it, but he was like a block of ice. Un-meltable.

Every day, at three o'clock, I began my practice: the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E Minor. It was what I planned to use for the Philharmonic audition in a few weeks. I'd sent in my transcripts, audio demos, and my chosen selection, half-hoping I wouldn't get a slot. But I had, and that should have filled me with pride. Instead, I practiced the Mendelssohn the way it was written on the page and nothing more, still unable to find the passion in it. The joy.

Once, when I was done and returning my violin to its case, I heard the floorboards creak at the top of the stairs. I had forgotten to close my bedroom door, and the creak was loud, louder than the settling of an old house. Loud like a footstep.

I nearly dashed out to the foyer but restrained myself. If that was Noah, I'd only embarrass us both by jumping out with a silly "gotcha!" It occurred to me I frequently heard the stairs creak after I finished my afternoon practice. I made a mental note to leave my bedroom door open from now on. Or better yet, play in the small living area on my floor as it was closest to the stairs and the sound would carry straight up to him. If he didn't like it, he could tell me. If he were even listening at all.

My own Spidey sense told me he was.



A new Monday arrived. I made breakfast for myself, and Noah shocked me by appearing at the stairs. He made his way carefully to the chair, midway between the stairs and kitchen.

“I was going to get your breakfast from Annabelle’s in about twenty minutes,” I said. “But I can go now, if you’re hungry.”

“Not in the mood for Annabelle’s. I was going to make a second attempt at cereal.”

“Cereal is so boring. I have oatmeal, fruit, and toast...if you’re interested.”

He shrugged, all casual-like. “If you have enough.”

“I do.”

“Yeah, okay.”

I turned away to hide my smile. Sometimes I felt like he could read silences, looks, gestures, without needing his eyes.

We ate breakfast together, saying no more than a handful of words, sitting side-by-side. I found it extremely distracting to be so close to him. I kept stealing glances, especially at his eyes.

Their color reminded me of those agates you can buy at some touristy mountain places. My dad took Chris and me to one when we were kids. You buy a rounded hunk of ugly gray rock and they cut it open for you to reveal a nest of amethyst crystals or maybe white quartz inside. The rock I’d chosen concealed a gorgeous, smooth striation of greens, blues, and browns, smattered with gold. I had been shocked and so happy. It was hard to imagine that an ugly old rock could contain something so beautiful.

When he had finished, Noah slipped off the stool with a muttered thank you and headed upstairs.

I froze on my way to the sink, two plates in hand. “Where are you going?”

“To read,” he said without stopping.

“Well, wait.” I dumped the plates in the basin and hurried to him. “I was thinking, maybe, you’d like to go for a walk?”

He stopped and sighed, his shoulders slumped. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“I knew that if I ate here instead of upstairs, you’d consider it some kind of breakthrough.”

“Isn’t it?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “I mean, that’s twice in one week.”

“You offered oatmeal, so I ate oatmeal. End of story.” He continued up the stairs.

“So does that mean no walk?” I called.

“No walk,” he called back.

I pursed my lips, but a smile spread anyway. This was progress, I could feel it. I wanted to call Lucien and crow my good news, but if Noah found out, he’d never trust me again.

That afternoon, Noah had me order his usual lunch takeout, but he ate it at the kitchen counter with me. He hardly said a word, still guarding himself. I thought that was progress too; that he was at least attempting to curb his biting words, and it prompted me to keep trying, to not give up on him like everyone else had.

“Are you sure I can’t change your mind about a walk?”

He tapped his long fingers on the counter. “Did Lucien put you up to this?”

“Put me up to what? Suggesting a walk in the fresh air and warm sunshine?” I smirked. “No, I came up with that one *aaaaall* by myself.”

He didn’t smile. Not even close. *But someday*, I vowed, *I’m going to get him to smile if it kills me.*

“I don’t know, Charlotte,” he said quietly, sliding off his stool. “I don’t know that it’s a good idea.”

I furrowed my brow. “To take a walk? Why—?”

“Because I…” He stopped. He’d taken a step the wrong way and had to reorient himself with the counter. “Because I don’t even know which direction I’m facing, that’s why. I’m a fucking joke.”

“Noah…” I put my hand on his arm to comfort him, but he tore out of my grip, and I stepped back.

“You don’t grab a blind person’s arm like they’re a child to be led around. If you’re trying to guide them, they take your arm.”

I stiffened and thrust my chin out defiantly, ready to retort that I wasn’t trying to guide him, when it hit me that he was *willing* to be guided.

“Oh. Okay. Here.” I stuck out my elbow, and to my utter shock and amazement, Noah wrapped those long fingers around the crook of my arm.

I froze. Or rather, I flinched and *then* froze. I felt a jolt of electricity shoot up my arm as he touched me, a pleasant thrill that skimmed along my skin, down my back, even to the tips of my breasts. I sucked in a breath.

“Well?” he demanded. “Are we going somewhere or not?”

“Oh, uh, right,” I said and cleared my throat. “Where are we going again?”

“I thought we were going outside,” Noah said irritably. “Don’t you want to take your poor blind schmuck out for a walk? Fucking hell, Charlotte, make up your mind.”

“Hey,” I said, turning to face him. “Let’s cool it with the swearing okay? I’m all for a well-timed f-bomb now and then, but you sound like a character in a Scorsese movie.”

I thought for a second he was going to snap back. Instead, he nodded once. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I said, okay. Let’s just go already.”

I offered my arm again.

“And try not to walk me into a ditch or get me creamed by a cab, if you don’t mind.”

I grinned despite myself. “I’ll do my best.”



I’d never led a blind person before, and I quickly discovered it wasn’t as easy as it seemed. I was shocked to find that the world I took for granted was actually a hazardous obstacle course with dangerous pitfalls at every turn. I found myself narrating every change in terrain to ensure Noah didn’t trip or break an ankle. And he was so damn tall, I had to steer him away from the low-hanging branches of sidewalk trees that threatened to scratch him.

Noah heeded every warning quickly and gracefully. He also walked very slowly. So slowly, in fact, I began to feel like I had an anchor dragging at me. His face was a mask of concentration, and I could see he was fighting not to keep one hand in front of him, to ward off anything that might come at him in the dark.

“You know,” I ventured, “if you had a white cane, you would know the way was clear.”

“I have one,” he said through gritted teeth. “The rehab place gave me several.”

“Why don’t you use it?”

He didn’t answer and I didn’t push it. The walk was obviously stressful enough for him as it was.

We made it to Broadway with its loud, busy thoroughfare and honking

taxis, running engines, and other pedestrians who crowded the sidewalk. Noah swore under his breath the third time someone brushed his shoulder.

“They’d get out of your way if they knew you were blind,” I said gently.

“They should get out of my way even if I weren’t,” he spat, but I could see his irritation was only a mask to conceal his anxiety. Sweat beaded on his brow despite a pleasant breeze, and I felt his grip on my arm tighten. Finally, he stopped short and pulled me close to him. “Charlotte...”

“It’s okay,” I told him, feeling horrible for suggesting this walk when he obviously wasn’t ready. “We’ll go back. I’ll take you back.”

“No, wait.” He stood rooted to the spot, his jaw twitching. “Just wait. Where are we?”

“Columbus and West 77th.”

“That doesn’t mean anything to me.” He heaved another breath. “Goddamn, it’s loud. Are we close?”

“We just have to cross this street, and we’re there.”

“The park is in front of us?”

“Yes.”

“Describe it.”

“Describe...?”

“Charlotte, I’m fucking drowning,” Noah breathed. “Tell me what you see.”

“Oh, right. There’s uh...a wall. A gray-ish wall with greenery spilling over it. There’s a bench just inside this wall a little ways in, along a paved path. I can see it from here. That’s where we’re going.”

He nodded and took a deep inhale. “All right. Go.”

We waited to cross Columbus, a street that was crazy-busy with speeding cars and rumbling trucks that hissed and honked. Finally, the light changed with no sounds or bird tweets for the visually impaired like some crossings. I wondered how on earth a blind person would navigate without help and realized most blind people probably *would* have help. A dog, maybe. Or a cane that they actually used.

I led Noah to the bench just inside Central Park, and he sank into it, withdrawing his death grip on my arm. “Remind me again how this is supposed to be good for me?”

“You did great. You should be proud.”

“Proud of what? Walking outside for fifteen minutes without shitting myself?”

“When was the last time you were outdoors? Months ago, right?”

“At the rehab place upstate.” He snorted a laugh that almost concealed his sigh of relief that he was sitting. Almost. “They were constantly dragging me around, trying to get me to learn to be blind.”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Because, that means game over. I lose.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

He heaved a few more steady breaths and then jammed his hands in the pockets of his athletic pants. He slumped down, his long legs akimbo. If we were on the subway, he’d have taken up two seats. But for all his man-spreading bluster, I could see he was trying desperately to appear at ease when he obviously wasn’t.

“So, what’s your story?”

I blinked and couldn’t help but chuckle. “You’re quite the conversationalist. You want to hear where I’m from and all that?”

He nodded. “All that.”

“Well, it’s not very interesting...”

“Don’t minimize yourself. Everyone’s life is interesting in some way.”

“I guess. Not much has happened to me yet. Not compared to you and where you’ve been.”

I meant that as a compliment, not to open old wounds, but Noah flinched anyway.

“Where I’ve been? Do you mean the bottom of the Pacific? That was my latest and greatest excursion, but how about we don’t talk about that, eh?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Noah waved a hand. “You, not me. Where are you from? Originally?”

“Um, Bozeman, Montana. I moved here when I was eighteen.”

“Montana. Big sky country.”

“Have you been there?”

“No. I missed it.”

“Missed it?”

“The big sky. I missed my chance to see it and now it’s gone forever and...” He shook his head. “Forget it. You, not me.”

I crossed my arms and faced him. “You know, after our breakfast chat the other day, I don’t know that I’m in a big hurry to spill my guts to you.”

“I don’t blame you.” He turned his head in my direction. “I promise to behave myself. Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my useless fucking eyeballs. Oh, pardon my language. My gosh-darned useless eyeballs.”

I shifted against the bench. “I’m not used to talking about myself.”

“Obviously.”

“Some would say that’s a positive character trait.”

“Others might say we’re going to grow old and die waiting for you to at least tell me the basics of your so-called-not-very-interesting life.”

“Okay, okay. Such a grouch.” I laughed. “Um, well, I came here for Juilliard...”

“No, no, wait. You didn’t magically poof into existence at Juilliard. Go back. How long have you played the violin?”

“Oh, uh, since I was a kid. Since almost before I can remember.”

“Why? Did your parents force you? Make you take lessons, hoping for a prodigy?”

“Just the opposite. I was desperate to play.”

Noah nodded, his hard-edged features softening, as if he liked that answer. “What sparked you?”

“I saw some concert on PBS. I must have been four years old. There was a woman, a soloist—I don’t know who—and I watched her, just... mesmerized.”

My thoughts turned back to that day, years ago. I could still see the old TV—not a flat screen, not yet—and our family room that was warm and brown and smelled of maple wood and orange spice.

“It was like I was seeing a future version of myself,” I said to Noah. “I told my parents I wanted to play how she was playing. Standing up, while all the rest of the violinists were sitting down. I wanted that, not for the accolades. It wasn’t—and still isn’t—for that. Before I knew what a concerto was or could name an opera, I knew that soloist was singing for the composer. Her music was the beating heart of the piece and I...I wanted to be that.” I shook my head at the memory, quelling the strange longing that welled in my heart. “Anyway, that’s how it started.”

Noah was quiet for a moment, then said, “And you were good. More than good.”

“I guess so. It turned out that I had...an aptitude.”

“You were a prodigy, you mean.”

“Yes, that’s the word, I guess. But my parents wanted me to have a normal life with a normal school experience and normal friends. So I took lessons and played in the local orchestras, instead of going off to some big concert hall or recording studio.”

“Do you resent that? You could have been a big star, early on.”

“No, I’m grateful. I didn’t want to be apart from my parents, or Montana, or...Chris. I thought the music would always be there and so I was content to wait. I got a partial scholarship to Juilliard, but then...things got rough during my senior year.”

“Your brother,” Noah said quietly.

“Yes. But also...well, there was a guy. A boyfriend. It ended right after Chris passed, and I...” I rubbed my arms. “Anyway, I wasn’t doing so well after that.”

“This boyfriend, he broke up with you or vice-versa?”

“He broke up with me.”

Noah sat up and laid his arm along the back of the bench, behind my shoulders. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No, I’m not, and aren’t you supposed to be behaving yourself?”

“Yeah, but...” He carved his hands through his hair, his eyes seeking me and missing. “This guy...he broke up with you? Right after your brother died?”

I nodded.

“Hello?”

“Oh, uh, yes,” I said. “But it’s no big deal. Bad timing. The perfect storm of horrible shit happening at once.”

“Bad timing.” Noah rapped his fingers on the bench. “That’s it?”

I glanced at him askance. “You sure are nosy.”

“I’m a journalist—or *was*, in a past life. I never left a story unfinished. Don’t leave me hanging here. This guy sounds like he needs a good ass kicking. What happened?”

I could feel my face screw up in perplexity as I regarded this man sitting next to me. “Okay, I’ll tell you, on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“*Quid pro quo*, Clarice. You have to answer the question I asked you at the start of our walk. Why you don’t want to learn to be blind.”

He frowned, looked about to protest, and then nodded. "Fair enough."

I told Noah about Chris's death and coming back to Juilliard to find Keith had moved on with another woman. I shook my head, remorse and shame burning my cheeks and my heart aching with old pain that never seemed to diminish.

"I fell for Keith completely," I confessed. "And when I say fell, I really mean it. I fell for *him*, but I also fell for his bullshit and lies. He was my first love, my first...lots of things." I cleared my throat. "He told me he loved me, and I did something really stupid."

"Which was?"

"I believed him."

"That's not your fault, Charlotte," Noah said in a low voice.

"No, I suppose not. But I should have been more careful. I came back to New York thinking, 'My heart's ripped to shreds, but at least I have Keith. At least he'll be there for me.' But I was just a country girl in the big city, I guess. A cliché that was easy prey to a serial dickhead like him."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. I simply ceased to exist. I wasn't the blazing talent I had been. I was a mess. A sleepwalker wandering around the school." I shrugged, wishing my feelings matched the empty gesture, but then Noah couldn't see it anyway. "I lost everything. I lost my seat on the Spring Strings, lost Keith, lost my brother, and somewhere in there, I lost my music too." I wiped my eyes. "So there you go. My so-called-not-so-interesting-on-hold life. In a nutshell."

Another silence fell, and I waited for Noah to lecture me again or berate me for letting a boyfriend screw up my life.

"He was an idiot, this guy," he said finally, carefully, as if he were weighing his words before he spoke them.

"Or I just misread him. I was smitten and he wasn't, and I got burned."

"That's why he's an idiot. To have someone like you. To have *earned* the time and affection and the...the love of someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Yeah, Charlotte. Someone like you."

I bit my lip, waiting for him to tell me what that meant and felt irritated with myself for not having the guts to ask him.

"Have you ever been in love?" I asked.

"No," he said quickly. "My last girlfriend told me she loved me, but I was

in love with my adrenaline highs. And I thought being with someone meant staying in one place. I couldn't do that." He made a sour face. "Oh, the irony."

"I feel stuck too," I said. "A different kind of stuck. Like I have some huge ball and chain locked to my heart, not letting me put myself out there or... love anyone ever again."

"I think you're too generous to be so jaded," he said quietly.

"I don't feel jaded. I feel like a dummy for being so trusting. Love taught me two lessons: it could feel real and still be a complete lie, and it could be ripped away, leaving you with empty, grasping hands."

Noah's expression suddenly hardened, and his voice became scratchy and tense. "Why did you tell me all that?"

"I seem to recall you *asking*."

He gave me a look. I don't know how—he's blind, after all—but he did, and I felt a blush sting my cheeks.

"I don't know. You're a good listener."

He scoffed. "So I got that going for me."

"You have a lot of things going for you," I said gently. "Your turn. Why don't you want to learn to cope with your blindness?"

"If I learn Braille or carry a damn cane, then it means I accept that this is my life now. It's stupid, I know. I'm blind no matter if I accept it or not, but I can't give in. If I do that...then my old life is really gone." His voice lost its edge at the end, like a frayed rope. "I don't want to let go."

I bit my lip, hesitant. "But...don't you think that's why you're so angry? If you let it go, then maybe—"

"Then my life will magically improve? That I'll get back a fraction of what I lost and be satisfied?" He shook his head. "Impossible. I want it all back. *All of it*. Not just my sight but everything that went with it."

"You can't have it back," I said as gently as I could. "But there has to be ways to make this new life easier for you. There are technologies you could try, right?"

"No, Charlotte. My life, my career...none of it survived that cliff dive."

"You could have a new career," I ventured. "Maybe there's something you haven't discovered yet that you'd like to do."

"Maybe. But how the hell would I find it when my old life still feels like it's *right there*. Like it's on the other side of this fucking black curtain, and if the curtain would just *lift*..."

He scrubbed his hands over his face and then rested his elbows on his knees, his sightless gaze cast down.

“I loved my job, you know? I loved writing and taking photographs and visiting every corner of the world, and losing all that...” He swallowed hard, a jagged lump of pain. “Losing all that is bad enough. But I lost something else, something I craved and lived off of, almost as much as I did air and food and water.”

“What’s that?”

“The rush. The adrenaline. The thrill of walking the edge of life and death, like a tightrope. I didn’t have a death wish, but I loved taunting it. When I was throwing myself out of planes or skiing down triple black diamonds... that’s when I felt that amazing fear. That chest-tightening, ball-shriveling fear that you’re right there, about to lose it all. Because only when you’re about to lose it all, do you realize how much you have.”

Noah fell silent, and I watched the bitter anger seep into his face again, edging it with hard lines. But his eyes held a deep melancholy that was more potent than anything else. I remembered reading about the five stages of grief once, how anger eventually gives way to sadness. Maybe what I was seeing in him was progress. Like eating breakfast with me or agreeing to take a walk. My hand itched to take his.

“I know that feeling,” I said. “The rush. Not the same way as you felt it, but...before Chris’s death, I felt it when I played. An immersion so strong, it was like I was outside myself, watching, while the rest of me just...lived the music. Some people call it being in the zone.” I plucked at a stray thread on the seam of my dress. “I miss that.”

Noah turned my direction, his gaze landing on my chin as it always did. “I’m sorry I told you that you were wasting your time. I had no right.”

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “It’s true. I can’t let go, either.”

His head tilted, and the brusque demeanor slipped even as he tried to hold on to it. His brows furrowed as if he were willing his eyes to work. To see me.

“Charlotte...what do you look like?”

I brought my head up sharply. “I told you what I look like.”

“You told me with words and words aren’t always enough.”

I felt my pulse quicken and I glanced at his hands in his lap. Nice hands. Masculine. Long fingers.

“Do you...want to touch my face?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged sharply. “Maybe.”

My skin heated at the idea of his hands on me, and I swallowed hard.

“Well, I guess I wouldn’t mind. If you think it would help...or something.” I coughed.

Noah shook his head. “Never mind. Forget I brought it up. It’s stupid. I can’t see shit with my hands.”

“Have you ever tried?”

“No. That’s just a dumb cliché in even dumber movies.”

“How do you know?”

“I know because nothing will ever compare to just being able to see. Ever.”

“It seems to me that if the rest of your senses are heightened, your touch might be too.”

Noah shifted on the bench toward me. “Are you desperate for me to put my hands all over your face, Charlotte? Do you have a gnarly wart on the end of your nose that you’ve been dying to spring on me?”

“Now you’ve ruined the surprise.”

“Liar.”

“See for yourself,” I said, hoping my voice sounded as light as I tried to make it.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said. How the hell had I become so nervous? Or why? He was so close, I could practically count the gold flecks in his eyes.

Noah raised his hands, slowly, and I could tell he was nervous too.

“Go on,” I blurted. “Big hairy moles...and a unibrow that would’ve made Frida Kahlo jealous.”

Noah dropped his hands and rolled his eyes. “Will you shut up? I have to concentrate.”

“I wasn’t ready. Okay, I’m ready now.”

“Charlotte?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I told you to shut up.”

“Now you’re stalling.”

“Maybe. I’ve never done this before.” He raised his hands, lowered them again. “People are staring at us, right?”

“Yes. A crowd has gathered.”

“Ha ha.”

“It’s New York. No one’s watching.” I took his hand in my own that trembled slightly and placed it on my cheek. “It’s okay. Go ahead.”

The street was loud and busy, but just then the very air between us seemed fragile, and I held my breath as Noah looked at me for the first time.

He cupped my cheek, then raised his other hand to join the first. He held my face like this for a moment, his touch surprisingly gentle, and then his thumbs traced the outline of my mouth. It took everything I had not to gasp at the sensations that simple touch awoke in me, and I was sure he could hear my heartbeat; it was pounding like a hammer in my chest as his fingers brushed over my lips.

I held perfectly still even as shivers danced down my back when his hands slipped to the back of my neck, my nape, my ears, feeling the size and shape of them. His face was so close to mine, I could feel the warmth of his breath on my cheek. His hazel eyes tried to follow where he touched me, but he gave up and closed his eyes, letting his hands do what they could not.

He trailed the tips of his fingers over my nose, down its contours, along my cheekbones, then up to my eyes. He drew each eyebrow, and I closed my eyes as his fingers moved down, over my eyelids and then my eyelashes that lay against my cheek.

Finally, he stroked my hair, trailing his hands down the length, feeling the texture, taking strands in his long fingers, and then his hands fell away. I opened my eyes to an expression so full of longing, it nearly broke my heart.

“I was right.”

“About what?” I managed.

He opened his mouth to speak, and then all the hard edges and lines came roaring back. He pulled away, to his side of the bench. “I was right that I can’t see shit with my hands. Stupid to try.”

A deep, hollow disappointment came over me. “Really? Nothing?”

He turned away. “We should go back. I want to go back now.”

He stood up without waiting for a reply, and I stood with him, feeling like I’d been robbed of something I didn’t know I wanted.

Noah took my arm, and we walked. He moved a little easier this time, but his face was drawn tight again, a thousand thoughts darkening his eyes.

As we walked, I distracted myself and watched the yellow cabs and cars and people go by. So many different makes and models of everything. So many colors, so many textures, to try to name them all would be futile. To try to describe the twilight as it fell over New York City would be impossible. I

didn't have the words. But right then, I wished I did. I wished there were some way to give it all back to him. The sunsets and the blues skies and even his adrenaline rushes...

My arm felt warm where Noah held me, and the skin on my face still tingled with the memory of his touch.

Be careful, I warned myself. Be very careful.

chapter fourteen



White Plains, Summer 2014

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Lake. I wish I had better news, but this was always a possibility.”

No! You told me there was a chance. You told me it might come back. You assured me that the brain swelling had been minimal. The damage contained. The charts looked good, you said. I’m relearning all my skills. Prognosis is excellent. So where is my goddamn light?

Those were the thoughts screaming in my head. All I could manage from my stiffened mouth was, “Fehk you.”

“Noah!” My mother’s voice, scandalized.

“I understand your disappointment, Mr. Lake.”

The doctor. One of a squad. The quarterback.

“On the positive end, your progress in every other area is nothing short of astounding. You should consider yourself lucky. Eventually, you will walk out of this facility and speak with perfect elocution. Given the severity of your accident...well, frankly, that’s a miracle.”

You told me there was a chance. I’m busting my balls in PT every goddamn day because you gave me hope...

My mother’s hand on top of mine. “Is there anything we can do for you, honey? Anything you need right now?”

What I need? What I needed was for the doctors to fix my goddamn brain so that I could see again.

I sat in my wheelchair, my jaw working. So many words and I couldn’t spit them out. They crowded in my mouth, gummed it shut, as reality sunk its sharp, poisonous teeth into me.

This is it. This is final. This is how I’ll be for the rest of my life. No light,

no color. I'll never see another sky. I'll never see another sunset. I'll never see...anything. Ever again.

My hands gripped the arms of my wheelchair more tightly than I'd ever been able to achieve during PT.

"Noah? Please talk to me, honey."

No! I can't be like this! I can't be like this forever. My job...Planet X...my photography, my car...I can't drive it anymore. The coral reef in Cairns I was supposed to photograph this summer. The Carlsbad Caverns I had plans to visit in September...

And on and on.

They piled on me, one after another, all the things I would never do or see or experience ever again. One after another, until their weight pressed me down into my wheelchair and I could hardly breathe.

And then the future unspooled before me and it was all black. What would I do? Where would I work? Or live? And how? I had no plans to get married any time soon, but it was out there, someday. And now...I'd never see my wife on our wedding day. I'd never see her walk down the aisle toward me in her dress. I'd never see her face the first time I told her I loved her. I'd never see the faces of any children we might have. My own kids would be mysteries to me.

Christmas lights strung on a tree; candles flickering in a darkened restaurant; snow brushed over deep green pines...

All of it. Gone.

I clenched the armrests until my tendons ached. Doctors and parents flitted nervously around me, asking me if I was okay, begging me to answer. But they were on the other side of the black curtain, and it was never going to lift.

I felt tears sting my eyes. Tears. No fucking way. I wasn't going to mourn. I wasn't going to give in. Fuck this. Fuck them all. I wasn't this person they were trying to make me be. This person who couldn't do what I'd been doing for twenty-three years. I would never accept that.

Never.



The Vesuvius eruption arrived.

I lay awake all night replaying that moment in the hospital, over and over

again—like prodding a sleeping monster. When I finally slept, I had the usual nightmare. I awoke choking so badly on nothing, I thought I might actually die. How ridiculous if, after all the hell of the accident, it was a fucking dream that did me in. I was finally able to suck in air instead of imaginary water, and the tightness in my chest loosened and then fell away. The blackness, of course, did not.

Neither did the outrageous sense of injustice. The unfairness of it all. I felt it every second of my life. It was the fuel to my rage and bitterness, lurking behind the scenes. Some days it took center stage, demanding attention, and this day was going to be one of those days.

I hated everything and everyone. I hated the bed I lay on, the walls around me, and the floor beneath me because I knew it was wood but not the color. I hated the house, my parents for letting me live in it, Lucien for trying to take care of me, and Charlotte for not quitting weeks ago when I raged at her for opening the goddamn drapes on a beautiful day over a city I couldn't see.

I hated her prick of an ex-boyfriend for touching her and sleeping with her and then abandoning her. I hated her brother for dying, for branding her with that loss for the rest of her life. I hated myself for stoking her pain with my stupid, blundering questions.

I hated Mexico, I hated the magazine for sending me there, I hated the way the danger tempted me. I hated the local divers who dove too and remerged alive and whole while I broke myself on the rocks below.

I hated, hated, hated.

I lay in bed feeling the hate wash over me like waves on a beach, surging and ebbing, eroding me bit by bit. Someday there wouldn't be anything left.

Charlotte came up sometime in the morning hours, saying she'd made breakfast, and would I like some or would I prefer my usual takeout? I barked at her to get the hell out and not come back all day.

I hated how I spoke to her.

I hated that she left.

The hours passed and I could do nothing but stew in the rage. They'd told me that this might happen. During my rehab. They'd offered me drugs to control my moods. I took one once, and the eight hours of nothing I felt were the most terrifying of my life. I was already robbed of sight. The drugs robbed me of emotion, leaving me numb. I never took a mood med again. But that morning I probably would've needed about a hundred to quell the hatred that pumped through my veins instead of blood.

I jabbed my earbuds in and told my phone to play Ministry's "Psalm 69." Loud. Louder. As loud as I could stand. The music infiltrated my brain, and I hoped it would leave room for nothing else. Instead, it fueled my rage to greater heights until I was ready to explode.

And then I felt it. The first twinges at the back of my skull. The Monster, waking. And not a slow emergence from hibernation, either. The Monster was roaring to life with a speed I hadn't thought it capable.

I told the music to stop and sat up quickly. I tore the earbuds out and reached for the little bottle of migraine medication. But I was already panicked, shocked at how fast the pain was growing. My hand brushed the lampshade; my elbow hit the medicine, knocking the bottle over. Dread took hold of my heart and squeezed along with the pain in my head. It wrapped a steel band around my skull, tighter and tighter. The hatred I'd been marinating in all morning quickly morphed to out-and-out terror.

I searched the floor, hoping desperately that my fingers would close around that goddamn bottle. My groping fingers found nothing but wood floor, bed post, side table. My breath turned to panting. My clothes became drenched in sweat. I crawled until I lost all sense of where I was and still felt nothing but hardwood. A cry tore out of my throat, faint under the pounding pain that was like a jackhammer in my skull.

I searched on hands and knees until I was back to the side table. I propped my elbows on it and hauled myself to standing, though I had no idea why. No plan. My thoughts were breaking apart under the pounding agony. Dizziness crashed over me, and I flailed for something to hold on to until my hand closed around the lamp.

With a mindless scream, I hurled it across the room. The base shattered as it struck the wall next to the closet, and I felt like I was shattering too. The pain was wracking me, tearing me apart. My throat issued a low, steady stream of moans while tears and sweat poured out of my eyes, my skin.

I fell to my hands and knees again, taking the side table with me. It tipped over, bruising my thigh. A little kiss of pain compared to the howling agony in my head. I crawled on the floor like the pathetic wretch I had become, still searching, still finding nothing.

My hands felt hardwood become cold tile. The bathroom. Delirious now, lost in an ugly, dull haze of agony, I gave up the search and thumped my forehead on that tile, over and over; a steady rhythm that kept time to the pounding in my head. How long would this last? This was the end. Had to be.

My head would explode like some grisly scene in a horror movie. Or I'd bang it until my skull cracked open like an egg and the pain spilled out. I shuddered, my stomach clenching.

Make it stop... Oh God, please, someone make it stop...

"Noah? Oh my God!"

Charlotte.

And somewhere, behind the agony where I could still think, I thought it was possible I might come out of this maelstrom alive after all.

chapter fifteen



“Get the hell out and don’t come back today.”

Noah’s words that morning were like a bucket of cold water thrown over me, shocking and chilling me at the same time.

I thought he was getting better. I thought I was making a difference.

I shouldn’t have let it hurt as much as it did. Our walk, him taking his meals with me, when he’d touched my face...I thought something had changed, only to find out we weren’t any further along than we were the day he yelled at me for opening the drapes.

I descended the stairs to the first floor, telling myself that Noah had “bad days” and that his every emotion didn’t have to be about me. In fact, it was better that they weren’t. We were employer and employee, right? Nothing more.

So why were hot tears stinging my eyes? I swiped them away angrily and started to close the door to my room, close the door on *him*, and let him have his bad day and his foul temper and his denial that was ruining his life.

I almost closed that door.

But I didn’t. I couldn’t. And that’s why, some hours later, I heard the crash two floors above me.

My heart took off at a gallop and I sat up in bed, my book tumbling to the floor. Noah’s rule that I never help him no matter what echoed in my mind, sounding as impossible to comply with as it had when I first heard it.

I raced up both staircases, not sure what I’d find but knowing something was horribly wrong. As my foot hit the landing on the third floor, a second crash sounded, this one a heavy thud punctuated by a muffled cry.

Noah’s door was shut but I didn’t bother knocking. I threw it open, and in the perpetual dimness of his room, I saw the remains of the bedside lamp

against the wall to my left, its ceramic base shattered into pieces, the shade dented, the plug mangled from having been torn out of the wall. On the other side of the room, next to the bed, the sturdy wooden side-table had been upended. Agonized cries were coming from the bathroom.

My heart in my throat, I hurried there to find Noah on his hands and knees, banging his forehead on the ceramic tile.

“Noah? Oh my God!” I raced to him and knelt by his side.

“Make it stop,” he cried. “Please, ah God, make it stop...”

“O-okay. Please, it’s okay, please don’t do that...”

I took hold of his shoulders and tried to pull him up, to stop him from that awful banging. But he was in so much pain. It was in every hunched muscle and sinew of his body. His T-shirt was drenched in sweat and a constant hum of agony issued from his throat. I finally got him to sit against the cabinets below the sinks and gasped at the horrifying ashen color of his face. His long legs writhed, fists clenched and let go, over and over, and then he began to strike his head against the cabinets behind him.

“No, stop! It’s a migraine?” I asked, feeling frantic. “Where are your pills? Did you take one of your pills?”

Oh my God, is he out? Of all the tasks I have to keep on top of... But no, I had checked his supply just the day before.

“Can’t find...the fucking...bottle.”

I didn’t waste a second but rushed to the bedroom. I got down on my hands and knees, frantically searching, and found the little orange bottle had rolled all the way to the other side of the bed, hiding from Noah in plain sight.

I grabbed it and returned to the bathroom. Noah had hauled himself to his feet, braced himself over the basin to vomit in the sink. I rushed to him, steadied him as his body clenched. He’d had nothing to eat all day and I could only imagine the pressure that the empty heaving had on his already aching head. Sure enough, when he finished, he let out a choked cry and would have fallen to the floor had I not been there to ease him down.

“I’ve got the pills, Noah. I found them. It’s going to be okay.” I filled a glass with water from the other sink, sloshing it all over my wrist. “Just hold on.”

His reply was to moan and grip the sides of his head as if he were trying to keep his skull from breaking apart.

My own hands were shaking so badly, it was a miracle I got the childproof

cap off the bottle. I shook one violet-colored pill into my palm, then almost dropped it down the sink. I grabbed the glass of water and knelt on the hard tile beside Noah.

“Here.” I pressed the pill to his lips. His mouth fell open weakly, taking in the Azapram. I cupped the back of his head with one hand and held the glass to his mouth. “Now water. Swallow...”

He drank, and I watched him swallow the pill, breathing a sigh of relief and praying he wouldn’t throw it up at the same time.

“How long does it take to work?” I asked, trying to keep the panic from my voice.

“I don’t know...” he said from between clenched teeth, his face drawn with agony. “Ah, Christ!” He resumed slamming his head against the wooden cabinet, like a horrible metronome keeping time to the pulsing pain in his brain.

“No, no, this isn’t right,” I said, my hands twisting. “I’m going to call an ambulance...”

“No!” He grasped at empty air. “No, please...don’t leave.”

“But Noah...”

“It’ll pass.”

“How do you know? Has it ever been this bad?”

“Yes. In the beginning. Please...don’t leave me.”

I bit my lip, unsure, but one look at Noah’s face and I nodded quickly. “Of course not. I won’t leave you. I’m here.”

I scooted close and pulled him toward me, to cradle his head against my chest. I knew the head banging wasn’t self-harm but to distract himself from the pain, so I rocked him instead and stroked his head that was damp with sweat. I just held him and rocked him, keeping a steady rhythm he could concentrate on, and he clung to me. He wrapped his long arms around me and hung on, and we waited for the medication to do its job.

After twenty minutes that felt like hours to me—probably longer to Noah—I felt his muscles loosen from their coiled tension, and he took long, deep breaths, as if he were sighing with relief over and over. I couldn’t imagine a pain so strong it made you vomit or want to bang your head.

He released me and slumped heavily against the cabinet, his gaze cast down.

“Okay. I’m...okay,” he muttered dully. “You can go. I’m a mess. I stink. You...” He swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut. “You don’t need to see

me like this. I'm just going to take a bath and then sleep. Thanks. Thanks again for...helping me."

I felt tears burn in my eyes and blinked them away before he could hear them in my voice. "I'm not leaving you, Noah. You want to take a bath? I'll help you, but I'm not going to walk out now just so you can slip and fall..."

"Charlotte..."

"No. I'm staying."

I thought he'd protest again, but he leaned back against the cabinet, his eyes still closed, his hands hanging limply in his lap. "Okay."

I nodded and heaved a steadying breath. "Okay. Good. I have some lavender bubble bath. Downstairs. It'll help you relax, but it's not strong. I promise you won't smell like a girl or anything."

He made no answer.

I got up and started the bathwater. "Do you like hot? Warm? Somewhere in between? Personally, I like baths so hot I can barely stand it and then I get light-headed when I get out, but that's just me." I was conscious that I was babbling like a maniac—Noah's migraine had scared me more than I'd realized. "So, um, water temp?"

"Not too hot. I can't take it."

I adjusted the faucet and got to my feet. "I'm going to go get the lavender stuff. Don't get in that water until I come back."

I hurried down the two flights of stairs to my bathroom, grabbed the bottle of bubble bath, and raced back up. I was out of breath when I got to Noah, which was good because he had taken off his sweat-soaked T-shirt and was standing at the sink, gargling mouthwash. My wheezing camouflaged the sharp gasp I made at the reflection of his chest in the mirror.

He was sculpted in lean muscle—arms, abs, pecs...a simply beautiful masculine body swathed in smooth skin. My heart did some inexplicable stutter, and my body felt warm all over. But I tore my gaze away quickly. Now was absolutely not the time or place to be ogling him like a piece of meat.

"I'm back," I said, crossing to the huge soaker tub and pouring in a good dollop of lavender soap. Then I went to his side. "You ready?"

He nodded dully. "If you insist."

"If you want to keep your, um...boxers on, or whatever, that's fine. Okay?"

"Like it matters," he muttered and stripped off his athletic pants to reveal

boxer-briefs. “What am I going to do about it? You look or you don’t; it’s all the same to me.”

“I’m going to give you your privacy,” I declared. “I swear it.”

His features softened slightly, and with my help, he went to the bathtub, walking slowly like an old man. At the tub, I held onto him but kept my eyes averted.

“Go ahead.”

He said nothing but removed his underwear, and I kept my promise, keeping him in my sight only enough to ease him into the water where the bubbles covered him to his waist.

“How’s the water? Good?”

I could tell by the expression on his face it was just what he needed even before he spoke. “It’s perfect.” He leaned back and closed his eyes.

“And the lavender? Not too strong for your super-bionic sense of smell, right?”

“No.”

He wasn’t smiling—I had yet to see that happen—but he looked content and that was good enough for me. I sat down hard, the panic and fear of the migraine incident fading out of me too, leaving me drained.

“You can go now, Charlotte,” he said after a moment, his eyes still closed. “I can manage.”

I knelt beside him. “I’m sort of afraid you’re going to fall asleep in the tub. And besides, I think you’ve been left alone long enough.”

He turned toward me, his gaze landing at my chin. His beautiful eyes were wet and red-rimmed and trying so hard to find me. But he couldn’t. He closed them again and leaned back, his mouth drawn down.

I felt a tightening in my chest, my heart aching for him, wanting him to feel less undone than he did. I let him rest and soak, and after a bit, he took up a washcloth. He rubbed his face with it, then let his hands fall as he grew more exhausted by the minute. I cleared my throat.

“Can I help?”

“I had a thousand sponge baths in the hospital and rehab. I thought I was done.” He held out the washcloth to me. “What’s one more?”

I tried to ignore Noah’s nearness, or the fact that he was naked under the bubbles, but my hands were unsteady as I reached to touch his face. I cupped his chin and turned him in my direction, then gently ran the cloth along his brow, down over his cheeks; first one then the other. I had long since

recovered from my two-staircase dash, but my heart was pounding anyway.

I finished his face and washed his neck, then trailed the cloth over the broad plains of his chest, down the ridged muscles of his abdomen and back up. My fingers felt each defined muscle and shivers danced up my arm, despite the heat of the bath. I was trying to treat this as part of my job, but my traitorous body couldn't help responding to him.

Noah didn't respond at all. I thought he might be apprehensive that some strange woman—a woman he could never see—was touching him like this. But he was bone tired, and I strove to hurry, to get him to bed where he could rest.

I washed both long arms, starting at the shoulder, then down. I held his hand in one of mine, washing his long fingers, neither of us saying anything until I was finished.

"I have to do your back," I said.

"I have scars. They're repulsive."

"I don't mind."

Noah seemed too exhausted to argue and leaned forward. He rested his arms on his upraised knees, head bowed, revealing his scars to me. All of them.

They were bad, no doubt, but I'd seen the mangled, bloody horror of the original wounds in the Google photos. The scars were nothing compared to that; mere echoes of that terrible accident, permanently carved into his skin.

The three claw-looking marks I had seen were almost the same here, now white and striated, climbing up the right side of his back to his hairline. The left side that had required skin grafting was worse: an uneven rectangle with ragged edges that covered almost the entire left side of his upper back. The rest of his back was smooth, unblemished skin over muscle. Part of a crude rectangle—the twin of the one on his back—was visible on the inside of his right thigh, just above the bubbles.

I lathered up the cloth and washed the scars on his back with the same gentle care as I had the rest of him. I could feel the uneven texture of his skin beneath the cloth.

"It doesn't disgust you?" Noah asked dully. "It does me."

"No. It amazes me that you survived this."

He snorted. "It amazes me that I *wanted* to survive it."

I felt a lump rise in my throat. "What do you mean?"

"I fought hard when I woke up from the coma or else I would have died. I

should've just...let go. But I didn't. Because of hope. Stupid, pointless, fucking hope."

I waited for him to say more, but he didn't, and I couldn't find any words. Not the right ones anyway. He hated pity and there was nothing I could say that would make his loss any easier to take. I knew that firsthand. Grief had to run its course and that was all there was to it. Mine was still running and so was Noah's, so I saved my useless words. *I'm here for him when no one else is*, I thought. *Maybe that's worth more anyway.*

"Do you want me to wash your hair?" I asked. I started to touch the dark, silken waves at the back of his head, but he flinched away from me.

"No," he rasped, then gulped air. "No, sorry. The scars there...they're the worst. Don't touch them...please."

"Okay, I won't. Whatever you want."

"I want to sleep, Charlotte. I'm so tired."

"Of course. Let's get you out."

I let the water out and got a towel from the rack. I averted my eyes again as I helped Noah to stand and then gave him the towel. He wrapped it around his waist, and I guided him out of the bathroom to the bed.

"Sit here, and I'll get you something to wear."

I rummaged around in his drawers for underwear, a T-shirt, and some soft pants to sleep in. He dressed himself and I waited until he was done, then helped him into bed. I watched as he felt for the headboard, careful not to knock his head on it, and eased himself down.

"Get some rest. I'm going to clean up the sink—"

"No, Charlotte..."

"Yes," I said firmly, "it's no trouble."

He shook his head weakly, fatigue dragging him down, "I meant...don't go yet. Stay with me. A little while longer. Please."

Every part of me froze but for my heart that was thumping madly. "Okay," I managed and climbed onto the bed.

I thought that shocked him a little; he thought I'd stay and hold his hand, maybe. But Chris used to tell me that I never did anything halfway.

I slid up next to Noah and held him as I had in the bathroom. He hesitated, unsure, then relented with another sigh. He wrapped one long arm around me as I snuggled into him, letting him rest his head above my left breast, against my heart, and I prayed he wouldn't notice its quick pace.

"It's my fault," he murmured. "I brought it on myself. This rage...it's

eating me alive.”

“What happened?” I asked gently, stroking the hair along his temple as I had when the migraine wracked him. “What happened to you?”

He was silent for a moment and when he spoke, his voice was brimming with old, tired bitterness. “They told me my sight might come back as my brain healed. Maybe just a little. Maybe all of it. They’d planted the seed and I just wish...I wish they’d kept their mouths shut.”

“Why?”

“Because I might not have fought so hard to live.”

Instinctively, my arm around his shoulders tightened.

“My back was dog meat, so they took a chunk of skin off my thigh and slapped it onto my shoulders, and the infection from that little fiasco nearly killed me. Then they put me in a rehab place upstate for PT. I don’t have the vocabulary to describe the hell it was to go through that completely blind. But I did it. I healed up with only a few hideous scars, migraines that feel like my brain is about to explode, and uncontrollable mood swings. My souvenirs. I thought if my sight came back, it would all be worth it.”

But it never did, I finished silently.

“And all the while—the *entire time* I was recovering—people told me how lucky I was. *Lucky*,” Noah spat through clenched teeth, the anger giving him a flare of energy.

I stroked his cheek, not wanting the tension to bring back that horrifying migraine, and he relaxed slightly.

“I was *lucky*. I could’ve been killed, they said, as if that was some sort of fucking newsflash to me. I could’ve been paralyzed or made a vegetable. I could have had worse brain damage, from either striking the rocks or inhaling half an ocean’s worth of water. I could have lost my leg to the infection, I could have, could have, could have. And all the while, I’m sitting in the dark, wanting to just...*scream* and never stop. I still feel that way. But I can’t scream enough, so I listen to music too loudly and lie around hating everyone and everything and just feeling oh-so-damn fucking *lucky*.”

“You weren’t allowed to grieve for what you *did* lose,” I said softly.

Noah’s head came up, a look of pained surprise on his handsome features, as if what I’d said was the last thing he expected. His hazel eyes went right and left, trying so hard to find mine. To make contact.

“How do you do that?” he breathed. “How do you know what to do and say so that I feel...?”

“So that you feel what?”

“Whole. You make me feel like I have a shot at something more than this misery.”

“You do,” I whispered, tears welling in my eyes. “You do, Noah...”

“God, Charlotte. I don’t deserve you.”

“Don’t say that.” I blinked hard but it wasn’t doing any good.

“It’s true.” His hand reached up and found my cheek, his thumb brushing away the tears. “Don’t cry for me. Please, don’t cry. And don’t let me kiss you. I shouldn’t...”

But he did.

I held my breath, my heart clanging madly in my chest, as Noah laid his lips to mine in the most beautifully tender kiss of my life. Just him touching me softly, sweetly, for half a heartbeat until, with a soft moan, he moved in closer to kiss me more deeply. I tasted the warm wetness of his mouth, the sweet softness of his tongue that tasted mine for one precious, brief moment. A heavy warm stone seemed to drop into my belly, and I pulled him closer. To kiss him again. And again. To kiss him all night, because now that we had, I didn’t want to stop.

But he was exhausted. The migraine’s pain had stolen his strength. He brushed his lips over mine once more and then his head fell back to the pillow.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, struggling to keep his eyes open. “I’m so sorry. For every harsh word. For every time I snapped at you, or snarled, or swore. I’m so sorry for all of it, and not because you found me tonight and saved me but because you don’t deserve it...my ugliness.”

“You aren’t ugly, Noah,” I whispered. “You’re in pain. I understand.”

He shook his head against me. “You’re in pain too and you’re not like me. You’re nothing like me. You’re sweet and kind and I’m sorry I kissed you. I can’t *inflict* myself on you, Charlotte.” He sighed, and I knew sleep was stealing him away from me. “And the anger...it will come back. I’m sure it will. But I’m sorry for it. Remember that, okay?”

My vision blurred again, my eyes stinging with hot tears. “Noah...”

But he was finished. Finished talking, finished touching me, just finished.

I lay beside him, watching his face relax into the peace of sleep, holding him as long as I would let myself. A long time. Then slowly, so as not to disturb him, I slipped off the bed and crept out. I left the door ajar in case the migraine came back and he needed me.

Downstairs, I moved to the living room sofa like a sleepwalker and sat down. Caramel-colored light streamed in from the front windows, and I marveled that there was daylight left in the sky. It felt like Noah and I had been locked away together for hours and hours. I sat still, stiffly, trying to contain the tempest of emotions that swirled in me. My hands twisted in my lap, and I had to move, to talk, to do something.

A strange panic gripped me. I slipped down to the first floor to my room, my trembling hands grabbing—and nearly dropping—my cell phone. I was going to call my parents and cry with them for Chris. Or maybe call Melanie and tell her that Noah Lake had kissed me, and that kiss had drawn something from me that I'd been keeping locked down tight.

In the end, I called Lucien.

“Allô, cela est Caron.”

“Where are they, Lucien?” I demanded, tears falling unheeded.

“Charlotte?”

“The accident isn't even a year old. He got out of the rehab facility *four months* ago. Where are the letters? The flowers? The phone calls? Where are his friends, his sister, his *parents*? Noah told them to fuck off and they just obeyed? No questions asked?”

“Oh, my dear girl. Please. Tell me what happened.”

“What *happened*?” I could hear the hysteria on the edge of my voice and fought for calm. He kissed me, Lucien, and now I'm flying when I'm supposed to keep my feet on the ground.

“He had a migraine. And it was so scary, and he couldn't find his pills, and if I hadn't been here...” I shook my head and swallowed down a sob. “He needs *help*. He's needed help for months, and no one but you has even bothered to try.”

“And you, Charlotte,” Lucien said quietly. “You are trying.”

“Not me, Lucien. He doesn't need some strange girl he's never met but someone he knew from before the accident. Someone he can trust. But they all gave up on him, didn't they?”

“They did the best they could,” Lucien said, his voice heavy but calming too. “Are you all right? Do you need me to come to you? I will...”

I sniffed and wiped my nose on my sleeve. “No, I'm okay. I'm sorry to freak out on you. I just...got a little upset.”

“It's perfectly fine. What's not fine is hearing you so troubled. If it's too much for you, *ma chère*, I'll release you from your contract, no questions

asked. No penalties.”

“Then I’d be just like everyone else.” I gulped air until I was calm again and embarrassed by my outburst. “I’m not going to give up on him, I promise. I’m just going to do my job, but I can’t...”

“Can’t what?”

I almost told him I couldn’t get close to Noah like that again.

It’s too late. I’m scared that it’s already too late.

“Nothing. I’m really sorry that I worried you. Truly. I don’t know what came over me. I should let you go.”

There was a pause and then Lucien said, “I will hang up this phone with you, Charlotte, but only if you’re quite certain you’re all right.”

“I’m fine, I promise.”

“And Noah?”

“He’s fine too. Sleeping. I’m going to stay in the guest room on the third floor so I can hear him if the migraine comes back.”

“Thank you, Charlotte. I cannot tell you what peace you bring to my old heart.”

I got off the phone with Lucien, wishing I could say the same. Instead, I let the phone fall from my hand and cried until the awful fear of Noah’s migraine faded.

My tears dried up, burned away by the horrible realization that if I hadn’t been here, Noah would have been in real trouble. Maybe the worst kind.

I’d told Lucien I wasn’t going to give up on Noah, but I vowed to do better than that. I would do everything I could to help him, to ease his pain when no one else was even trying.

A door had opened and I had stepped through it and there was no going back.

chapter sixteen



White Plains, Fall 2014

“That’s it. You’re almost there.”

My shoulders screamed, the tendons in my forearms ached as I shuffled across the parallel bars one slow, dragging step at a time. My legs worked but only by sheer force of will, and my feet could hardly hold my weight. Sweat dripped off the end of my nose, ran in rivulets down my back, sticking to my shirt. I grunted, slid my right hand another inch along the bar, then the left. My right arm buckled, and I nearly fell. Harlan’s hands gripped my waist from behind.

“Le’go,” I slurred. I gritted my teeth, concentrated. “Let. Go.” The therapist’s hands retreated.

I hauled myself back up and continued the agonizing journey across the parallel bars. I heard Harlan come around in front of me, and when I reached the end, I collapsed against him. He eased me to the mat. I imagined it was blue. Harlan’s uniform was white. His skin was brown.

I lay on my back, bellowing like a bull.

“You never give up,” Harlan said, joining me on the floor. “That’s going to get you through this, my man. More than anything.”

He had it wrong. I didn’t push myself to get through it. There was nothing to “get through.” No light at the end of the tunnel, proverbial or otherwise. I pushed myself because the helplessness was fucking intolerable. My eyes were broken—or the part of my brain that translated for them was broken—but I’d make my body go back to how it was if it killed me. I could control that, at least.

A short silence told me Harlan was watching me. “You want to talk for a change? Get something off your chest?” He gave my shoulder a friendly pat.

I shrugged him off. “No.”

“All right-y. Let’s stretch you before you seize up. Right here. Save you a ride in your favorite chair.”

What a comedian, this Harlan. But he was right. I fucking hated that wheelchair. When I could walk normally again, I had grand plans to roll it out of a window or down a flight of stairs. They’d never let me, of course, but a guy could dream.

Harlan stretched my legs, bringing my knees up to my chest, one at a time. “Push back,” he said, one hand on the bottom of my foot, my knee bent.

I pushed back against Harlan’s pressure, knowing he was taking it easy, knowing that if he wanted to, he could drive my own kneecap into my nose and there was nothing I could do about it. Of course, it wouldn’t even cross his mind. Harlan was a good guy, but I hated him just the same.

As we went through the “easy” motions of my PT, my mind wandered, and I searched the endless black in front of me for something. A lighter shade. Some gray. A mote drifting across the canopy. Anything.

“An’theng.”

“What’s that, chief?”

Fuck. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud. I was tired, I guess. Last night’s nightmare had wrung me out. Or the PT. Or the relentless rage at all that was wearing me down, making me sloppy.

I clenched my jaw, mentally gearing my lips and tongue to do what they were supposed to. “Any...thing...would b’better...than nuh...nothing.” I brushed my hand over my eyes to show what I meant.

“Hey!” Harlan crowed. “Your speech is coming along fast, my man! But what are you telling me? You’d rather have a little something to look at? Yeah, I hear you. But it’s been what...two months? They tell you there’s a chance?”

“No...chance.”

“Yeah, that’s tough, chief. But if you had a little haze or a blur it’d be worse.”

It can’t get worse, I wanted to scream. Only my body failing to make a full recovery would be worse, and I wouldn’t tolerate that anyway. I’d throw my wheelchair down the stairs with me in it.

“Worse?” I demanded.

Harlan bent and stretched my legs that perpetually felt like they’d fallen asleep and were slowly waking. Maddening. He spoke all the while, his quiet,

rich voice filling the dark spaces of my new universe.

“Let’s say that instead of nothing, you were left with a little blur or shadow. Nothing more, nothing better. Every morning you’d wake up and imagine improvement. Is it brighter today? Is the shadow lifting?”

I could picture him shaking his head, his hair not quite gray but getting there.

“The endless black, that’s a tool. A tool you should use toward acceptance.”

“Bullshit.”

I said that word so many times it always came out perfectly.

“Hope is a wonderful thing,” Harlan said. “I’ll never tell someone to give up hope, and you got lots to be hopeful about, even if you don’t think so. Hope is maybe. It’s gradations of black instead of just black, and that’s not what you have right now, Noah. What you have is certainty. And sometimes that can be just as powerful. Better, even. There’s peace in certainty. It’s honest. No ‘maybe,’ just truth.”

He put his hand on my shoulder again. “You gotta decide when to let it go.”



Those words came to me in the small hours of the night, after the migraine.

Hope. Fucking *hope*. It just keeps going and living and growing, so that when the woman who shares your house turns out to be just as physically beautiful as she is in her heart and spirit; when you discover she tastes as sweet as her nature, you think, *Maybe*.

Maybe what I told her was a lie. *Maybe* I could be what she deserved. *Maybe* I could make the same teeth-clenching, sweat-pouring effort I’d put into my PT and channel that into living blind so that she wouldn’t have to constantly be cleaning up after me or dragging my ass out of the house. My endless black was never going to go away. That was certainty. But kissing Charlotte had been a burst of light streaking across it, like a comet.

Maybe. *Maybe* is gradations of darkness. The sweetest torture.

Maybe is hope.



When I next woke, it was to floorboards creaking.

“Charlotte?” I mumbled sleepily.

“Uh, hi.” She sounded soft and sweet but nervous too. “Sorry to wake you. I just wanted to check on you. How are you feeling?”

I hauled myself to sitting against the headboard and ran a hand through my hair. “I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck.”

“You didn’t eat anything yesterday. Would you like something? Something light? I make a mean pineapple-coconut smoothie.”

I was tired of people doing everything for me. So fucking weary of it.

“Yeah, okay,” I said dully. “That sounds great. Thank you.”

“I’ll be right back.”

I heard her rustle around in the kitchen, then the whir of the blender, and then she was back, and the scent of pineapple mingled with her own vanilla sweetness.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly and took a sip from the cold glass she’d pressed into my hand. “It’s good.”

I heard the smile in her words. “My mother taught me. Of course, she always used fresh pineapple, but I can’t cut one of those suckers properly to save my life. The packaged, frozen kind is easier. Hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind.”

A silence fell, and then I heard her intake of breath. “Okay, well, um, do you need or want anything else?”

What I needed, I realized, was to get my ass out of bed, out of this room. For her. For me too, I supposed, but mostly for her. I didn’t have anything to give her, not one damn thing, but I could make her feel good about her job. That, I could do.

“Charlotte?”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to take a walk today if you’re up for it. Maybe around noon?”

“Uh, yeah...yes! Of course. I could pack a lunch for us. We could eat in the park?”

Eating among other people. Not my favorite thing. But she sounded so... happy.

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

“Okay, great!”

She was talking to me differently. Our kiss was right there on her lips, coloring her words, making her smile.

You stupid, stupid man.

Charlotte didn't need my pathetic overtures, my warped version of romance. I hadn't been thinking clearly last night. I'd been in pain and then exhausted in every fiber of my being. I was her boss. She was my employee.

The memory of her soft lips on mine rolled in like a bowling ball, knocking my neat little reasons down, one after another. But I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let anything happen between us.

Fuck hope. Like Harlan said, certainty is better. And there was no greater certainty than what I'd told Charlotte about inflicting my ugliness on her. I'd promised her I wouldn't do it and I meant it.

I started to tell her that maybe a walk wasn't such a good idea, but she was already retreating. "I'll go get it all set up and meet you whenever you're ready."

She was smiling at me. I didn't have to see it; I could feel it. When she'd gone, I fell back against the pillows.

"Shit."



I took a short, careful shower and got dressed. The whole process took me nearly thirty minutes. Speed, it seemed, was no longer my thing.

Suck it up, snowflake. Those days are over with a capital O.

I made my way downstairs, ready to tell Charlotte that I'd changed my mind. That I didn't want a walk after all. But what could I do? She was my assistant, and I couldn't stay in this goddamn house another minute.

"I packed a light lunch," Charlotte said, and I heard the creak of wicker. A picnic basket. "Sandwiches, fruit, cheese, wine..."

"Sounds like a very French picnic. Lucien would approve."

"Is cabernet okay? Some people are picky. I didn't think to check."

"Bring whatever you want. I don't drink."

"Oh, you don't? Not...anything?"

"Never have. Most of the guys at *Planet X* partied pretty heavily, but I never did. No drugs, no booze. I always wanted my highs to be natural and never lose a day to a hangover."

"Oh."

"But go ahead," I said quickly. "I'm not a dick about it. It's just not for me."

“Another time,” she said. “And maybe it’s better I stay sharp, since I’ll be leading you across busy streets and such.”

“No argument from me there.”

She snorted a laugh. I heard her rummage in the basket, then the *clink* of glass as she set a bottle on the coffee table. “Well, the basket’s lighter, anyway.”

I held my hand out. “I’ll carry it.”

“Oh, um, are you sure?”

A flash of irritation lanced through me. Not at her but that I’d been reduced to someone who couldn’t be trusted to carry a fucking basket and walk at the same time. “Yes,” I said evenly. “I’m sure.”

“No, of course,” she said quickly, and then the sweet scent of her grew stronger as she approached. She pressed the basket handle into my hand. “Here you go.”

I took it with my right, her arm in my left, and she led me to the stairs.

“Oh! Did you bring your migraine meds?”

“No. Didn’t think about it.”

“Well, you’re a man-about-town now. Better safe than sorry.”

Man-about-town? God, what a goofball. A sweet, sexy goofball.

She went up and I took the last flight of stairs down to wait for her in the foyer, trying my damndest not to think of our kiss.

“Here you go,” she said, bounding back down the stairs. She pressed the pill bottle into my hand and her skin grazed mine.

“Ready?” Charlotte said, her voice like a sunburst of optimism.

We set out.



Not two minutes into our walk and I was already struggling. The basket in my arm made me feel less able to defend myself from unseen obstacles, and I started to see why people like me used canes.

Yeah, and advertise to everyone how helpless you are? No, thanks.

Charlotte described the scenery as we went. In my mind, a blank scene slowly became populated with cabs, cars, buildings, and trees. My memory of New York City blended with Charlotte’s words. It wasn’t anywhere as good as the real thing, of course, but it helped.

She was good at guiding me away from obstacles like uneven sidewalks

and curbs. Christ, I used to slalom down mountains where rocks hid under the snow like mines, ready to explode my bones. Now a crack in the pavement could send me sprawling. Ridiculous.

The anger flared but I sucked it down, vowing Charlotte would never have to suffer me snarling at her ever again.

“We’re in the park now,” she said. “Strawberry Fields. Have you been?”

“No. Well, maybe. Lucien may have taken my sister and me here when we were kids. I can’t say for sure.”

“I’m sure you’d remember. It’s the memorial to John Lennon? With the big *Imagine* paving in the street?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Would you like me to describe it?”

“Sure, thanks.”

Charlotte described the path through the park and then the black and white *Imagine* plaque. She said it was strewn with colorful flowers people had dropped out of respect. I heard voices, footsteps, smelled hot dogs and flowers, felt the cool of shade over my skin.

We walked on and Charlotte led us out of the shade and into a clearing, a patch of grass in the sun. I heard her unfurl a blanket she must have been carrying under her left arm. We sat, and while she unpacked the food, that itchy, staring feeling came over me.

“It’s crowded here,” I said.

“It’s not too bad. It probably sounds like it to you, but the nearest person is a good twenty feet away.”

I nodded.

“No one’s watching you, I promise,” she added and pressed a sandwich into my hand.

We ate and talked about nothing in particular, and it should have been a good day. One of the best since the accident. But I felt strangely hollow, as if the peace and contentment of the day was sitting just out of reach and I didn’t know—in my endless black—which way to grab for it.

“Are you okay?” Charlotte asked.

“I don’t know. I’m so used to feeling pissed off all the time and now I feel sort of numb.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Maybe. Feels like failure. Aren’t I supposed to rage, rage, against the dying of the light?”

“Oh, I love Dylan Thomas. I think you are one of the ‘wild men’ in that poem.” I heard the gentle smile in her words. “Sounds like you.”

“Was,” I corrected. “That was me. Not anymore.”

Charlotte shifted on the blanket next to me. “It’s still you. Just another version. Noah 2.0.”

She was trying to cheer me up, but the part of me that had laughed and smiled was broken. Maybe beyond repair.

“I don’t know, Charlotte. I’m worn out right now. The migraine kicked my ass, and I’m sort of basking in the lack of pain. But it might come back and the anger with it. I don’t want you to have to put up with it. Like I said, you don’t deserve it.”

“Oh, I’m a lot tougher than I sound.”

I turned in her direction, wishing like hell I could see her face. I’d lied to her when I’d said my hands hadn’t told me what she looked like. I hadn’t “seen” enough to form a concrete image but enough to know she was beautiful. Christ, of course she was. Her exterior reflected the beauty within.

Which is why I have to save her from the fucking wreck that is me.

“Charlotte, about last night...I shouldn’t have kissed you. That was a mistake and wrong and probably illegal somehow, given that I’m your employer. I was just...burned out by the migraine and not thinking clearly.”

“Oh. Yeah, no, of course,” she said, and I heard blades of grass meet their end as she plucked them mercilessly. “I understand. It was...an intense situation.”

“Yeah, intense. And it would have been a hell of a lot worse if you hadn’t been there. I think I was drunk on pain and exhaustion. Bottom line, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

I let out a slow breath. *So that sucked.*

“Oh. Okay,” Charlotte said, her voice sounding strange and distant. I couldn’t tell if she were relieved, indifferent...

Or maybe disappointed?

She inhaled like she was going to say more, but I guessed she changed her mind. I heard a creaking sound as she rummaged in the wicker basket.

“I brought a book.”

So she wasn’t disappointed. She was cool with it. Moving on. I leaned back on my hands, pretending like a fucking madman that didn’t bother me.

“Okay.”

“You might be tired of listening to other people read with all your

audiobooks, but I thought you might like this one.”

She was right; I was sick of the audiobooks. I wanted to read words on a page but what was my alternative? Learn Braille? Exhausting just to contemplate.

“What’s the book?”

“*The Origin of Silence* by Rafael Melendez Mendón. Ever heard of him?”

“Sounds vaguely familiar.”

“He’s really good, and this is his latest. The one he sort of debuted with as he came out of his self-imposed exile.”

“Oh yeah? Exile?”

“He had been living in San Francisco, alone, writing award-winning books, and no one knew who he was. Then he published this one, *Origin of Silence*, and sort of re-emerged into the world...” Her voice changed, grew heavy. “I’m sorry, I just realized how all this must sound to you.”

“What do you mean? A recluse holed up in a big city?” I affected a slightly stupid expression. “I don’t see a connection.”

Charlotte laughed. “I didn’t mean to imply anything. It’s just really good.”

“You’ve read it already?”

“Yes, but I’m willing to go again; it’s that good.”

“All right, let’s hear it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I lay down on the blanket and listened to her voice unfurl the story of a guy named Eduardo who journeys to South America and discovers the Midnight City—a ruinous city deep in the jungle and appearing only at night. By the end of chapter two, Eduardo is trapped there and has come face-to-face with the city’s ruler—a cold, bitter-hearted man who also happens to look as if he were Eduardo’s identical twin.

I fell into the story, amazed at how this Mendón guy could weave his words so perfectly—to form a whole picture seemingly effortlessly, while also telling a story *behind* the words. His ability to craft subtext and allegory was insane. I could believe he was an award-winner and wondered how I’d missed him in all my audiobook ordering mania.

“What do you think?” Charlotte asked after a while. “Pretty good, right?”

“Pretty good,” I said dryly. “The same way Picasso was a *pretty good* painter.”

“Yeah, Mendón’s not too shabby.” A pause. I heard more grass plucking.

“Didn’t you tell me you liked to write too? For the magazine?”

“Yeah.”

“I read one of your articles. Okay, I read more than one. A few. You’re really good too, Noah.”

“Thanks, Charlotte. I wasn’t bad, I guess. My editor, Yuri Koslov, was always harping on me about it.”

“For being good?”

“He’d curse at me in Russian and then say...”

“Say what?”

“Never mind. I’ll sound like an arrogant ass.”

“Tell me! Come on. It’s not bragging if it’s the truth.”

I felt warmth grow in my chest at her words. I didn’t talk about my writing a lot. I’d always been too busy with the sports to give it much thought, but I was sort of proud of my articles. And I had to admit, some part of me wanted Charlotte to be proud too.

“All right. Yuri would say, ‘You’re being better than the subject matter. Tone it down or write a book, but if you do the latter, I get first crack at publishing.’”

“Noah!” Her voice was saturated with pleasant surprise, and I could have hugged her. Or kissed her again, despite my own damn vow to leave her alone.

“Do that!” she cried.

“Do what? Write a book?”

“Why not?”

“What would I write about? *All the Light I Cannot See*?”

“Catchy. Anthony Doerr’s lawyers might disagree, but I like it.”

Of course, Charlotte knew the reference. She was smart. She read a lot, just like me. She had a deep pain she couldn’t shake—stage fright—like me. And everything else I liked about her, I liked because it was the exact opposite of me.

She nudged my knee, and I swear to God, I felt it up to my groin. “Think about it, eh?”

Unlike me, Charlotte knew just when to leave a subject alone and resumed reading the Mendón book. But I wasn’t really listening. When my blood had cooled from her brief touch, I thought about that old saw: write what you know. What did I know? Blackness. That losing my sight made me feel trapped in my own body. Anger, pain, rage. A future of more of the same.

I felt the shadows grow long and steal the sunlight from my skin. A soft hand on my arm; Charlotte had stopped reading.

“What are you thinking about?”

My life...or what's left of it.

“Not a damn thing.”

chapter seventeen



On Friday night, I was itching to go out. Melanie was out of town visiting her parents with her girlfriend, Sasha; Anthony was spending the weekend with *his* new girlfriend in D.C., and Regina rain-checked me for next week. I found myself wandering the townhouse, debating whether or not to go up and ask Noah if he wanted to venture out. Not as a date, of course. No, just as friends. Or an after-work social outing, since he'd made it clear we were employee/employer only. As it should be. The last thing I needed was to have my heart stomped on all over again.

And Noah wasn't right for me anyway. But for a love of reading, we had nothing in common. He was cranky and sharp-tongued, and I'm sure that if he'd known me when he was sighted, he wouldn't have given a girl like me a second look.

"It's better this way," I muttered to myself. "I can't take another hit."

I should have been comforted by that fact. Instead, I just thought of his kiss, of his hands on my face, his words... *To have the love of someone like you.* I put my hand to my heart as if I could massage away the little ache that lived there.

I wandered to the second floor. I heard Noah above, in the office/gym room, lifting weights and then running on the treadmill at a speed I was sure wasn't safe even for people who could see. That was part of his normal routine. Not so normal was what came after.

I was in the kitchen making a snack when I heard the slow, methodical clacking of an old typewriter.

Noah's typing? When he can't see what he's doing or read it after?

I thought of our conversation at Strawberry Fields. He liked to write. He'd been good at it. A sunburst of enthusiasm dawned in my chest. This was

something he could do, and it sounded like he was willing to try. But not on a typewriter! He needed something designed for him.

I raced down to my floor and powered up my laptop. It only took a minute to find software for the visually impaired that read screens, spoke type-written words, and had all kinds of voice-activated bells and whistles. They could be used with Braille keyboards or regular and didn't require special computers; they were compatible with anything. And they were expensive. The best, that I could see, was \$450.

I'll call Lucien tomorrow. I'll show this to him. When was Noah's birthday? Too far away. November 1st. A Scorpio. I scoffed with a smile. That explains a lot.

These thoughts raced through my head until a text from Melanie chimed on my phone.

Well? How did it go???

I frowned in perplexity and nearly texted her back: *How did what go?*

And then it hit me. The Philharmonic. The audition. I'd missed the audition. I'd forgotten all about it.

My skin felt cold all over as Chris's voice echoed in my mind. "First Juilliard, then the Phil!"

Oh my God, how did I forget that audition? How did I let that kind of opportunity slip through my fingers?

My hands shook as I shut my laptop. I shut off my phone too, without answering Melanie's text, and climbed into bed. I pulled the covers up over my head and squeezed my eyes shut, as if I could block out the shame that washed over me.

Noah was right. I was squandering my time. I was meant to be singing with my violin, and if I didn't at least try to find that voice, I might lose it forever. I had to rage against the dying of my own light or else put my violin in a closet and never touch it again.

I vowed to tell him I needed to start looking seriously for a seat somewhere. Maybe I could still work here part time and they could charge me rent.

Or you could get serious and resign.

I bit my lip, and burrowed deeper under the covers. I hated the thought, but didn't Lucien say the best thing to do was rarely the easiest? But did I have to choose?

I fell into a fitful sleep in which I dreamed I was playing on stage, alone,

and the only person in the audience was Noah.

The following morning, I was on the third floor, dusting and airing out the unused guest rooms and the office/gym. On the desk was the typewriter I'd heard last night. Noah must have dug it out of some closet since I'd never seen it before. It was a classic, sleek and black with the word *Corona* etched in elegant gold along the front.

There was paper still tucked inside. With writing on it.

Don't do it, I thought even as my feet brought me closer. The desk needed dusting, I reasoned. My eyes darted to the paper once, twice, and then I sat down in the chair, drawn in by the words, typewritten perfectly despite Noah's blindness. He must have been an excellent typist in his *Planet X* days, not a 'dumb jock' at all, and here was the proof.

Chapter ?

Once, when I was in Peru, I hiked up to Machu Picchu like everyone does. Only I didn't trek up Huayna Picchu with four hundred other tourists. I got a special permit and hiked Cerro Machu Picchu, alone, before dawn. Not the highest peak I'd ever climbed; not even close. Mt. Everest Base Camp has that distinction. But the Picchu wasn't the easiest trek anyway: winding, steep paths, and a dense, sweltering cloud forest. It was summertime. December. December 25th to be precise. I arrived at the pinnacle alone, around three in the morning, and waited for the sun to rise. A Christmas present to myself.

I was on assignment for *Planet X* and had my digital *SLR* at the ready. But when the first rays broke the eastern horizon, that \$6000 camera nearly slipped out of my hands.

The light emerged first like a molten glow through a thick mist. I imagined a lost god, wandering the earth and holding aloft his lantern, searching, like I was, for something he would never find and not caring, because it was the journey that mattered. Always the journey. The thrill of discovery, of boundaries and edges, of new horizons.

The light grew brighter, spilled into the cracks and ravines of the surrounding mountains, and stained the sky in hues of violet, orange, and gold.

I watched the light grow stronger until it seemed all of Peru—all of the world—lay at my feet. The mountains, swathed in green, surrounded me on all sides, challenging me to climb up and over and see what lay beyond. The Urubamba River coiled through the greenery below like an albino snake, and the famous ruins were mere scratches against the mountain from my high vantage.

The beauty of it stole my breath and made my heart ache in a way I couldn't explain. I got my wits about me enough to snap a few photos, but I didn't want to see this unfold through a lens. I wanted to see it with my own eyes. Savor it. It wasn't just a new day, it was the epitome of all new days, as if the world hadn't existed until that light touched it, and then it was all mine.

Only mine.

That was three years ago, and in that time, I'd experienced dozens of death-defying rushes—adrenaline pushes that left me weak and laughing and high with

triumph. None compared to that moment, sitting alone on that mountain.

After the accident I thought I'd never know the kind of pure, unadulterated bliss I'd felt in Peru ever again. It was lost to me when the rocks stole my sight. That euphoria of endless possibility was gone forever.

And then I met Charlotte.

I sucked in a breath and bolted out of the chair as if it had shocked me. I spun around, sure I'd see Noah behind me, snarling with rage for snooping. But the door and hallway beyond were empty.

Slowly, I sank back down into the chair and read the last paragraph over and over, trying to decipher its meaning. Noah meant I was helping him get out of the house more, that's all. As his assistant. Right?

"Euphoria of endless possibility," I murmured, and a smile spread over my cheeks along with the warm glow that bloomed in my heart.

The words crowded my mind, and any ideas about resigning evaporated.

chapter eighteen



For the next week, I tried to keep some distance between Charlotte and myself. I didn't take a walk or eat with her every day, but the days in which I didn't were little slices of hell to be waited out until I could go to sleep at an hour that was acceptable in normal society. But even the days spent with her were wearing on me. We'd come back from a walk, and I'd listen to her play her violin, and then I'd return to my room with my audiobooks and takeout and all the same old bullshit I'd been doing for months.

I wondered what would happen if I asked Charlotte to go out to dinner with me.

Like a date.

Then I imagined sitting at a table, surrounded by other diners, and knocking a drink onto Charlotte's dress or fumbling with a knife and fork, trying to cut a steak.

She wouldn't care.

I knew that was true. She had seen me naked and puking and banging my head like a goddamn monkey in a cage. What was one awkward dinner to that?

You're no good for her, and you know it.

And that was also true. I was no good for her. Not yet. But maybe...

When we did walk, we ventured deeper into Central Park each time, and Charlotte detailed the greenery, the paths, the gnarled trees and the strolling or jogging people. When she told me it was overcast, I asked her to describe the clouds, the shades of white and gray, the sky when it threatened rain, and the sun when it set. Some days, her beautiful descriptions colored my black world and I felt like I had a chance.

Other times, listening to her was torture, and I was the masochist who

never told her to stop. I took it all like a jagged pill and swallowed it down, tried to force myself into thinking it was enough.

I could tell she was hesitant on those bad days, not wanting to hurt me. But she did as I asked because, like I'd reminded her, she was my employee and I was her boss.

Some days it felt like I needed that reminder a lot.



One morning, the sky was overcast but not heavy enough for rain. At least that's what the guy on the radio said. I lay on my bed, listening for hours—since before the dawn, for sure—feeling like shit. There was no other way to put it. They told me at the rehab place that I'd have mood swings. Big ones. I felt myself at the bottom of a low, and a sickening fear that another migraine was on the way took hold.

I kept my damn meds near me this time and thought I'd ride it out alone, to spare Charlotte. But there was no migraine, and instead of stewing in hate, I felt a sudden, almost obsessive need to get out. I couldn't stand being in that fucking room listening to that obnoxious morning show another minute. I just wanted to step out the front door and take a walk like a normal human being.

I took a long, cool shower, hoping to calm myself. I felt tightly coiled up inside, ready to spring or snap, and I had promised Charlotte she would never have to suffer that again.

She sounded happy—as she always did—when I asked her for a walk. But that afternoon, when we turned left instead of right from the front door, heading westward, I hit the brakes immediately.

“Where are we going?”

“I thought I'd try something new,” she said.

I dropped her arm. “What's wrong with Central Park?”

“We're going to a park, just not the big one.” She sighed at my silence. “Can it be a surprise? Just a little one? I think you'll like it.”

Give her this and don't be a dick about it. I took her arm again and mustered a bad joke to make up for being short with her. “It's not an archery range, is it? I'm a bit rusty.”

She laughed—like music that I didn't deserve to hear. “How'd you guess?”

We walked for ten minutes and then the cement under our feet became

gravel. I scrunched up my face. “I smell dog shit. Or is that just the Hudson?”

“The first one. We’re at a dog park.”

“Why on earth did you bring me to a dog park? We’re not here to meet some fucking seeing-eye dog trainer, are we? This isn’t some goddamn set-up—?”

“Will you settle down?” she admonished. “This isn’t a set up. I thought you might like a change, that’s all. Something different.”

I muttered an apology, and she led me to a bench. I felt better at once; I could feel the wide-open spaces around me, and the Hudson River was close. Why that calmed me, I don’t know, but the insatiable urge to *get out* mellowed some.

I heard a scraping sound along the ground near us, and the image of a skidding Frisbee came to me as clear as day. The sound was followed by paws scrabbling over gravel and panting.

Charlotte clucked her tongue. “Here, boy. C’mere. Oh, you’re a gorgeous fellow, aren’t you?” Her voice grew slightly louder; I guessed she turned to me. “A Husky, and he’s a beauty, too. Icy blue eyes, white underbelly, gray and black on top. He looks like a wolf but the way his tongue’s lolling around, he’s about as ferocious as a puppy. Want to say hi?”

I did not, but I also didn’t want to hurt Charlotte. The dog had its own ideas, anyway. I heard it scrabble in front of me and then heavy paws fell into my lap.

I flinched back with a curse, but the dog stayed put, maybe hoping for a treat. I started to push away and sank my fingers into its fur instead. I stroked the dog’s head, its silky ears, the scruff around its neck. It panted its stinky breath on me, whined, and laid its muzzle on my hand, and I understood at once why Charlotte brought me here. To spark my senses that were dulling under the monotony of takeout and audiobooks.

God, this girl.

My heart clenched painfully, and I wished I could be something good and whole for her.

I heard huffing and jogged steps on gravel. “Sorry about that,” said a man’s voice. “We’re trying to teach Kona to stop jumping on people. Come on, Kona. Let’s go.”

The dog moved off, and I felt Charlotte’s hand on my arm instead.

“That was nice, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, but I was still caught in the low swing of my roller-coaster

moods. I tried to do what they told me in PT: focus on something positive. “It feels open here.”

“It is. Lots of wide spaces. I thought you might like the change.”

“A change, yeah. What about you? You must be tired of doing the same boring shit with me, day after day.”

“I’m not bored,” she said quickly. “Plus, it’s my job. I’m supposed to be helping you—”

“Yeah, okay, but if you could go anywhere in the world right now, where would you go? Somewhere out of the city.” I waved my hand at the black nothing in front of me. “Anywhere but here.”

“I’d go to Vienna, Austria. Or maybe Salzburg. Or both.”

“Why?”

“That’s where Mozart lived and worked. I’d love to see his birthplace and walk the same streets that he did.”

“He’s your favorite composer?”

“To put it mildly. I’m sort of obsessed.”

She laughed lightly but it sounded strained. My shitty mood was wearing on her; I could feel it.

“Is that what you practice with every day? His music?”

“No, no, that’s Mendelssohn. Do you remember that first time I played for you? When I forgot my violin and came back for it? I played Mozart.” Her voice softened. “For you.”

I clenched my jaw so tightly I thought my back teeth would shatter.

No, Charlotte. You should be playing in front of sold-out audiences every night. Not me. Don’t waste your time or talent on me.

“Are you okay?” she asked when I didn’t respond. “Bad day?”

I didn’t answer that. “You’d probably have seen all of Europe by now if you’d pursued your music sooner,” I said tightly. “You’d have seen all of Vienna ten times over.”

“Maybe. I didn’t want to leave Montana. I wasn’t ready, I guess. I don’t think I’d have done so well far away from home. Even coming to Juilliard seemed like the other side of the world. I was a homebody, kind of a dork in school.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” I said, mustering enough lightness to let her know I was teasing.

“Shocking, I know,” she laughed in return. “I love performing. There is no better feeling than being submerged in the music and creating an experience

for the audience. But I was happy at home too.”

“You don’t regret it? Even now?”

“No. I got to spend more time with Chris. I wouldn’t trade those memories for anything.”

Her gentle words, her sweet honesty...they began to soothe me like balm on a burn. I felt the tension in my gut uncoil slightly until something struck a chain-link fence right behind us. I didn’t know what hit it, maybe the Frisbee or a ball. But I hadn’t even known there was a fence in the first place. It made sense to keep the dogs corralled, but it surprised me in some awful way too.

I got to my feet and carefully made my way around the bench, my hands outstretched until I found the galvanized steel.

“I didn’t know this was here.” I curled my fingers between the links, staring at whatever lay beyond. A river, maybe. A skyline. Nothing. There was nothing.

“Noah?”

My grip tightened until it hurt. I forced myself to let go and said to Charlotte as calmly as I could, “I’d like to go home now.”



We walked back to the townhouse in utter silence.

In the foyer, Charlotte said, “I’m going out with friends for drinks, but that’s later. After dinner. I was wondering if you wanted your Friday night takeout or if I could make something for us? I was thinking baked chicken, wild rice...?”

“I’m not really hungry,” I said, trying my best to not sound like an ungrateful asshole. Pretty sure I failed miserably.

“Oh. Okay.”

“I’ll figure something out,” I said. “Go ahead, Charlotte. Go out with your friends.”

“Would you...uh, like to come with me?”

I knew what it cost her to ask me that; I’d felt the urge to ask her out and couldn’t muster the guts. I guess the cliff dive stole my backbone too. But then again, the relentless itch to *escape* was consuming me and the sooner I was away from Charlotte, the better. For her.

“No. Thank you, Charlotte. I’m under the weather today. I think I’ll just rest. But thanks for asking.”

I turned and made my way up the stairs before she could say another word.

Alone in my room, I threw myself on the bed and did nothing but listen for the sound of the front door closing, which would mean Charlotte had gone out with her friends. My watch told me it wasn't even four o'clock. I had hours to wait.

My thoughts went back to the dog park. I'd asked Charlotte where she'd go if she could get out of this city, as if I could live vicariously through her. As if I could escape the blackness through her vision. All I could think about was getting out, going anywhere but where I was, which was a chamber of inky nothing. A room in a townhouse. Strawberry Fields. A dog park with wide spaces that weren't wide at all but fenced off. All different words that boiled down to the same thing.

No matter the name or dimensions; if a breeze blew or if it didn't; if it were populated with dogs or people or just a chair and a voice reading in my ear, it was all the same black prison to me.

And I had to get out.

chapter nineteen



I watched Noah walk upstairs. Inexplicably, my heart clenched and tears sprung to my eyes. He was having a “bad day,” that was clear. I thought about staying in, but his expression, his voice...I recognized the grief in them. I’d looked and sounded like that many times in the early months after Chris died, and I’d just wanted to be alone. Noah’s “death” was fresher than mine and he was still making his way through it.

I got ready to go out, dressed in a knee-length blue shift with an artsy diamond pattern sewn in thick maroon thread along the hem. I brushed my hair until it shone, and it settled prettily around my shoulders. I wished that it were Noah I was going out with, that we’d slow dance under the lights of the Brooklyn Bridge, and I’d describe to him the sunrise so that he could see it. Like he had in Machu Picchu.

Because I’m his endless possibility.

The girl reflected in my bathroom mirror blushed.

“You’re setting yourself up for disaster,” I told her. “*Again.*”

But she wasn’t listening.



I met the gang at the Gin Palace in the East Village. The swanky bar’s façade was a jut of gold-trimmed onyx in the falling night. Regina, Mike, Felicia, Melanie, and Sasha were all there, sitting in a row on the top level of the long dais-raised seat that ran along one side. I climbed up the two steps, and Regina and Melanie scooted so I was wedged between them.

“So?” Regina crowed as Mike pressed a gin and tonic—the bar’s on-tap specialty—into my hand. “How was it? The audition for the Phil?”

“Oh, I uh...I didn’t get it,” I said, grateful that we were all sitting side-by-side. Regina didn’t know I was lying but it would take one peek from Melanie and the jig would be up. “It’s okay, though,” I added quickly. “I wasn’t one hundred percent prepared.”

Understatement of the century.

Regina lifted her glass in a solemn toast. “An A for effort, Conroy. We’re all happy to see you’re getting out there. And those knuckleheads at the Phil don’t know what they turned down.”

“Okay, okay,” I said and took a long pull from my gin and tonic. I felt a hand on my arm.

“Hey.” Melanie’s voice was uncharacteristically soft. “I’m proud of you. I know it took a lot for you to do that.”

“Yeah, well...”

“But how was it? What did you play? Did you feel nervous?”

I couldn’t lie to Melanie. Our friendship just didn’t work that way. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Sure, sure. Booze it up a little. Relax. Celebrate the first step on the road back to concert violin-ing, instead of personal assisting.”

I smiled thinly and took another long sip. A really long sip.

The group chatted about the various orchestras they played for or were vying for a spot with, and Regina talked up her musical shindig that was—she reminded me frequently—a week away.

Eventually, it was my turn to get the next round. I asked Melanie to come with me to help carry, and while we waited with the crowd around the glittering bar, I came clean.

“I didn’t audition for the Phil,” I blurted.

Melanie’s face contorted into concern. “Oh, hon. Is it still so bad?”

“It’s worse,” I said. “I didn’t freeze up, or fuck up, or even play at all. Mel...” I clutched her arm, “I *forgot*. It didn’t even cross my mind.”

Her concern morphed into perplexity, her brows coming together under her thick, dark bangs. “You...forgot? You won yourself an audition for the New York Philharmonic and you *forgot*?”

“I practice every day,” I said miserably. “But I don’t know what I’m practicing for. It’s all rote. Aimless. There’s no joy in it, and when you practice your art, you’re supposed to feel joy, aren’t you? You don’t do it for money or fame, you do it because you *have* to do it or your head will explode, right? But I can’t feel that anymore, and I don’t know how to get it

back.”

Melanie listened to all this as the crowd talk-shouted around us. Finally, she narrowed her eyes from behind her cat glasses. “It’s that Noah, isn’t it?”

“What? *No*. It’s not his fault. I wasn’t even thinking about that audition, Mel. It wasn’t even on my radar. And not because he’s demanding or takes up all my time. Believe me, if he had known, he’d have kicked me out the door.”

“He doesn’t have to take up your time to interfere. He’s taking up your headspace.”

That, I couldn’t deny. And I guess it was all over my face.

Melanie gaped. “Oh Christ, are you in love with him? He’s an asshole!”

The two gals in front of us turned, smirking.

“Nothing to see here, move along.” Melanie shooed at them, then looked at me. “Isn’t he?”

“No,” I said. “Not to me. To himself, maybe, and it spills over. I don’t know. He keeps telling me he’s no good for me.”

“Maybe you should listen.”

I thought of our kiss and the typewritten page I found in the office. “Maybe. But I’m getting mixed messages. I can’t tell if he’s saying that because he cares for me and it’s true and he’s trying to protect me, or if it’s a lie. A version of ‘It’s not you, it’s me.’”

The line moved up. Based on my own past experience behind the bar, we were still three people away from getting the bartender’s attention.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” I said. “He’s thoughtful, and smart, and has a gentle side no one sees. A side I don’t think he even realizes he has. He’s eloquent and protective and I know that if he could just learn to live with his disability...he’s got a chance.”

Maybe we have a chance.

Melanie watched me, her lips pursed.

“What?”

“Damn, you got it bad.”

“Oh, I know,” I groaned. “When I fall, I fall hard. I can’t help myself. Even knowing I might shatter into a million pieces when I hit the bottom.” I sighed, but a small smile escaped me. “I never do anything halfway.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Look, I don’t know what’s been going on with you and Lake; you’ve

been holed up in that townhouse for weeks. Whatever the deal, you gotta get your head in the game. Come to Regina's party. Bring him if you want, but come. Be among your own kind, and just...soak it up. Okay?"

"Okay. I promise."

"Yeah, yeah," she laughed dryly. "Try not to let it *slip your mind*. Oh, and I have the perfect solution to your confusion about Lake."

"Oh yeah?" I crossed my arms.

"Yeah. It's a magical thing. Works like a charm every time." She leaned close. "Talk. To. Him."



The loose easiness of my Friday night—and the two gin and tonics I'd consumed—began to fade on the subway ride back. I wasn't afraid of talking to Noah, I just hadn't realized I *needed* to. My feelings for him were a tangled mess, but at least now I could admit they were there. Telling Melanie was like putting skin and bones on a ghost. But as the train drew closer to my station, a feeling of unease turned the bubbly drinks in my stomach into biting turmoil.

After the subway, I raced up the front steps of the townhouse and thrust my key in the lock. But it gave too easily. The door was already unlocked. And I always lock the door. Always.

I stepped inside and locked it behind me. The house was dark, but Noah had no use for lights, so he wouldn't bother to turn any on. That should have made me feel better, except that the house felt so very still.

"Noah?"

It felt like calling into a soundless chamber. Not only was there no answer, there was no movement either. No floorboards creaking, no music playing, no footsteps. Nothing.

I tossed my purse and sweater onto the bed in my room and went upstairs to the second floor. It was empty and dark. I switched on the light near the stairs. Nothing.

You're freaking yourself out for no reason. He's upstairs, as usual, reading or sleeping.

But my skin itched and my nerves were humming again—this time with anxiety. Something was wrong. I knew it.

I hurried up to the third floor and stood outside the master bedroom.

“Hello? Noah?”

Silence.

“I wanted to talk to you...”

I pushed open the door. The bed was empty. The sitting area by the window was empty. I rushed inside and searched the bathroom and both walk-in closets. Empty.

“Don’t panic,” I muttered. “Just don’t panic.”

I raced back down the hall, to the workout room, then to the guest bed and bath, searching even the closets. No sign of him.

“Noah? Where are you?”

I hurried down to the second floor and went to the casual living room off the kitchen that wasn’t visible from the stairs, praying I’d see him stretched out on the couch, asleep. He wasn’t there. I checked the never-used dining room, the linen closet, bathroom, even the kitchen pantry, my heart pounding harder and faster every time my search turned up nothing.

“Noah! This isn’t funny!”

More silence.

I raced down to the first floor and searched my area, wondering if he’d snuck down there while I was upstairs, or had decided to take in some fresh air in the backyard. The first floor was empty and the door that led out to the backyard locked tight.

My terrified mind couldn’t refuse to admit it any longer.

Noah was gone.

chapter twenty



“Okay, let’s just think about this. No need to panic,” I said, but my voice sounded so high and tight in the empty house, I decided it was better for my nerves to not talk to myself anymore.

Maybe Noah’s out with Lucien and they didn’t tell me.

That made sense. Noah was doing better. Taking walks. Maybe he just got bored, and since I wasn’t around, he called Lucien. That didn’t jibe with his “under the weather” comment. Nor his bad day. But it could happen, right? I tried to imagine them together as I dug my cell phone out of my purse. I tried to picture them at a pub somewhere, having a beer; just two guys hanging out.

But Noah doesn’t drink.

“A restaurant then!” I shouted to drown out unhelpful thoughts. I called Noah’s number on my phone. It would ring with a voice telling him my name. He didn’t pick up and there was no option for voice mail. “So I can’t yell at him,” I muttered.

I called Lucien. That one did go to voicemail. I tried my best to leave a calm message and failed miserably.

“Lucien, it’s Charlotte. I might be freaking out over nothing and he’s probably with you. Noah, I mean. Is he? With you? Because he’s not here. I looked all over. So um, yeah, if you could call me and let me know if you know...anything? That’d be great, thanks!”

The wrap sweater I’d worn that night had a pocket. I put the sweater back on and stowed my cell phone there, then conducted another search of the house. This time I looked under beds and behind curtains as if Noah were playing hide and seek with me.

He wasn’t.

I went out the front door, my gaze sweeping the streets right and left.

“Noah?” I called. “*Noah!*”

I called Lucien twice more, and by eleven o’clock, my stomach was twisted into a knot so tight, I thought I’d throw up my cocktails. The fact that Lucien hadn’t called me back was both a relief and cause for concern. I still held out hope that he and Noah were together. Until he called me back, Noah was out with him and doing just fine.

At a quarter after, I started out the door to walk up and down the street when my phone rang showing Lucien’s number.

Oh please oh please oh please...

“Lucien...?”

“Charlotte, I’m so sorry. I’ve been in transit and didn’t realize my phone was off. Has he come back?”

My heart sank and then took off at a gallop so fast, it nearly made me dizzy. “No, he hasn’t.” Guilt wracked me. This was the second time I’d called Lucien in a panic. “I don’t blame you if you want to fire me. I went out... I left him alone and went out and now he’s gone.”

“He’s a grown man,” Lucien said solemnly. “If he chose to leave the house, that is not your doing.”

“You know it’s not that simple, Lucien. It’s not like you or me *leaving the house*. On our walks, he’s usually so anxious.”

“You’ve convinced him to take a walk? Outside?”

I closed my eyes against the tears that were threatening. Lucien had been away on business for weeks, and I’d forgotten that too. “God, I haven’t even told you anything *good* that’s happened, and now he’s lost...”

“Charlotte,” Lucien dropped his voice, as if he were afraid of being overheard on his end. “I’m in Connecticut. At the Lake residence. I only just arrived and cannot leave again without causing suspicion. I don’t wish to worry Noah’s parents unless I absolutely have to.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “What should I do?”

“Firstly, you must calm down. Wracking yourself with guilt helps no one. It is not your fault Noah left the house on his own. However, given his impaired state, I want you to phone the police.”

I clutched my stomach. “Oh God. Okay. I’ll do that and search the street here. I’ll go crazy if I don’t do something.”

“Be safe, my dear. Call me the first sign of news.”

I hung up with Lucien and called the police. After giving them Noah’s

description, I set out on a one-woman search party of my own. I started up the street, eastward. There were plenty of shops and restaurants a few blocks up; Noah might have decided to give one a try. But the fact he could hardly eat in front of me tried to muscle out any positive thinking.

The sky above me rumbled thunder, and a thick humid wind blew my skirt around my knees. An early summer storm was brewing. I hurried up the street, my gaze sweeping right and left, searching. Amsterdam was dark, so I kept going to Columbus, which was full of light and sound and shops that were still open.

“Too much,” I murmured. “I’ll never find him on my own.”

At that moment, the sky broke open and the rain came down.

I headed back to the townhouse and was soaked through by the time I arrived. My breath caught in my chest as my lungs constricted at the sight that greeted me.

Red and blue lights lit up the silvery rain that darted down. Two police officers were just stepping down from the front walk of the townhouse, returning to their squad car. My veins filled with icy dread.

They’re here to deliver the news. The worst news...

I hurried up to the police officers before they could climb into their car. “Excuse me?”

I couldn’t say anything else. I stood there, shivering in my drenched clothes, waiting for the policemen to tell me how bad it all was going to be.

“Ma’am?” said one officer—the pin on his rain jacket said Flores. “Do you reside here?”

My head bobbed. “Is Noah okay?”

“Noah Lake? Yeah, just dropped him off,” said the other officer. His name tag said Brant. “We picked him up in Queens. He’s a little banged up, but nothing serious.”

“Queens? What the hell was he doing in Queens?”

“Getting mugged,” Flores said. “According to the lady who called us, he was mouthing off to a couple of thugs who took his wallet, the crazy bastard.”

“It could have been worse,” Brant said calmly, shooting his partner a look. “Outside of comic books, blind guys don’t usually do so hot in street fights.”

“No, I don’t imagine they do,” I muttered. “Thank you, officers, for driving all this way.”

They tipped their caps. “Just doin’ our jobs, ma’am. Please get yourself

dry and warm, and have a good night.”

I went inside, my clothes dripping water all over the marble foyer floor. I closed the door and then sagged against it. My nerves felt raw, and I couldn't tell if I were pissed off at Noah or overwhelmed with relief that he was safe. Both, I decided, and stormed upstairs.

I texted Lucien: **He's home. He's fine. I'm going to kill him.**

The reply came as I rounded the second flight of stairs. **Thank heavens. Try not to maim him any more than you feel is necessary and call me in the morning. Adieu.**

I threw open the master bedroom door without knocking. Noah was in the bathroom, in the shower. His clothes were in a pile on the floor—black jeans, T-shirt, leather jacket, all dirt-streaked and scuffed.

I stood in the middle of the room, hugging myself, my rising anger keeping me warm despite my sodden state.

In the bathroom, the water shut off and the door opened. It occurred to me—a split second too late—that Noah might come out naked. But he had a towel slung low on his hips. A hot rush of lust swept through me at the sight of his body, and I hugged myself tighter, wondering how it was possible to feel so many different emotions all at the same time.

Noah stopped at the boundary between bedroom and bathroom. “Charlotte.” A small cut above his eye was dark with congealed blood, and a rounded lump was rising on his cheekbone. Otherwise, he looked unhurt.

“I'm here,” I said stonily.

He said nothing but made his way to the walk-in closet.

“Where were you?” I asked.

“Queens, apparently,” he said from inside. I heard drawers open and close.

“But...why? Were you visiting someone?” I swallowed hard. “You just left without telling me.”

Noah emerged from the closet. He wore a white T-shirt that accentuated every cut line of his torso, and flannel pajama pants. He looked like a Ralph Lauren model, damn him. He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms, his gaze cast toward me.

I flapped my hands. “Well?”

“I was riding the subway.”

“The subway,” I stated. “You took a train to Queens...?”

“More than one train. Dozens,” he said, his voice sounding strangely calm. “One would stop, I'd get off, cross the platform, and take another. Again and

again, changing trains and riding them until the names over the intercom were foreign to me.”

“But...why?”

He cocked his head. “Is a window open? I smell rain.”

“Noah, I was scared to death. I didn’t know where you were or what happened to you. Are you telling me you just went for a joyride? Do not tell me that you went out looking for a rush. Another high.”

His silence spoke volumes.

Anger poured into me as if from a pitcher. “Oh no. No, no, no. I’m not going to listen to you say you’re flying high off a fight with a couple of muggers. God, don’t tell me that or I’ll be sick.”

Noah’s brows knit in confusion. “How did you know I got mugged?”

“The police officers who dropped you off were kind enough to inform me. Unlike you, who didn’t tell me *anything*.”

Remorse flashed over his face. “I had to get out. I had to try. I was suffocating and I needed to *feel* something besides anger.”

That hurt. More than it should have. My heart started to crack. Small fissures that I had promised myself I’d never allow to form again, were forming. Was this my penance, to be suffered again and again, each time I let myself care for someone?

“You needed to feel something?” I asked, hating how small my voice sounded. “Well, too bad you aren’t me. Because apparently, I feel enough for the both of us.”

I started for the door, but Noah reached for me. “Charlotte, wait.” His hand snagged my sodden sweater. “What...?” He reached his other hand, grasped me, pulled me close, his face incredulous. He felt my shoulders and then my hair that was plastered to my cheeks. “I thought you were out with your friends. Were you...looking for me?”

“Of course I was!” I thrust away from him. “You didn’t even think of that, did you? You don’t care whether or not you make other people worried. Like your parents and friends. Like Lucien. God, poor Lucien...”

“Charlotte,” Noah’s voice was heavy. “Don’t do that. Don’t put yourself in that place where you’ll get hurt. Don’t think I’m just like everyone else, because I’m not.”

“No, you’re not,” I said. “And I’m glad. I—”

“No!” he cried. “Don’t be *glad*. Don’t tell me that you wouldn’t want me any other way or that my blindness has made me who I am. I want me

another way. I want to be what I was.”

“You have no idea, do you?” I retorted. “None whatsoever. You’re so wrapped up in what’s happened to you that you don’t give a shit what anyone else thinks or feels. *You are blind*. You are not what you were. But you are alive. You have *no idea* how much worse it could be.”

“Worse?” he thundered back. “You mean paralyzed or a vegetable? Because I’ve heard all that shit before, remember? A thousand times.”

“And yet not one word seems to have gotten through to you,” I spat, tears watering my voice. “I felt bad that no one had let you mourn your loss. But you’ve had time now, and you still don’t get it. They talked about being lucky, but they weren’t just talking about you. They were talking about themselves. The ones who care about you. *They* are the lucky ones. Lucien, your parents, your *sister*... They are lucky that they didn’t have to make *final arrangements* or place horrible phone calls and listen to the people on the other end fall apart. They didn’t have to pick out what to wear to your *funeral* or plan what to say in front of a room full of crying people when the only thing they want to say is *I wish we weren’t all standing here doing this right now*.”

My sobs were coming hard now, hot tears on my cheeks where the rain had been cool. I endeavored to calm down because the full impact of my fear for him—the enormity of my feelings—was trying to drown me.

“Charlotte...”

“What I’m trying to say, Noah, is that you can’t do that again. Not ever. Not while I’m here. I can’t take it. I can’t...”

The tears broke over me again and I felt his arms go around my shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, pressing his cheek against my damp hair. “I did it for you. For us. I know that sounds like madness, but I had to get out, to throw myself off that cliff into the black and prove that it wouldn’t destroy me.”

“But it could have. It could have been so much worse,” I whispered, clinging to him, and then his words hit me, wrapped around me like a warm blanket to stop my shivering. I looked up. “You did it for...us? What does that mean?”

“Charlotte, you’re soaking wet...”

“Tell me.”

He cupped my cheeks in his hands, wiping away my tears with his thumbs. “It means I’m trying to be what you need. To not be a coward. To

live...the way I am now.” He swallowed hard, his hazel eyes finding mine, holding my gaze for a few brief seconds. I knew he saw nothing, my heart ached to see him looking at me, even for just a moment. “You deserve more than what’s left of me.”

I shook my head. “There’s so much...”

“Not yet, but I’m trying. I’m so sorry I hurt you tonight. Or ever. You’re the light in my darkness, Charlotte. You are...”

He kissed me then, his lips warm on my cold skin. A quick touch and then retreat, a short inhalation, and then his mouth descended again, covering mine and then entering with a delicious sweep of his tongue.

Noah’s kiss seeped into my cracks, filled all my broken places. I felt it in the marrow of my bones, and I clung to him, kissed him back with all that I had, knowing that this was what I had been waiting for, that I’d never have something this strong and real ever again.

He slowed the kiss, then broke away. “Charlotte, you’re shivering.”

“Yes,” I breathed, craning up, not wanting my mouth to part from his.

He scowled, his expression seductively fierce and hungry. “We need to get you out of these wet clothes.”

I moaned softly, aching for him. Noah moved in again, hard and insistent, his tongue seeking entry. I gave it to him, taking him in deeply as he kissed me with a fiery aggression that flooded my entire body with heat. His tongue slid into my mouth, tangled with mine, and the scent of his skin in my nose—his closeness—sent shivers dancing down my back and my heart to pounding.

“Charlotte,” Noah breathed, his hands moving to wrap around me, to pull me close even as his words tried to push me away. “I’m scared I’m no good for you.” He buried his face against my neck, laid kisses there between his words. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I pulled away, held his face in my hands. “Then don’t.”

He stared, his eyes desperately searching for me, his expression pained. But I kissed him again, to show him I trusted him even when he didn’t trust himself.

He returned the kiss, first gently, reverently, like its own silent vow. Then we let the spark between us catch again, and his kisses became deliciously ferocious with need. I clung to him, delirious under the onslaught of his lips, tongue, and nipping teeth. And his hands...oh God, his hands were roaming with lust and want, but building an image of me in his mind too, sculpting me

for his mind's eye. He felt the flat of my stomach, the bow of my waist, the rounded curve of my hips, kissing me hard all the while.

He peeled my sweater from me, then felt along my sides to determine what I wore. Maddening tingles shivered over my skin as his hands slipped down my waist, to my hip, to the hem of my dress. He lifted and pulled it off me, letting it fall to the floor to join the sweater.

Down to my bra and panties now, I watched his sightless gaze sweep over me, seeing nothing, and yet I felt beautiful in his eyes—more beautiful as a woman standing before a man than I ever had before.

Noah took a half step closer and encircled me in his arms. He unclasped my bra and started to pull it off my shoulders, pausing just long enough to whisper in my ear, “I want to touch you.” The bra fell to the floor.

I nodded weakly and he held me close for a moment, warming me with his body.

Then his hands slid down my naked back, over my panties, and we both moaned as he ground me against him. I clutched his waist, dizzy with the sensations he was creating in me. Shards of electric pleasure radiated out to all parts of my body and converged between my thighs. I wasn't cold anymore; I couldn't remember what cold felt like. I was on fire.

He walked backward, leading us to the bed. When the back of his knees found the edge, Noah lifted me with a feral growl, turned around, and laid me down on the mattress. I immediately drew him on top of me.

He braced himself on his forearms over me, kissing me with teeth and lips and his tongue that was so sweet despite its insistence. And the weight of Noah on me... God, that alone was driving me crazy. He was so tall and strong and lean, and I couldn't quite grasp that the gorgeous man I'd seen in that *Planet X* promo shot was now on top of me and kissing me as if his life depended on it.

His moan filled my mouth, and he pressed his body against mine, his hard muscles against my soft breasts, his erection grinding into the cleft of my thighs and my hips rising and falling in answer. I gasped, reveling in his arousal—one that I had created—since he'd told me it hadn't happened since the accident.

I'd never wanted a man so badly, but there was too much clothing between us. I started to lift his shirt when Noah broke our kiss like a man coming up for air.

“Wait, wait. Damn...wait...” He shifted his weight to the bed and fought

to catch his breath. "I'm sorry...it's just...sensory overload. I haven't felt anything in months and now I'm feeling everything all at once."

I took a breath to calm my own racing heart. "It's okay," I said, stroking his cheek. "I'm sorry, I should have thought of that."

"You couldn't know. I didn't."

"Maybe we can just...slow down?" I ran my hands over his biceps and up the bunched muscles of his shoulders. "Are you still...aroused?"

He coughed a small laugh. "To say the least."

"Then let me take care of you. Slowly."

I kissed him again, though it was hardly a kiss. I hovered over his mouth with mine while my tongue swept across his lips. I drew the lower one in and sucked it for a moment before letting go.

"Jesus, Charlotte..."

I pushed him back onto the pillows. He brought one leg up to hide the evidence that strained against his pants, but not before I could see that part of him was just as impressive as the rest. The throbbing between my own legs increased, and I wanted to straddle him until we both came undone, but I had to wait. His senses were in overdrive to make up for his lost sight, and he hadn't touched anyone in almost a year.

I scooted up so that my body was flush with his and trailed little feathery kisses along his neck, my tongue darting now and then to taste the warm, faint saltiness of his skin. He smelled so good. Masculine and clean and whatever it was that made him, him.

Noah's breathing increased at once, and my hand on his chest felt the pounding of his heart. I moved lower, went under the hem of his shirt to feel the lines of his abs. They were so tight and hard they hardly seemed real to me. He sucked in a breath, and those muscles contracted under my touch.

I nuzzled his neck now, as my hand went lower, touching him over his pants for the first time. He let out a harsh exhale and closed his eyes. "Oh, Christ..."

Slowly, slowly, I stroked him over the smooth material and then ventured under the waistband, under his boxer-briefs, until my hand closed around the warm hard length of him. He made a noise deep in his chest, and I answered with a soft moan.

"Oh my God, Noah," I blurted, unable to help myself. "You're magnificent."

He grabbed my wrist, and I thought it was too much, but he showed me

what he liked: squeeze, stroke, release, over and over.

I braced myself over him and touched him the way he wanted to be touched while he slipped his right arm around me, his hand making a fist in my hair and sending delicious shivers down my spine. Noah's eyes were open now, cloudy with lust, while my hand caressed him with increasing speed and pressure.

"Is this okay?" I whispered in his ear.

He nodded, teeth clenched. "I thought you'd be shy. You're not shy."

"No. I like doing this for you."

God, do I ever.

He turned to me, his eyes always searching. "I want to touch you. I have to touch you, Charlotte."

"Yes," I whispered, shivering in anticipation. "Oh yes, please..."

Noah brought his left hand across his body, under my stroking arm, and found my waist. His fingers trailed down over my hip and I parted my thighs immediately, shocked at how badly I wanted this. He pressed against the dampness between my legs, and I pressed back, my body begging for him.

"Do you want me to?" he asked, his fingers venturing under my panties.

I couldn't speak, I only nodded against his shoulder, then inhaled sharply and nearly lost control of my hand that touched him as a bolt of ecstasy shot through me. Noah slid two fingers inside me and made a beckoning motion while circling his thumb over the sensitive bud of flesh. I bit back a cry, my back arching, my thoughts reduced to the basest desire for *more*.

"Oh, God, you feel so good," Noah breathed against my neck. "Charlotte, you feel incredible..."

Somehow, I managed to keep touching him, and he touched me as we kissed and became tangled in each other. The pleasure grew between us like a rising sun until Noah gave a half grunt, half moan through gritted teeth. His muscles tensed, and then he let go, exhaling raggedly, his body shuddering with release.

A fleeting thrill of pride that I had brought him there flashed across my mind, then was lost in the delirium of my own climax. Noah's fingers thrust gently but deeply a final time, his thumb pressing down on that ball of nerves, and then pleasure unlike anything I'd ever experienced exploded across every inch of my body. It seemed to go on and on, until Noah withdrew his hand and we both collapsed, breathing heavily in the dimness of his room.

I lay quiet for a moment, wallowing in an afterglow that was—come to find out—a real thing. I basked. I reveled. My first non-self-created orgasm. I glanced at Noah beside me. His eyes were closed, the tension gone from his body so that he looked as if he were sinking into the bed.

I felt a laugh want to break free, but I could practically see all the doubt and worry creep back into Noah's thoughts, stealing the peaceful contentment from his face. I couldn't let it.

"So," I said, grinning. "Was it good for you?"

Noah froze for a second as my silly question sank in. Then I watched his lips twitch slightly. I held my breath as his mouth turned upward, and then he smiled. Noah Lake actually smiled. My heart leapt—I'd never seen anything more beautiful. But the smile kept going as a strange sound rumbled in his chest and then burst out of him. Laughter.

Noah laughed, and I couldn't help but laugh with him, until he turned to me and I nearly fainted to see his handsome, smiling, laughing face this close to me. Holy God, he was gorgeous while sulky and brooding, but a smile transformed him into the man I suspected him to be when I first saw his photo. The real Noah Lake had been right there, just beneath the surface all along.

"God, Charlotte, you're unbelievable," he said. "I must have done something right for you to be here."

He kissed me, and I felt his smile against my lips, and that was another kind of beauty all its own. Silly, happy tears burned my eyes for a moment because that smile meant he was—for a little while, anyway—free from the bitter pain that had gripped him for so long.

"Will you stay the night with me?" he asked, his gaze sweeping over my face. "I don't mean *sleep* with me. I just mean, go and put on whatever it is you wear to bed while I change. Then come back to me, let me kiss you a little more, and then go to sleep."

"Yes," I said, grinning like a loon. "Yes, I will. I'd love to. Definitely, and other assorted ways of saying yes."

I slipped downstairs to put on a T-shirt, fresh underwear, and soft sleep pants. My body was still humming from Noah's touch when I raced back upstairs. He lay on his bed, having changed his pants and put on a black shirt that made his eyes look too astonishing for words. The floorboards creaked at his door, and his head came up. He smiled softly and that put him over the edge.

I didn't know if or when I'd get used to how beautiful he was when he smiled. I hoped it was never.

I climbed into bed with him, and he put his arm around me at once, kissing me deeply before letting me go. Exhaustion reared its head—I'd been wrung out by the shifting spectrum of emotions I'd experienced that night: from dread to lust to pure, heart-pounding joy. I felt my eyes getting heavy at once.

Outside the windows, thunder rumbled and rain smattered the glass.

"Maybe it's good we didn't sleep together tonight," Noah said. "Maybe it's better to take it slow." He held me more tightly to him. "I still have work to do, Charlotte. Demons to battle, I guess."

"So do I," I said, thinking of my blown audition. "But I feel...hopeful."

"Yeah," Noah said. "Hope. Gradations of darkness."

I could hardly keep my eyes open. "Hmm?"

"Something someone told me once." He kissed me, stroked my cheek. "Thank you, Charlotte."

"For what?"

"For being here. With me."

He held me tighter and I burrowed into him, letting the warmth of his body carry me to sleep where I dreamed, and in my dreams, I was soaring.

act ii: allegro

Every moment of light and dark is a miracle. —Walt Whitman

chapter twenty-one



She'd gone downstairs, but I could still smell her on my pillows, on the sheets, on my skin. I lay cocooned in the blankets, in the scent of her, my body remembering the feel of her and wanting more. Wanting her completely, in every way, now and into some unknown stretch of time.

My future with Charlotte, I realized, was the last undiscovered country I would ever travel. But I had amends to make before I could take a single step.

I found my phone on the bedside table and told it to call Lucien. I spoke with the old guy for twenty minutes. A *good* twenty minutes. I didn't say everything I needed to say; I'd save that for when I was with him in person, but I said enough.

Plans made, we hung up and I threw off the covers. I made my way across the room, to the very back of my walk-in closet. I smelled the remnants of my favorite cologne hanging in the air, felt the pants and suit jackets hanging all around me. All designer threads, usually worn for some fancy *Planet X* event. A pang of regret slammed into my chest. I wondered what they were doing over at the magazine. The HQ was here in the city. My former co-workers were there. My former friends too; I'd steadfastly ignored every single message from anyone since rehab. They were nearby, going about their business, planning trips, working on articles.

I should be there. Or better, out on assignment somewhere, feeling wind tear at me while I jump or ski or glide over some vast horizon bursting with color.

The anger started to burn, and I almost let it catch. But then I thought of Charlotte, and I swallowed it down. *Keep going*, I thought, the same way I used to mentally boost myself during PT. *Just keep going.*

I felt my way to the back corner of the closet and found what I'd come for.

I hefted the cane in my right hand and unfolded it. Forty-six inches of aluminum, two large sections covered in white reflector tape—or so the counselors told me. The handle was black—more hearsay—and it had a loop of nylon at the top to go around the wrist. The cane—or white cane, they called it—was retractable and lightweight and I fucking hated it.

I nearly threw it back in the corner. Instead, I used it to find my way to the dresser. I told myself it didn't make anything easier; the closet was small. Only an idiot would get lost in it. But I had to admit, I felt kind of good holding the cane. Safer, somehow.

On top of the dresser, I found an old baseball cap. Under my fingers, the raised stitching on the front resolved itself into an N superimposed on a Y. Blue cap, white thread. I put it on and turned it backward. My hair hid the scars on the back of my head—also raised and distinct—but one can't be too careful.

I opened the top dresser drawer and felt around amid the cufflinks, the expensive watches I would never wear again, and the money clips I couldn't use anymore. I found the pair of sunglasses my sister had bought when I'd gotten out of rehab. I'd nearly smashed them to show Ava I wasn't going to play the part of the considerate blind guy who conceals his empty gaze from the public. But that was just me being a pain in the ass since I'd had no plans to venture out anyway.

Now that I was going to go out into the world for real, the thought of my aimless stare drawing attention made my skin itch. I slipped the glasses on. They felt light but sturdy. And expensive. Ava had great taste. I wondered what I looked like in them.

I wondered if I might someday forget what I looked like.

Charlotte called up to me. "Ready?"

No. But I'm trying, baby. I really am.

"On my way," I called back and went out.

chapter twenty-two



I nearly fainted to see Noah come downstairs in a baseball cap, sunglasses, and holding a white cane. He wore a pair of stylishly worn-out blue jeans and a long-sleeved black cotton shirt that fit tightly over his torso, accentuating everything. I stood in the second floor living room, slack-jawed as he approached.

“You’re staring at me, aren’t you?” he asked. An echo of the first time I’d met him, but this time there was no bitterness in his voice, and a small smile graced his lips.

“As if I can help it,” I said. “I’m going to need to borrow that cane to beat away the women. They’re going to come flocking to this whole adorable, backward-baseball-cap-wearing-blind-guy thing you got going on here.”

He smirked. “Right. The cliff dive was just an elaborate ploy to pick up chicks.”

It was the first time he’d spoken of the accident so lightly. My heart swelled.

“I’m not a big fan of covering up those amazing eyes of yours,” I told him, “but you look...sexy.”

“Mmm,” he said, running hands down my bare arms. “What are you wearing?”

“Blue blouse, sleeveless. Loose cotton pants, beige. Sandals.”

“You look beautiful.”

I almost teased him back that he was just flattering me, but I could see he meant it, in whatever way he perceived me. “Thank you.”

He bent to kiss me, and shivers danced along my spine. It was a gentle kiss, but with Noah, I’d quickly come to find out, there was always a smoldering energy in every touch, ready to ignite.

I pulled away with a nervous laugh. “This is...weird.”

“Weird? Why?”

“Being *with* someone again. I’m just not used to it, I guess. And we’re already living together...”

“We’re taking it slow, remember?”

“And what about the whole employee/employer thing?” I asked. “I don’t particularly want to talk about us in a business sense, but don’t we have to deal with that?”

“Yeah, we do,” Noah said. “But can we have *one* date first?”

“Yes, please.” I laughed. “Are you ready to go?”

Noah frowned. “I guess so. We’re not eating there, right? I think I’ve had enough Annabelle’s to last me a lifetime.”

“No, we’re going to a little bagel place on Amsterdam, but I promised Anthony I’d stop by Annabelle’s. I can’t wait for you to meet him.”

He rubbed his chin. “They know me there, don’t they? Or they know *of* me. The asshole shut-in who kept firing his assistants?”

I grasped his hand that wasn’t holding the cane. “You don’t have to do a single thing you’re not up for. I can always call Anthony—”

Noah brought his hand up to my chin, tracing my lower lip with his thumb. “It will make you happy to go to Annabelle’s, right? So let’s go to Annabelle’s.”

My heart felt like it was ready to burst now, and I tried not to get overly emotional. But it was taking some time to get used to this; the heady euphoria of being cherished and cared for. I felt reckless and impetuous but also exhilarated too. I felt like how a skydiver must feel the moment before she throws herself out of the plane.



On the sidewalk outside, Noah took the crook of my arm with his left hand and held his white cane in his right.

“Talk about weird,” he muttered.

“You’ll get used to it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I gave his hand a squeeze.

We walked, and I could practically feel the tension coiled tight in Noah’s every muscle. His mouth was turned down in a mask of concentration and his

grip on my arm was a smidge shy of uncomfortable. But by the time we turned up Amsterdam Street—damp from last night’s deluge—he was walking easier, his cane tapping the sidewalk side to side in a light rhythm.

I didn’t want to make Noah self-conscious, so I bit back the stream of joyful encouragement that was threatening to pour out of me and just strolled with him.

We arrived at Annabelle’s, its yellow and white striped awning sagging with a small puddle of rainwater. The restaurant was busy but not packed. Maxine greeted us at the door with her usual stiff smile. “Two for breakfast?”

“Hello, Maxine.”

She blinked under layers of black kohl eyeliner and silver eye shadow, then recognition dawned on her face. “Charlotte? My, my, you look... different!” She recovered herself quickly, and her over-painted lips turned down in their usual tight frown. She glanced over my shoulder at Noah, and I saw her eyes widen slightly but she said nothing; she wasn’t about to show she’d been caught off-guard twice.

“Hmmp? Breakfast?”

“No, we’re just here to see—”

“Conroy! Get over here.”

Anthony strode across the entry and swept me up in his arms. He lifted me clear off the ground in a huge bear hug before setting me down and holding me at arm’s length.

“You’re looking good, girl!”

“That’ll do, Mr. Washington,” Maxine said, swatting Anthony’s arm lightly with a menu. “After he’s done making a scene, Anthony will take care of you,” she told me and left to attend other customers with a final, parting smirk.

“Who’s your friend?” Anthony asked casually though he flashed his eyes comically at me.

“This is Noah Lake,” I said, beaming. “Noah, this is my good friend, Anthony Washington.”

Noah offered his hand uncertainly. “Good to meet you, man.”

“You too, you too.” Anthony reached over and shook it heartily, though he was looking at me and bursting with questions. “Hey, I got just the table for you...”

“Oh, we can’t stay,” I began, but Noah nudged my elbow.

“I can stand one more omelet from here if you can.”

“You sure?”

“Hang out with your friend, Charlotte. I’m good. Or I will be once we sit down, and I don’t feel like everyone’s staring at me.”

“No one’s staring at you.” I saw Clara rushing over, her eyes wide, auburn ponytail flying. “Well, almost no one.”

“Charlotte?” Clara cried, as if we hadn’t seen each other in years, instead of the last time I picked up an order, a few weeks ago. “How *are* you?” She engulfed me in a hug, then quickly—very quickly—turned to Noah. “Hello, I’m Charlotte’s friend, Clara Burns.”

“Noah Lake.” He offered his hand again, stiffly, in her general direction, and I could tell he was losing his patience.

Clara took his hand in both of hers and held on tight. “A pleasure. Charlotte told us she was working for you, but she totally failed to mention how adorable you are. And tall! What, six-four? I’m five-seven and you just tower over me!”

He smiled thinly. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Clara wasn’t put off. “I love your sunglasses! You get to wear them inside, right? Like Bono? Very cool.”

Anthony swooped in and hustled Clara back to work, and I leaned into Noah. “What did I tell ya about the women? She even used ‘adorable.’”

“You can’t see it, but I’m rolling my eyes at you behind my sunglasses. That I wear inside. Because I’m cool like Bono.”

Anthony led us to a table in his section—a two-top by the window where passersby strolled the sidewalk on the other side. He started to hand us two menus, then stopped, wincing apologetically. I took one and waved off the other. A split second before the silence would have made Noah self-conscious, Anthony cracked a joke and then left to get us coffee.

I glanced at Noah. He sat stiffly, silently, and I started to feel guilty that this was too much for him. A busser came by—someone I didn’t recognize—and dropped off two glasses of water.

“Water on your right, about two o’clock.”

“Thanks,” he said and eased a breath. I thought he was glad for something to do with his hands while I perused the menu.

“What are you in the mood for?” I asked.

“You,” Noah said, “but I’ll settle for eggs Benedict. For now.”

“Aren’t we saucy today? I thought we were going to take it slow.”

“Whose dumb idea was that?”

I realized I was grinning ear-to-ear, but I couldn't help it. Noah was sitting here, in a restaurant, cracking jokes and flirting with me.

Annabelle's began to get busier. Anthony returned to take our order, but he hadn't time to chat. Under the bustling noise and conversations, I heard my cell phone chime a text. I pulled it from my purse and checked it.

"Something wrong?" Noah asked after I stared at the message without saying anything.

"No, just my friend reminding me about a party this Friday."

"Why do you sound like that's bad news?"

"It's a Juilliard party," I answered. "Regina invites a bunch of musicians from our department to play TV show themes and musical drinking games. I used to go all the time, but I haven't been to one since...um, since I took time off. But I sort of promised my best friend I'd go and now..."

Noah leaned over the table. "Why not go? Hang out with your friends..."

"Because they won't want to just 'hang out,'" I said, pricklier than I'd intended. "They'll wonder why I won't play, and hound me about it, and ask a bunch of questions I don't really feel like answering."

I thought Noah was going to hound me himself, but he only nodded thoughtfully and let the subject go.

Anthony returned with eggs Benedict and french toast. I watched Noah find the saltshaker, sniff it, set it down, pick up the pepper. He poured some into his palm, and when he had as much as he wanted, he brushed it over his food as if he'd been doing it like that for years.

My heart soared with joy that Noah seemed to be on the path toward acceptance. He wasn't there yet—he still scowled and hunched his shoulders self-consciously when a bite of egg slipped away from his searching fork. And when someone in the kitchen dropped a huge tray of silverware onto the tile floor he swore like a sailor, flinching hard enough to slosh our coffees in their saucers. But he was trying, and I was overcome with pride.

When he had time, Anthony snuck in a bit of Annabelle gossip—the boss's nephew had turned out to be a terrible waiter—and Clara came by again to flirt shamelessly with Noah. Then it was time to go. But we were taking our time. Being leisurely.

I sometimes wonder how different things would have been had we left Annabelle's five minutes sooner.

"Holy shit! *Noah Lake*? Noah *fucking* Lake? Is that you?"

I turned to look—the entire restaurant turned to look—as a tall man with

coppery curls, dressed in stylishly casual clothes, stopped at our table on his way out the door with two friends.

Noah cocked his head. "Deacon?"

"In the flesh!" The man nodded at his friends. "Hey, I'll catch up."

This guy, Deacon, stood over our table, hands on his hips, shaking his head from side to side. "I can't fucking believe it. The dead have arisen! How the hell have you been? Oh, goddamn, they weren't kidding! You're still really fucking blind, aren't you?"

Deacon waved his hand in front of Noah's face, and I felt the blood rush to my cheeks.

"How've you been, Deacon?" Noah said, sounding strangely subdued. "It's good to hear your voice, man."

"I've been good. Really fucking good, as a matter of fact."

Deacon asked to steal a chair from the next table. The couple hardly had a chance to reply before he took it and slid it back up against our table. He straddled his long legs on either side and rested his arms on the back, like he was settling in to stay awhile.

Deacon stared at Noah, still shaking his head. "Unreal. It's been...what? Six months?"

"Just about," Noah said. "Deacon McCormick, this is Charlotte Conroy —"

"Fuck me, where are my manners?" Deacon laughed. He turned to me, his eyes raking me up and down. I felt the trail of his gaze like slime on my skin. "Sweet Charlotte, a pleasure to meet you."

He offered his hand. I reluctantly took it.

"You know Noah from the magazine?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed, and can I just tell you, in a business chock-full of crazy motherfuckers, this guy right here was the bat-shit craziest of us all!"

Deacon reached out and clapped his hand on Noah's shoulder. I flinched and so did Noah, and I thought for sure he would toss Deacon on his ass. I sort of hoped he would. Deacon instantly and completely rubbed me the wrong way. But Noah only listened as his friend unspooled a story about them scuba diving in Australia and an encounter with a great white shark. A faint, pained smile ghosted over Noah's lips as Deacon spoke.

"We were all shitting our suits, and Lake, here, looked like he was about to put a leash on the damn thing and take it home."

"It wasn't that big of a shark," Noah said to me, as if sensing I wasn't

impressed.

Deacon laughed. “Liar. This man was a legend.”

Noah winced again at the *was*. Deacon didn’t notice but I did, and I felt the joy of the morning dim a little.

“Goddamn, Yuri is going to blow a gasket to know you’re here!” Deacon cried. “Are you going to stop by *PXHQ*? You have to! The whole gang will flip to see you walk through the door!”

“Aren’t they out on assignment?” Noah asked. “Our gang, I mean? Billy and Logan and all those guys?”

“Billy’s in Iceland, Logan’s in...New Zealand, I think? And Polly’s gearing up for the X Games in August. They’re the last to trickle in to the city.”

“Everyone’s coming here?”

“Dude! The Global Ball is in two weeks, and this year it’s going to be *here*. The Grand Empire Ballroom in the grand fucking Empire State Building. Hell, I almost guessed you were here for the party.”

“I don’t work at *Planet X* anymore,” Noah said, and I heard the longing in his voice, faint but there.

“Hey, you took a nasty fall, bro,” Deacon said, instantly solemn. “The fact that you’re still alive is a goddamn miracle, and I know it wasn’t easy on you, the whole recovery. I also know you didn’t mean any of that shit you said to me back at the hospital. You had some issues to work out and I respect that.”

Deacon looked at me and winked, all solemnity flying out the window. “But you got this luscious little gal taking care of you, and you’re better, right? You gotta come! It is going to be one crazy rager. And who knows what might happen on the job front? I’m telling you, Yuri will cry to see you. He can’t stop talking about how great your articles were, and he won’t stop bitching at the rest of us to step up our game.”

“It’d be good to talk to Yuri again,” Noah said.

I said nothing but sipped my water, my stomach leaden with dread. I couldn’t say why exactly, but I didn’t want Noah having anything more to do with *Planet X*.

It’s not the magazine; it’s only because Deacon’s a scumbag, I told myself, but it didn’t do a thing to dispel my unease. I looked uncertainly to Noah, wishing I could get a look from him—some hint about how he was absorbing all of this, but his eyes were hidden behind the sunglasses.

“Yuri wants to see you,” Deacon was saying, ticking off names on his

thick fingers. “Jonesy says you’re the only reason he survived Cabo that one year...remember? He drank himself stupid on the roof of the hacienda? Would’ve croaked if you hadn’t talked him down.”

Deacon turned to me. “We always gave Noah shit because he never drank, but that night, Jonesy was lucky one of us was sober enough to help the poor bastard out. None of the rest of us knew what to say.”

“You mean you talked him down? From...jumping?” I asked Noah, but Deacon answered.

“Oh, who the fuck knows? Jonesy’s always so dramatic, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was just doing it for the attention.”

Now I wished Noah could read *my* eyes, but Deacon was still going.

“Who else? A shit-ton of the usual hotties... Ooh la la! Valentina will be there. I’m sure she can’t *wait* to see you again, good buddy. But hold up, are you off the market?” He looked between Noah and me and wagged his eyebrows.

Noah started to reply when Deacon jokingly elbowed him. “That just means more for me. Hell, poor Lake! Can’t even look-but-don’t touch!”

He waved his hand in front of Noah’s eyes again and my knee involuntarily bumped the table.

“Stop doing that,” I snapped.

Noah jerked his head. “Doing what?” The scowl that had been absent from his lips was back and I sort of hated Deacon for that.

“Ooh, she’s a spitfire!” Deacon laughed. “I like that. Hey, I’m just playing. Noah knows how I roll. You got a feisty one on your hands, my man.” He glanced at the window where the two friends he’d ditched were impatiently waiting. “Shit, I gotta bail.” He fished a card out of his wallet and gave it to me. “Charlotte, this is HQ’s main phone. If you want to go to the ball—you and your plus-one,” he added with a wink, “just call and tell them, and it’s a done deal. Okay?”

I knew Deacon was teasing, but I didn’t feel up to humoring him. “That’s up to Noah.”

Deacon swiveled. “What’ll it be, Lake?”

“I’ll think about it,” Noah said, and to my dismay, I could tell he meant it.

“Fuckin’-A,” Deacon said, and then he studied Noah for a moment again, shaking his head. “After those photos I saw of you in the hospital, bro? With your back all torn up and shit? You’re one tough bastard, but don’t go disappearing on me again, okay? I miss you, man.”

“Yeah, you too, Deacon,” Noah said dully. The scowl was gone. He sounded like someone lost in a fog.

Deacon gave me a final once over as he stood up. “Sweet Charlotte. A pleasure. Get this guy to the party, all right?” He leaned over me and said in a stage whisper that purposely carried to Noah, “*Make sure his pants match his jacket.*”

He laughed loudly, his hand stealing a caress of my shoulder before finally leaving.

A silence fell and I was waiting for Noah to tell me how sorry he was his old friend was such a jerk, and that he wasn’t even going to think about going to that party. Instead, he turned his coffee mug around and around.

“What did he mean by the hospital photos?” he asked, his voice low.

My stomach dropped. I saw no point in deflecting, so I told him the truth about the illicit cell phone pics.

“When did you see them? Before you worked for me?”

“Yes.”

“Are they...bad?” He snorted. “What am I saying, of course they’re bad. What else?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling slightly queasy.

“I mean, it’s really damn easy to make a fool out of me these days. Is there anything else floating around out there I don’t know about?”

I was unable and unwilling to start our relationship—or whatever it was—with a lie, omitted or otherwise.

“Lucien told me you have a Camaro. In storage, in Florida. That it’s the love of your life, and that you can’t bring yourself to sell it.”

He nodded, his mouth downturned, his eyes hidden behind the glasses. “Anything else?”

“No. I promise. Are you angry with me?”

Noah’s head shot up. “What? No, babe. Three months ago, yeah, probably. But that would’ve been unfair anyway. The photos are out there. Nothing I can do about it. And my car...” He pursed his lips in a wistful smile. “Not much I can do about that either.”

I reached over and gave his hand a squeeze.

He raised my fingers to his lips. “Let’s get out of here.”

I ushered Noah out of the restaurant after giving Anthony a hug goodbye and a promise to call him later.

We walked back to the townhouse in a silence that stretched throughout

the rest of the day. Noah spoke only a handful of distracted words to me, and when he took off the sunglasses, I could see his eyes were full of thoughts, thoughts that he wasn't sharing with me.

That night, we lay on his bed, and I read from *The Origin of Silence* by Mendón. Noah lay on his back, his gaze cast up, his fingers laced behind his head.

“Eduardo pressed on the stone and wasn't surprised when the rock shifted, a door opening on a black chamber. Eduardo took a step and Sara clutched his arm. ‘Don't.’

“He touched her cheek. ‘I can't go back, and I can't stay here. Come with me.’”

I shut the book with a snap, and Noah—finally—turned his face to me.

“Charlotte?”

“Not in the mood for it, I guess.”

Noah turned on his side toward me, and for the first time since Annabelle's, I felt he was really *with* me. “I'm sorry I've been out of it all day. Hearing Deacon talk about *Planet X* and about Yuri—my old editor—and all of our friends... Hell, just hearing Deacon's voice... It was like being catapulted back in time and I've been submerged in memories ever since.”

“Understandable,” I said, my fingers flipping the pages of the book, making them flutter. “Are you going to go to that party?”

“You don't want me to. I can hear it.”

“I don't like Deacon. I'm sorry, but I don't, and the whole idea of that Global Ball, or whatever it is, makes me nervous. For you.”

“I'm sorry Deacon was an ass to you. He's a good guy, actually, but he comes on strong.”

“A *lot* strong. And I didn't like the way he talked about your blindness. Is everyone at the party going to be like that? Just so...crude?”

Noah shrugged. “Maybe. But I can take it. I *have* to take it and move on. Isn't that the end game?”

“I suppose. Just seems like an awful lot, awfully fast.”

“It only seems that way because I've been doing a whole lot of nothing until now. Until you.” He gave me a smile I didn't return. “And I wouldn't go just for the party. I'd go to see Yuri. To reconnect. I need a career. A purpose. And if I still had a job at *PX*, it might be good for me. To know my old life isn't as dead and gone as I thought.” He smiled ruefully. “Like the book says, I can't go back, and I can't stay here.”

“I know, it’s like Mendón is a psychic.” I gave *Origin of Silence* a dirty look. “Can’t you just meet Yuri privately? Do you have to go to this party?”

“I have to go. To show them all I’m not hiding anymore. To show *me* that I’m done hiding.”

I forgot myself and nodded.

“Charlotte?”

“I’m here,” I said softly.

“Yes, you are.” Noah moved close, slipping his arms under me and holding me tightly. His hazel eyes swept over me, searching, and then he lowered his mouth to mine in a soft kiss. “Until you, I was lost. Sometimes, you’re the only thing that ever feels real to me.”

I stroked his cheek. “I’ll always be right here for you, Noah.”

“Promise? Come with me, Charlotte. I want to walk into that ballroom with you. I’d be so fucking proud to do it.”

“Oh, you and your f-bombs, you sweet-talker.”

He laughed. “Deacon’s an acquired taste, but Yuri is a good man. He’s a Russian version of Lucien. You’ll love him. And I promise the party won’t be terrible. For you. It’ll probably be a goddamn nightmare for me, but if you’re there, I think I can get through it.”

“For you,” I said. “But Noah, promise me if it’s too much or just...not what you think it is anymore, that you’ll leave. Okay?”

“I promise.” He kissed me and rolled over, taking me with him so that I was snuggled tight against him. “But will you make me a promise too? Actually, one promise, one favor.”

“Favor first.”

“Will you come with me to Connecticut next weekend? To visit my parents? I called Lucien this morning and—”

“You did? You are? You’re going to see them?” I felt like jumping up and down except I didn’t want to leave his arms. “I’m so happy for you. Of course, I’ll go.” Then the reality of it sunk in. “Wait. I’m going to meet your parents?”

“And Ava, my sister. Lucien says she’ll fly in.”

“Okay, so that’s not intimidating at all.” I laughed nervously. “When do you want to leave? Friday night?”

“Saturday morning. Friday night is your friend’s musical party and that’s the promise I want from you. That you’ll go.”

I sighed. “So many social engagements, so little time.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes. But will you come with me?” I buried my smile against his shoulder. “I’d be so fucking proud if you did.”

Noah laughed and I laughed with him until he kissed me. And then again. And again. Each kiss drew me away from my thoughts and deeper into him. His tongue plumbed my mouth in a way that made me ache between my legs. That kiss...like a promise of something more to come.

I gasped when he finally broke the kiss to trail his mouth hotly over my neck, generous with teeth and tongue. In seconds, I was dizzy for want of him. He took hold of me, lifted me, and took me with him as he climbed off the bed.

“I’m going to make you feel good right now, Charlotte,” he whispered, then lifted off my shirt and flung it away. “You deserve to feel good...”

My heart clanged hard in my chest to think what he had in mind, and then I gasped as he pressed me against the bedpost.

“What are you doing?” I breathed.

“Putting these stupid posts to good use,” he said gruffly, and wrapped his arms around me, to unclasp my bra. He flung that away too and laid both hands on my breasts, fantastically rough and needy. He crushed his mouth to mine again, his tongue swirling circles, and I felt that unspoken promise again in the raw, wanton kiss.

“I love these,” he said, moving to lick and suck at my earlobe, while his fingers teased my nipples.

“I noticed,” I managed and reached for him, needing to feel his skin against mine. I lifted his shirt up and off and greedily let my hands explore the tight muscles of his abdomen and the hard planes of his chest. “And you...I’ll never get used to this.”

He cut off my words with another of those kisses that seemed to be crafted to erode my sanity, and he grabbed my wrists and lifted them over my head.

“Hold on and don’t let go,” he commanded, and I nearly came with just those words, with the anticipation of what was coming next. It was so good to see him like this, full of confidence, aggressive, so sure of every move he made. A little voice whispered he’d been with countless women before the accident; he had experience to spare.

But he’s mine now, I thought, until my thoughts were swept away as Noah knelt before me, kissing my stomach while his hands gripped my hips.

“Oh God...” I whispered as he tugged my panties down until they landed

around my ankles.

“Step out of them,” he growled and no sooner had I one foot free, than he hooked my leg over his shoulder and put his mouth between my thighs, delving deep.

I cried out and clutched the bedpost above my head for dear life as Noah kissed me the same way he’d kissed my mouth—with intense, driving passion that was almost animalistic except that he knew exactly what he was doing.

I felt the ecstasy swell and roar and crash almost immediately, but he kept going, sucking and then swirling his tongue until my hips bucked helplessly against his relentless kiss. I came apart under him again, and he would have tried for a third time if I hadn’t begged him to stop.

“I can’t hold on...” I gasped. “And my legs...don’t work anymore.”

Noah slowly got to his feet, tracing a path up my body with his mouth until he was standing. Then he swept me in his arms and laid me on the bed where I seemed to sink into the soft mattress. He lay over me, held me, a Cheshire cat smile of satisfaction on his lips.

“What about you?” I said, still trying to catch my breath.

“If I did what I intended, you shouldn’t want to do anything more than sleep for a hundred years.”

I sighed heavily. “That’s so true. But if you’re suffering...”

He laughed. “We have time. And besides, it’s too easy for me to get lost in you, your body, your scent, your skin.” He flopped on his back beside me. “I almost need to recover, myself. From today in general. And you. I have a feeling that when we do sleep together, I’m going to need therapy after.”

I snuggled up close to him. “Okay, but if you change your mind tonight...”

He grinned. “You’ll be the first to know.”

chapter twenty-three



The following Friday, Noah and I took a cab to Regina Chen’s place in Hell’s Kitchen, my hand clutched tightly in his the whole way. The red brick building loomed above us with its rectangular windows and fire escapes zigzagging up the façade. The strains of music—modern radio, not live—and voices talking and laughing could be heard, even though Regina’s place was four flights up.

“You ready?” Noah asked.

“Um, sure. I guess.” I buzzed the door. “It’s going to be loud in there. And crowded. Are *you* ready?”

He smiled down in my direction. “Baby, I was born ready.”

I snorted a laugh as the door buzzed open, but I felt Noah tighten his grip on my arm as we started up the first of three flights of stairs.

“There’s a rooftop terrace if it gets to be too much,” I told him as we climbed, “or we can just leave...”

“Charlotte, this is your night. We’re not leaving until you want to.” At one of the landings, he pulled me to him. “You’re going to do great and then after...” He bent and kissed me, one of his patented Noah Lake kisses that suffused my entire body with heat and left a lingering promise of more when it ended.

A door on the floor above us opened and Regina Chen’s voice wafted down on a current of loud music. “I don’t know who the hell it is; I buzzed them in like a million years ago...” I looked up to see Regina lean over the banister. “Oh. My. God. You’re actually here. Charlotte Conroy is actually here!”

Regina hurried down the stairs and threw her arms around my neck. “I’m so happy, you have no idea.”

“I have *some* idea.” I laughed.

She glanced at the violin case in my hand. “Holy shit, it’s on now. This party just got epic.” Her dark eyes took in Noah behind me. “Oh, I see you brought a GQ model with you, as one does.”

A blush crept up my neck. “This is Noah Lake. Noah, Regina Chen.”

Regina grabbed his outstretched hand briefly then started back up the stairs. “Come on. The guys are going to flip. *Game of Thrones, Walking Dead, Mad Men...* Like I said, *epic.*”

“Regina, please don’t make a big deal...”

Too late. We’d arrived at her loft door which Regina threw open with a bang. “Charlotte’s here!”

A chorus of loud shouts, whistles, and applause went up, and I was genuinely touched.

“I didn’t know it’d be like this...” I said, clutching Noah’s arm.

Regina leaned in my ear. “Welcome back.” She kissed my cheek, then ran off to attend her guests while I led Noah inside.

Friends from Juilliard, most I hadn’t seen in more than a year, surrounded us. I linked my arm through Noah’s to anchor him to me as I was engulfed in a round of hugs. I introduced him more times than I could count and was proud when every one of my friends greeted him as if he were anyone else—but for a few lingering stares from some of the women.

Regina’s loft was one large rectangle, maybe eight hundred square feet of industrial space, filled with potted plants, metal ductwork and exposed brick. She’d strung up strings of white Christmas lights, and one area by the slanting windows was set up as a small stage. I swallowed my nerves, and led Noah to the sitting area where Melanie, her girlfriend Sasha, and Anthony were gathered.

Melanie embraced me close. “I’ve got a secret.”

I glanced at her askance. “Do you?”

“Later,” she said with a small, excited smile. She turned to Noah. “I’m Melanie Parker, the best friend. And you must be Mr. Lake.”

“Must be,” Noah said with a flicker of a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Melanie said, giving me a meaningful look, which I pointedly ignored.

“And you remember Anthony Washington,” I said as Anthony stood up to greet us.

Noah offered his hand. “How’s it going, man?”

I watched with a strange, silly pride as Anthony and Noah did one of those manly handshakes that ended with a half-hug and pat on the back.

I sat with Noah on the couch and heard him sigh with relief as he sank down and tucked his white cane beside him.

“I’m going for a drink,” Anthony said. “You guys want something? Noah, beer?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Char?”

“I thought I saw a bowl of sangria when we came in.”

“You want the whole bowl or just a glass?”

I rolled my eyes. “Smart ass.”

Anthony grinned and turned to Melanie and Sasha. “Ladies?”

“You can only carry so much,” Sasha said and rose to go with him. She had short, bleached hair and two sleeves of tattoos up her slender arms. She bent to kiss Melanie’s cheek. “Be cool,” she told her girlfriend, shooting me a fast smile.

I narrowed my eyes at Melanie. “Yeah, what’s up with you? You look ready to burst.”

She waved a hand. “Later. So. Noah, tell me about yourself. New York native or what?”

“Yeah, native, though I only moved back recently.”

“Charlotte tells me you worked for *Planet X*.”

“I did. For about five years. Maybe again. We’ll see.”

Melanie asked Noah about some of his travels as Anthony and Sasha returned. A guy standing behind us overheard Noah talk about Nepal and Mt. Everest and joined in. He introduced himself as Zach and said he’d been to Kathmandu a year ago. He practically coughed beer out his nose to hear Noah had worked at *Planet X*.

“Dude! That rag is the bomb!” Zach turned to tell some of his friends. The next thing I knew, we were surrounded, and Noah was peppered with questions about some of the places he’d been and the extreme sports he’d participated in.

I studied Noah carefully for any signs that it was all too painful for him, but he seemed to be doing okay until Zach nudged his shoulder.

“Hey, Noah. Did you know the guy who worked at *Planet X*? The cliff diver who wound up in a coma?”

“Yeah, I know him,” Noah said, his voice low. “That was me.”

Now Zach really did choke on his beer. “That was...? Holy shit! But you look good, man. Not a scratch on you.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

I saw one of Zach’s friends make a negating motion. He tapped the corner of his eye and pointed at Noah’s cane folded beside him.

“Oh, shit...” Zach said. “Hey, I’m sorry. I’ve already had one too many of these things. Beer, I mean,” he added quickly. “Let me get you one. Or something stronger? What’s your poison?”

“I don’t drink,” Noah said.

“Oh.” Zach frowned. “Is that because...you know?”

“Nah, man. I’m the designated driver.”

A silence fell among those gathered around us and Zach blinked. Then everyone burst out laughing, dispelling the tension that had started to thicken in the air.

Anthony clapped Noah on the shoulder—but not too hard. “I’ll bet you get a lot of *mileage* out of that joke,” he said, and everyone groaned.

“No puns in my presence!” Regina strode up. She held a tall glass filled with ice and bubbles. “Noah Lake,” she said, holding the drink to him. “Pellegrino with lime because this is a fancy fucking party.”

He took it with thanks and my heart felt ready to explode with happiness...until Regina turned to me. “Conroy. You’re up. Let’s do this.”

My joy turned to nerves, and I felt Noah’s hand slip into mine as the radio music went silent. Regina announced to the room that the entertainment portion of the party was about to begin. Noah took his sunglasses off, leaned in, and kissed me softly and that was all the reassurance I needed.

Regina, a pianist, had an old Steinway set up next to the makeshift stage. On the stage itself were three little fold-up chairs and a drum set. I grabbed my violin case and took a seat next to Melanie who propped her cello against her knee while we rosin-ed up our bows. After a hug for me, Mike Hammond got set up behind his drums while Felicia Strickland, in braids, black vinyl, and combat boots, tuned her guitars—one electric, one acoustic.

The knowing smile was back on Melanie’s face. “So. You and Mr. Lake seem really cozy. How’s that going?”

“Slowly,” I said. “We’re taking it slowly. Or trying to. For lots of reasons.”

“The least of which, you work for him and you live together.”

“There’s that.”

“I’m assuming you followed my talk-to-him advice? Or was it the good old ‘put-his-hands-on-your-boobs’ trick after all?”

I laughed incredulously. “What is with you tonight? You’re smiling like a fiend.”

“I can’t smile?”

“You *don’t* smile,” I corrected. “Not this much. What’s up?”

“Shh.” Melanie winked. “Show’s about to start.”

Regina had quieted down the crowd, and my stomach lurched to see the entire party—more than fifty people—staring at us in anticipation. My eyes sought Noah. He’d put his sunglasses back on and stared straight ahead, but I could tell by his body language he was listening intently.

“Ladies and gents,” Regina began, “if you’ve been to one of my parties before, you know how we roll: your favorite TV themes played at your request by my own in-house band, so to speak. You’ll notice the lack of sheet music. That’s because this is musical improv and if we don’t know it, we’ll fake it. And if we can’t fake it, we drink!”

Cheers and whistles from the crowd.

“So, without further ado...who’s got a request?”

“*Game of Thrones!*” someone in the back called.

“Naturally,” Regina sat on her piano bench facing out—our pseudo-conductor. “Melanie...if you would?”

Quickly, I mentally recalled the theme, arranging the notes in my mind as if on sheet music. We all nodded our readiness and Melanie began to play the first strains. I came in on the second stanza with the descant, a higher echo of her undertone. We played the first movement, then again a second time with Mike’s bass drum and Felicia’s guitar. Then the theme repeated, this time with my violin rising and taking over from Melanie’s cello.

We were far from a whole ensemble, but I thought we nailed it. And when it ended and the cheers and applause were filling the loft, I realized I’d had fun. More than fun. I was performing again, making my violin sing for a rapt audience. I felt the old thrill of it and hope swelled.

Maybe it’s not lost after all.

We went on like this for an hour or so, with Regina playing a haunting solo rendition of the *X-Files* theme on her piano. Felicia plugged in her electric guitar and we did a cover of *The Munsters* that drew a noise complaint from the neighbors. We tried—and failed miserably—to recreate *The Simpsons* theme, but that song had too much going on, and we were all

forced to drink a shot of peppermint Schnapps as punishment. Finally, we closed the round with *The Walking Dead*.

The crowd went crazy as Regina produced her own violin and began the theme, but I had a moment of panic trying to recall my part. But I listened and found the music, found my voice. I played the eerie whine right on cue and the place erupted again.

“Not bad, Conroy,” Regina said. “I think you’ve got a future in this business.”

She moved off to attend to her guests and Melanie swooped right in. “I’m proud of you.”

“I feel good,” I whispered. “I feel...almost like I was.”

She clapped her hands to her mouth. “Oh, Charlotte. That’s wonderful. That’s *everything*.”

I rejoined Noah and Anthony and Sasha. Noah held my hand as I sat beside him. He said nothing, a strange little smile on his face.

“Char!” Anthony cried. “I never knew! Girl, you gotta get on stage.” He looked to Melanie who’d joined us. “All of you. Start your own symphony if you have to.”

I expected Noah to chime in and agree, but I guessed since he’d already given me that lecture, he didn’t feel the need to do it twice. Or maybe he felt the electricity humming along my nerves, or the heat of my happiness. I felt like I was glowing.

The night wore on, and the loft was filled with music, mostly from Felicia’s guitar as she and a group of friends settled down in one candlelit corner and played and sang together. Everything had mellowed; the tiny Christmas lights seemed muted and softer, and the voices of the partygoers less harsh. It was one of the best nights I’d had, made more so by the fact that Noah was clearly enjoying himself.

“It’s a practice run for the *Planet X* ball,” he told me.

I nodded, suddenly a little deflated, but Melanie finally couldn’t hold in whatever it was she needed to tell me and drew me to the tiny kitchen where beer cans and half-empty bottles of liquor cluttered the counters. Her perpetual smile was still there, but she looked almost nervous. Except that Melanie Parker was never nervous.

“All right, spill it. You look like you’re sitting on the secrets of the universe.”

“I just might be.” She sucked in a breath. “The Vienna Touring Orchestra.

Ever heard of it?”

“Can’t say that I have. New?”

“New-ish. Definitely not as established as some others, but they’re not shitty either. They’re based out of Vienna—obviously—and word on the street is they’re gaining some traction in Europe for putting on an exceptional series, mostly Mozart.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “And?”

“Regina’s got a sister in Prague and heard that the VTO is sending some people out here. To fill some seats, if you catch my drift.”

I bit my lip. “Mel...”

“Charlotte, just hear me out. I think this would be good for you on multiple levels. You’ve always wanted to go to Vienna, the company isn’t all that high-and-mighty so an unknown musician of your caliber could really rise to the top, and they’re all about Mozart! It’s like they were created with Charlotte Conroy’s must-have list in mind.”

“Well...”

“And the experience!” Melanie crowed. “To be honest, I think you need it. To get out of the city and the bad memories and the goddamn Spring Strings fiasco and work one of those tours. Just...sink your teeth into something new.”

I smiled despite myself. “You should have been a saleswoman.”

“So you’ll audition?”

“Well, wait. I don’t know...”

“Oh, sweet baby Jesus, do *not* tell me you don’t want to go because of Lake.”

“Don’t start, Mel,” I said, feeling my hackles rise. “At least with Noah I’m doing something useful. I’m helping him.”

“Yes. You’ve been doing a bang-up job helping him. But who’s helping you?” She crossed her arms. “You cannot put your life on hold—again—for a man. I will not let you.”

The room temperature seemed to drop fifteen degrees. “I put my life on hold for a man?” I crossed my arms partly to look fierce, mostly to hide how my hands trembled. “And which man would that be? My brother who *died* or my boyfriend who tore my heart to shreds a *minute* later?”

Melanie held out her hands. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. I just think that this orchestra would be perfect for you, and I’d hate to see you miss a shot at it for any reason.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I mean, how

serious are things between you and Lake?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. Well, it was a half-lie. I didn’t know how serious Noah took us, but the thought of leaving him made my insides curl up. “But anyway, it’s a big deal, what you’re suggesting. To leave the country for a whole season and be so far away from my parents and...the city.”

“And Noah?”

“Can I research a little before you decide I’m setting the women’s movement back fifty years?”

Melanie wrinkled her lips. “Sure, sure, though time is of the essence...”

“Why? When’s the audition?”

“Two weeks from Monday.”

“Ugh, Mel...”

“You had your sabbatical but it’s over now. Your time has come. This is it! I can feel it.” She softened. “Promise me you’ll consider it?”

“I’ll consider it,” I said and was surprised to find that was the truth. The idea of this Vienna Touring Orchestra didn’t fill me with dread like I thought it would. On the contrary, it sounded exactly as Melanie had said: something I might have wished for in another life.

No, in this life. I could do this. And Noah...he could come with me.

Possibilities were floating in my head. I’d probably have to audition with Mozart. That was daunting, as I honestly didn’t know if I’d freeze up, or melt into a puddle of tears, or both.

Or maybe you’d just nail it.

The night rapidly slipped away, and I was ready to go. Or rather, I was ready to be alone with Noah, even if it just meant falling asleep with him in his bed. I was overjoyed that he was rejoining the world but still felt protective. Maybe I was setting the women’s movement back, but I wanted to take care of him, keep him safe.

But if he came with me on tour, I could play and he could travel the world he thought he lost.

I started to ask him if he were ready to go when he leaned into me, his breath warm and sending pleasant shivers down my neck. “I’d like to get you home now.”

My breath quickened. “That’s an interesting choice of words,” I murmured back. “And what happens when you get me home?”

“Anything. Everything. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

I closed my eyes as the blood rushed between my thighs, leaving me

dizzy. “Me neither.”

We said our goodbyes and I led Noah across the loft that was now much less crowded, past Felicia Strickland’s little corner.

“We need your strings, lady,” Felicia called to me. “‘Time of Your Life.’ Green Day. You know it?”

“It’s late...”

“Please.” Felicia egged on the ring of friends around her, and suddenly I was bombarded with plaintive begging and pitiful faces.

“All right, all right. You guys sound like a herd of starving cats.” I turned to Noah. “One last song.”

“I’m all ears,” he said. “Almost literally.”

“Aren’t you cute.” I guided him to a chair.

I pulled out my violin and sat on the arm of that chair while Felicia sat cross-legged on the ground. She began to play and sang the song herself, which, in her raspy, feminine timbre made it all the more beautiful in my opinion. I played background to her guitar, the strings carrying the poetic, raw lyrics on a soft undercurrent.

As I played, I really listened to Felicia’s voice and the song’s message. A new life. Turning the page. A fork stuck in the road. I saw my road before me; one path with Noah in New York City, the other touring Europe, making music.

Or maybe I don’t have to choose. Maybe I can have both.

We said goodbyes, hugs and kisses were exchanged, and Melanie arched a brow at me. She mouthed *I love you*, and I returned, *I know*.

On the street below, Noah and I were alone for the first time in what felt like ages. He wasted no time but swept me up in his arms and kissed me hard. I fell back against the wall and gripped his hips, pulling him to me. My violin case slipped to the ground between us.

“Except for my sister, I’ve never admired a woman before,” he whispered in between biting kisses. “That’s fucking terrible, but it’s true. But you...” His hands ceased roaming my body and gripped my face. “Jesus, Charlotte. That was torture.”

“Torture?” I leaned forward, nipped his lip, and he pushed me back, hips grinding into me. We were separated by too much clothing. *That* was torture.

“Talent is a turn-on,” he said, brushing his lips over mine in a maddening tease. His breath came hard, and I could feel his erection straining against his jeans. “And you’re beyond talented. I’ve wanted you all night.” He kissed me

again. “But not here. I want you in bed, naked. I want to sink into you, Charlotte...”

Oh my God... Noah’s words alone were unraveling me right there on the street. “Then you’d better stop talking, or we’ll never make it.”

Reluctantly, he stepped back, breathing hard. “Christ, you’re right. Where are we? What time is it?”

I laughed and fought to calm my racing pulse. The night was deep, and a wind had picked up, cooling my hot skin. “We haven’t even left Regina’s block.” I fished my cell phone from my purse. “And it’s almost two a.m.”

“Damn,” he muttered and pulled out his folded cane that he’d tucked into the back of his jeans. “Not many cabs at this hour.”

“The subway is a few blocks up.”

I picked up my violin case and offered him my arm, my heart still pounding from his kisses and words that were almost as potent.

“There was something that came up tonight I’d like to talk to you about,” I said as we walked along streets that were silvery with recent rain. “Something Melanie told me about. A touring orchestra she thinks I should audition for.”

“Oh yeah?” Noah asked. His voice sounded carefully neutral. “Where does it tour?”

“Europe,” I said. “I don’t have all the details, but it sounds like I’d be gone all through summer if not longer. If I even got in. I mean, hell, who knows what would happen if I auditioned. I might not get it. I *probably* wouldn’t get it.” Except for the first time in a very long time, I thought that might not be true.

“You probably would,” Noah said, his voice low. “But the only way to know for sure is if you tried. Is this something you want?”

“I don’t know. I think maybe it is.” I stopped and faced him. “But you could come with me...if you wanted.”

“Charlotte, I...”

Noah stopped talking and cocked his head to the side. I started to speak but he hushed me. He listened for a moment, then said in a low voice, “Let’s keep moving.”

We started walking again but Noah kept his tapping cane off the sidewalk, and I heard what his keen hearing had already picked up: footsteps behind us. I let out a little breath, and Noah’s hand on my arm tightened.

“Don’t stop, don’t turn, don’t say anything. Could be harmless, but just

keep going.”

I nodded. My heart had climbed into my throat and then sank when the next street sign came into view. We were a good two blocks away from crowds and lights and safety.

Then a hard, scratchy voice broke the silence, making me jump.

“That’s far enough.”

Three simple words and yet promising so much danger and violence. We froze, and Noah’s grip tightened on my arm until it was all I could feel; my body was numb with fear.

“Your cash and your suitcase,” said the low voice. “Yell for help and she dies. Run and she dies. You won’t see her, blind boy, but you’ll hear her scream just before I slit her throat.”

chapter twenty-four



Even though fear clenched my stomach like a vise, the ridiculousness of being mugged twice in one week wasn't lost on me. The only difference was the first time around, I was alone, stupid, and looking for it; flying on adrenaline just like the good old days. But that night with Charlotte, the kind of fear that coursed through my veins was slow and thick like sludge. I had one thought and one thought only.

Whatever happens, he doesn't hurt her. He doesn't come close.

"Turn around, now," the man said, and I could hear the scuffle of his shoes, a dance from foot to foot. "Slow. Nice and slow."

We turned.

"He has a knife," Charlotte whispered to me in a voice so strangled by fear I hardly recognized it.

A knife, not a gun.

"Run, Charlotte," I whispered.

"No."

"Run."

"I'm not leaving you."

Damn her.

Had I been sighted, I'd make her run. I'd push her if I had to, but I was shackled by darkness. Weak. I could hurt her by mistake or make things worse in ways I didn't dare imagine.

"Shut up, both of you. No one's running anywhere."

He sounded about fifteen feet away but drawing closer. I moved between Charlotte and the mugger, keeping her behind my arm, and gripped my cane tightly in my other hand.

"Drop the stick."

Fuck no.

The cane was lightweight but had a long reach and was the only weapon I had. Rage was fast drowning my fear in a molten flood at this asshole for threatening Charlotte, for making her so scared. But he sounded young. He might chase Charlotte down if I fucked up. Then things would get a whole lot uglier.

“Okay, man, be cool,” I said. My cane hit the ground. “I’m going to give you my wallet. I’ve got at least a hundred bucks in there...”

“And her purse,” the guy said. “And her case.”

I ignored the last part, and I leaned in to Charlotte. “Put your purse on the ground.”

I felt her comply, and I did the same with my wallet, all the while, my nerves were lit up like a switchboard, and I mentally screamed at my brain to *fucking work* and show me the knife-wielding criminal on the other side of the black curtain.

“We’re going to back away now,” I said.

“Are you deaf too, fucker?” the guy said. “I want the case. Violin, right? Instruments sell for plenty.”

“Noah,” Charlotte whimpered. “Let’s just do what he says.”

“Smart bitch.” I heard the guy move, a scrape of shoe against asphalt, and I jerked backward. He laughed. “You can’t see shit, can you? I could stab you in the throat and then fuck your girl six ways from Tuesday, and there’d be nothing you could do about it.”

My pulse thrashed in my ears, and Charlotte gave a little cry. I reached and found her hand holding the violin. I pried her fingers loose—she was petrified by fear—and gripped it tightly in my own hands. The idea of giving her violin to this guy made me sick to my stomach. Charlotte’s parents had scraped by to save up for it; she’d had it since before her brother died... But what choice did I have? Charlotte was all that mattered.

“Here, man.” I set the case down, hating myself for giving it up. “You have everything now. We’re going to keep walking...”

“You don’t get to say what happens,” the guy scoffed. “I say. And I say I’d like some time alone with that sweet young thing over there.”

I heard the scuffle again and knew he was approaching even before Charlotte spoke.

“He’s coming,” she cried. “Noah...!”

My instincts took over; they were all I had in the first place. I shoved

Charlotte behind me and barked at her to run. The guy rushed at me, and I grabbed the violin case off the ground and brought it up like a shield. I expected to feel the edge of his knife open my cheek or plunge into my throat, as promised. But I heard his blade scrape against the hard plastic case. I shoved forward with all I had, and he grabbed on, locking us together as Charlotte screamed for help.

I smelled rotten teeth, sour sweat, alcohol. I think I had his knife-hand pinned between himself and the case, but that wouldn't last. I yanked the case toward me, then shoved it back at him. The guy grunted. I felt his knife tear the sleeve of my leather jacket, and then the case was ripped out of my hands as he lost his balance and fell back.

The mugger hit the ground with another grunt, and then Charlotte's hands were on my arm, pulling me away, crying for me to run with her. I hated that that guy was going to get her violin, but Charlotte needed to be safe. I took her arm and let her guide me away, running like a fucking coward.

I heard the quiet street open up to sounds: passing cars and voices, even at this late hour. We stopped to catch our breaths, and Charlotte's hands were suddenly on me, patting me down, and it took me a second to realize she was searching for injury. She found the tear in my jacket, gave a little cry, and hauled up the sleeve to inspect my arm.

Finding nothing, she threw her arms around me and held me tightly; I could feel her heartbeat crashing against mine.

"You're okay," she said against my shoulder. "You're okay." She said it over and over, and I was too stunned to do anything more than hold her until she calmed down.

Charlotte led us into an all-night diner that smelled like old grease and burned coffee, and we called the police.

"I have my purse," Charlotte said dully when I asked how she still had her phone. "I tripped on it when you told me to run and just...grabbed it. I wasn't thinking clearly, or I would have taken your wallet too. Or your cane and tried to help. But I didn't help. I could hardly move; I was so scared..."

The cops came to us, and we made a statement. Charlotte described the man who'd robbed us while I stewed in anger, regret, and the knowledge that I had failed her completely.

The officers didn't sound hopeful. There was no way to track the violin down through the pawnshops as most wouldn't take stolen goods, but the cops promised to put a call out anyway. I almost told them not to bother. The

violin was as good as gone and we all knew it.

The police took us back to the townhouse—my second ride in the back of a cruiser in a week. We stepped into the foyer and Charlotte threw every lock on the door, her breath coming in shaking little sighs.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte,” I said gruffly. “I fucked up.”

“What? How?”

“I lost you your violin.”

“God, Noah, that wasn’t your fault. You protected me. You protected *us*. Tomorrow, maybe, I’ll mourn it, but right now...”

Yes, right now I could hardly think of anything but Charlotte and the fact that she was alive and unhurt and here with me. I took her by the shoulders and pulled her to me fiercely, holding her as a torrent of emotions rushed out of my chest. Now that the danger was over, the enormity of what might have happened tonight swamped me. Not to me, to her. The strength of my feelings for her scared me more than a knife in the dark.

“You should have run,” I told her. “You would have been safe.”

“I should have left you?” She shook her head against me. “Impossible. And I am safe. I feel safe with you.”

I kissed her softly, tasting the salt of her tears, but no more fell. Our kiss deepened, and I infused it with every emotion I was too afraid to speak, and when she moaned softly into my mouth, I knew she felt everything I couldn’t say.

She broke away, breathlessly. “I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

“You won’t be,” I whispered, stroking her hair, feeling the softness under my skin. “I couldn’t leave you if I tried.”

But for the first time in a very long time, I was nervous. She was to be my first since the accident, and I had no idea what would happen, how it would be different when I couldn’t see the woman beneath me. I worried I wouldn’t please her, that I’d humiliate myself, that all my poise and finesse from my old life was gone and I’d be reduced to something like a drunkard; fumbling and sloppy and finishing before she even began.

Charlotte put my hand on the crook of her arm and drew me with her. Not to the stairs; she was taking me to her room in her living space—a place I’d never stepped foot in until now.

“My bedroom,” she said, and I heard the nervous lilt in her voice.

I stopped at the door, shocked at how my entire body reacted; a white-hot flash of desire that surged through me. The room was suffused with

Charlotte. Her perfumes, her soaps and shampoos, the scent of her on the bed... She was everywhere here, and my senses were filled with her.

“Noah?”

“Slowly,” I managed, “or I won’t last a minute.”

“I’m not worried,” she said, pushing my jacket off my shoulders.

I caught one of her hands. “I am. You deserve everything.”

“I have everything.”

She led me to her bed and sat me down. It felt impossibly soft, and I imagined a white bedspread; I imagined everything white and cloudy and hazy with the pleasant fog of her scent wafting around us. I felt her stand between my knees, her hands resting lightly on my shoulders. I was painfully hard, and I wondered if she wanted me as badly. I hated that I couldn’t see her face, and then she bent down and kissed me softly, wetly, and I felt her trembling.

“Noah.” Her breath was hot on my cheek. “Touch me. Please.”

My hands found her hips and I gripped them, anchoring myself to her. I rested my head against her soft, full breasts and nuzzled them gently.

The material wafted past my nose as she lifted off her dress, and then her warm skin was there. I leaned forward, kissing the space between those luscious breasts, my breath already turning ragged. *Slowly!* I took a deep, steadying breath.

“Your bra...”

She shifted, I felt it slip away, and then she was clutching me around the neck, pulling me to her.

I kissed the soft roundness of one breast, then trailed my tongue along its curve. I felt the texture of the skin change and then took her nipple into my mouth, sucking gently, while my thumb rolled in lazy circles over the other. Christ, her breasts were perfection. I felt like I’d waited eons to taste them and kiss them. I moved from one to the other, nipping and sucking them hard with my mouth, and then soothing them with soft, gentle strokes of my hands until she writhed and shivered.

“No more,” she finally cried.

She had my shirt off in a heartbeat and then pushed me back on the bed. I felt her over me, her hair curtaining around us, tickling my cheeks and forehead. She kissed me in that maddening way of hers, soft and wet, running her tongue along the seams of my lips until I was half crazy with lust and had to plunder her mouth with mine.

The wet sounds of our kiss, Charlotte's scent, her body straddling my hips...I started to lose myself, but she must have sensed it. She sat up, resting her hands on my chest. I could feel the heat of her through her panties on my aching erection. But she held very still and lightly dragged her hands down my chest, over my abdomen, tracing the contours of my muscles.

"I'm here," she whispered and then I felt her hot mouth on my skin, kissing the place over my heart. She trailed her mouth to the other side. "Here." Down, to one nipple. "And here," she said and sucked lightly.

She continued on like this, and I followed the sound of her voice, the feel of her mouth. Little pinpoints of sensation. I no longer felt like I was drowning, but my desire to have her was becoming the fiercest hunger.

"Charlotte... *Now.*"

"Yes," she said, and I felt her move off me; I heard a drawer open and close.

I stripped off my jeans, and my erection strained against the fabric of my boxers. Was she as ready as I was? I needed to feel how badly she wanted this, and again, as if she could read me, she came back, straddled me, put my hand between her legs.

God, she was naked, and the wet heat of her... I sucked in a ragged breath.

"Can you feel it?" she breathed. "How much I want you?"

"Yes..."

"I'm ready, Noah." Her hand slipped down to stroke me. "I want you inside me."

I grabbed her then, crushed my lips to hers and rolled her onto her back. She pushed at the waistband of my boxers, and I felt something in her hand scratch my skin. A condom packet.

Thank God, I thought. I couldn't take it slow for one more damn second.

I stripped naked and she rolled the condom down. But once we were ready, I had to make sure she felt safe, that she knew I wanted her more than I wanted her body. I braced myself on my forearms over her, kissing her deeply, softly.

"Charlotte, I can't see your face. I need to know..."

"I'm smiling at you, Noah," she said softly, stroking my cheek. "Because I'm so happy we're here. I'm so happy it's you."

I kissed her again, and then slowly—so slowly— I sank into her, into the warm, wet, softness of her. She let out a ragged, breathy little cry and whispered one word. "Yes..." and Christ, I'd never felt anything so good or

perfect in my life until that moment.

Charlotte's body, her entire being, became my world. My skin lay flush with hers, we breathed the same air, and I was inside her. Somehow that felt impossible and new and more intense than I'd ever imagined. A tiny voice whispered that I was being stupid, that my blindness wasn't entirely why this moment felt so monumental.

It's because it's Charlotte, and that was the truth.

"Are you okay?" I asked her, my ego forbidding me to show weakness, because of the two of us, I was the one that needed reassurance that I wasn't going to disintegrate into a million points of light.

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh yes. You feel so good. So good..."

"You feel incredible," I told her, rolling my hips slowly. "You feel..."

Like everything I've ever wanted.

I kissed her, my body arched over hers, moving faster now, and she pulled me closer, angled her hips to take me deeper. A constant stream of beautiful sounds came from her: little moans and breathy gasps and whispered words of *more* and *yes* and my name, again and again, so that I never doubted that she wanted this as badly as I did.

Her hands were all over my back, her nails digging into my scarred and unscarred flesh alike, as if they were one and the same. And then into my hair, where I felt her fingers brush the hideous scars there too, with no recoil. Only acceptance. More than acceptance, because it wasn't that she felt my ugliness and *decided* it was okay. She made no distinction between scarred flesh and whole. It was just me that she wanted, as I was, and who is ever lucky enough to feel that in this world?

The urgency between us grew; my body was moving now on its own and it took everything I had to hold back. I felt Charlotte shift beneath me, and her hands were gone from my back. Her mouth rose to meet mine in a kiss that was all tongue and wet lips and barely contained hunger. I groaned into our kiss, as my left hand found her breasts, stretched taut somehow. I kept exploring, over her collarbone, her shoulder, then up her arm to find she was gripping the headboard above her head with both hands.

The image that created in my mind came swiftly: her hands clenched above her head, bracing herself, her eyes closed, her head thrown back, her luscious mouth a perfect O of pleasure.

"Yes," she whispered, as if answering a question I had asked with my searching hands. "Let go, Noah. I want this. I want you. Hard. Please..."

Thank Christ.

She wanted what I wanted, and my body obeyed her breathy little command immediately.

I braced myself, palms flat on either side of her, and rose up to thrust deeply into her. She answered with a cry, and her legs wrapped around my waist. I thrust again and then again, harder and faster each time. Then Charlotte—my God, this woman—she had me gripped so tightly, lifting the lower half of her body off the bed to meet my every thrust while I drove into her over and over, each time coming closer to the edge of an ecstasy I had never dreamed was possible.

No whispers or gasps anymore, now Charlotte was crying out, *screaming out* her pleasure with every thrust, and I gave up trying to keep from becoming lost in her and became lost. Feverish. My skin and bones and thrusting flesh were hers now, and she was mine. All mine. Every inch of her was wrapped around me and she took me inside her so completely, I couldn't tell beginnings or endings, boundaries or bodies, just her and me.

In the end, she pulled me to her, and I sank down deeper into her, as if that were possible, and she kissed me, clutched me tightly. I felt her tense, felt her teeth sink into my shoulder, and then she let go, arching her back and crying out one last time—my name—so I knew I had become her entire world too.

That was all it took. I thrust once or twice more, erratically, as my climax crested and crashed, tossing me into a delirium of pleasure that throbbed like a second pulse in every ounce of my body to leave me drained.

I collapsed on top of her and wanted to stay there, wrapped in her forever. But I was too heavy. She shifted beneath me, reached for something by the bed.

“Wastebasket.”

I disposed of the condom and rolled over, taking her with me. I wrapped my arms around the smooth, velvety skin of her back that was slicked with a fine sheen of sweat. She lay full on top of me, her breasts against my chest, her arms still around me and her breath gusting over my neck. Our hearts were thundering together, then slowing together, and it felt as if her warm, soft body were melting into mine.

We lay this way for a while, neither of us saying a word, until she finally lifted her head and kissed me one last time, breathing life into me when nothing and no one else had before.

chapter twenty-five



I woke up, certain I'd had the craziest, most two-sided dream of my life. The first half was a frightening nightmare, the second half, the most rapturously joyous experience I'd ever had. Noah was wrapped around me, naked, and my body was humming with pleasure. We'd made love three times, until the dawn was breaking in the east, and I had to reluctantly beg off for some sleep. He was insatiable and had stamina to spare. I don't know why on earth he ever worried he wouldn't last a minute; Noah was incredible. A real man where Keith had been just a boy.

And it wasn't merely the physical pleasure that brought a smile to my lips that morning. It was the deep emotion I felt surging through Noah's every touch that was an added layer of ecstasy. It was in his kisses, in his body that moved over mine, and in the feel of his hands that *looked* at me because his eyes could not. I'd never felt safer in my life than I did in Noah's arms, and the memory of being mugged probably would've faded out of my mind quickly had my violin not been taken too.

Later. I'll worry about that later, I thought, snuggling closer to Noah. He stirred, woke, and kissed me with intention.

"Really?" I laughed, incredulous.

"Really," he murmured, and this time he was gentle and slow; he took his time and cherished every inch of me until I cried out his name, delirious and drunk on him.



We took a train from Grand Central Station to New Canaan around mid-morning. The station wasn't as crowded as it was during a commuter day, but

the halls still rang with the echoes of hundreds of footsteps. Noah stuck close to me as we made our way through, but once we took our seats on the old Amtrak, he heaved a sigh.

“My mother’s going to throw a fit,” he said as the train lurched out of the station. “Be prepared for lots of hugs and tears from her. My father will shake your hand as if you just closed a business deal, and once Ava stops shouting at me, she’ll probably hug you too.”

I nodded and smiled faintly, watching the scenery outside the window turn into a blur.

“Charlotte?”

“Oh, sorry. That sounds great.”

He turned to face me. “You okay? You’ve hardly said a word all morning.”

“Nervous, I guess,” I said. “It’s a big deal, meeting your family.”

“They’ll love you,” he said. He took off his sunglasses, twisted them by the stem. “Are you thinking about last night?”

“The mugging or what came after?” I asked, trying for levity. “We went from terrifying and awful, to glorious and sublime in record time. It seems impossible it all happened in the same night.”

He leaned over and kissed me and I smiled, but the unsettled feeling wouldn’t leave. “I keep thinking I forgot something at the townhouse. Or that I left a burner on or the front door unlocked. And then I remember my violin is gone.”

He dropped his empty gaze. “I’m sorry, Charlotte.”

“It’s not your fault, Noah,” I said gently. “You have to know that. But now that it’s all over, I feel like I’ve lost a limb or something. Stupid, really. I’ve hardly touched the thing in a year. Not seriously, anyway. But I was just starting to feel something again.” I heaved a sigh and brightened my smile. “Anyway, yes, I’m very nervous about meeting your family. But Lucien will be there, oui?”

“Yeah, he and my father are on a working vacation, I guess.”

“Good,” I said, sitting back. “It’ll be good to see him again.”

The closer the train got to Connecticut, the more nervous I became. I wasn’t exactly smooth while socializing with people my own age, never mind those that lived in huge, sprawling manors and had names like Grayson Lake III. I felt like a country bumpkin. Or like a hippie, in my loose bohemian dress and sandals. I imagined they were all tall like Noah too, and I’d be the

little child tripping at their heels.

The New Canaan train station was neat and quaint-looking, and Lucien Caron, waiting there for us, looked just as neat and quaint. He stood almost alone on the platform in his pale-yellow suit and paler-blue ascot with a diamond winking from the center in the brilliant sunshine. I watched with tears in my eyes as Lucien took Noah by the shoulders and slowly drew him into a tight embrace.

“Oh, my boy.” Lucien dabbed his eyes with a silk handkerchief.

“Okay, okay.” Noah cleared his throat.

“Charlotte, ma chère,” Lucien said, and it was my turn for a hug. He smelled of expensive clothes, cologne, and his Dunhill cigarettes. He didn’t say anything for fear of making Noah self-conscious, but when he pulled away, his eyes spoke volumes of gratitude.

“Ava arrived late last night,” Lucien said after we’d stowed our luggage—one rolling bag each—in the trunk of his silver Cadillac sedan. “She’s very... curious to see you, Noah.”

“I’ll bet,” he said darkly. I glanced at him. All the hard edges and lines had returned to his face and when I offered to sit in the backseat, he bit off a smart remark about the view being all the same to him.

“Hey.” I pulled him aside while Lucien discreetly smoked a cigarette a few feet away. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, Christ, I’m so sorry.” Noah’s eyes aimlessly roamed the parking lot. “This suddenly got a lot harder than I thought. I’ve been a dick to everyone for so long, it’s like my default setting. I just know I won’t be able to take a bunch of crowing about *improvement* and *acceptance* and...”

I held his hand to my lips. “You’re going to be surrounded by people who love you and have missed you. There’s bound to be some ooh-ing and ahh-ing.”

He nodded reluctantly. “But if I ask you to run away with me, promise you’ll say yes, or I won’t get very far.”

I laughed and kissed him, and he seemed bolstered.

We departed the station with Noah sitting in the backseat and me riding shotgun. Lucien described the scenery as he drove down tree-lined streets, bordered by the most enormous houses I had ever seen. Some were barely visible behind gated walls or tucked at the end of long drives. Lucien’s running commentary was for Noah’s benefit, but he deftly directed it to me as the guest and newcomer to Connecticut.

He pulled the car into a circular drive that fronted an enormous white house with gabled third-story windows. Trees surrounded the manor on three sides, giving it the appearance of being tucked into its own miniature forest. A lush lawn that seemed too green to be real lay spread before it, buffering it from the street.

I stared up through the car window. “This is your house?”

Lucien patted my hand. “You will find quite a warm welcome within, my dear, I assure you.”

I nodded and slipped out of the car wishing I had worn something a little less casual than my dress and sandals.

Like a tiara or one of those fur stoles that have the fox head still attached.

Noah and Lucien trundled the luggage behind them, and Noah took my arm with his free hand. His face was drawn, and I decided if one of us was going to freak out, I should probably let it be him. I was out of my element, but Noah’s expression was a tumult of regret and longing. I kissed his cheek.

“I’m here for you.”

His hard edges softened with gratitude. “And that’s how I get through this weekend.”

Lucien led us up a paved stone walk and opened one of the two enormous wrought iron and glass doors. I followed with Noah on my arm behind me as we stepped into a foyer laid with hard wood in a rich caramel color and white walls.

Mr. and Mrs. Lake were standing stiffly at the base of a winding staircase, as if they’d decided that meeting Noah there appeared less eager than out on the front porch. Both were gray-haired, and both were dressed as if they’d just come from brunch at the Club. They may have, for all I knew. They both were nervous as hell too, but they tried to hide it behind manners and what my mother would call “good breeding.”

Victoria Lake tugged at a gold pendant around her neck while Grayson rocked on his heels, hands in pockets, his lips pursed. As soon as her son crossed the threshold, I saw tears spring to Mrs. Lake’s eyes and she approached him slowly, as if walking underwater.

“Noah,” she said. “Can I...hug you now?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Noah said hoarsely. He let go of my arm, and I stepped aside so Mrs. Lake could carefully put her arms around his neck. When he hugged her back, first hesitantly, then tightly, a little sound escaped her, and my vision instantly blurred.

“You look wonderful,” Mrs. Lake said, holding Noah at arm’s length. “Doesn’t he look just so healthy and strong? Grayson?”

Mr. Lake strode forward. “Son.”

Noah seemed to know what was expected and held out his hand for his father to shake. “Hi, Dad.”

Mr. Lake pulled Noah to him and embraced him as well—which surprised both men—and I clutched Lucien’s arm. It was like watching those viral videos online where an excitable lady is told she’s going to be a grandmother, or a military son surprises his mom by coming home. Those moments get me every time, and here it was happening right before my eyes, only a million times stronger. When something wonderful happens to the person you love, you can’t help but feel overjoyed too.

Mrs. Lake turned to me. “And you must be Charlotte.” She embraced me in a cloud of perfume and expensive linen, but her arms around me were soft and welcoming. “I’m so very pleased to meet you. We must sit down this weekend and chat, you and I.” She spoke slowly and distinctly, her eyes speaking volumes. She wanted to talk to me about Noah, of course, but didn’t want to make him self-conscious. Her husband was less discreet.

Mr. Lake shook my hand. “Bang-up job, Miss Conroy.”

“Dad.” Noah shook his head.

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you?” Grayson Lake smiled down at me. He was as tall as his son. They all were; even Lucien towered over me. Mr. Lake pumped my hand. “Someone deserves a raise.”

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t...” I stammered something unintelligible even to myself, my cheeks burning.

With practiced ease, Mrs. Lake swooped in. “Charlotte, let’s set you up in the west suite...oh. Unless it’s best you stay close to Noah? We can give you the room beside his...?”

“Give them the same room, Mother,” came a voice from above. “They’re a couple, after all.”

I looked up to see a young woman descend the curved staircase like a debutant making her presentation. The fact she was dressed in shorts and a silky blouse did nothing to dispel the notion. She was Noah’s spitting image, remade as a woman with all his beauty in feminine form: tall, raven haired, with the same astonishing hazel eyes.

Twins. They’re not just brother and sister, they’re twins.

“I’m Ava,” the woman said, extending her hand to me. “I’ve heard a lot

about you from Lucien. Very pleased to meet you.”

I shook her hand, feeling a bit star struck. Ava Lake had more poise, self-possession, and confidence in one little finger than I had in my whole body. *Except when I'm on stage*, came a sudden thought. *On stage, I'm powerful...* A pang of loss gripped my heart as I remembered my lost violin, but I forced a smile.

“Pleased to meet you too.”

“What do you mean, they’re a couple?” Mrs. Lake asked, looking at her son. “Is this true?”

“I saw them arrive from my little perch upstairs,” Ava said. She moved to stand in front of her brother. “Nice glasses.”

“Still tattling on me?” Noah asked gruffly.

Ava studied her brother, her luminous eyes full. “Yes. And if history is any indicator, you’ll be allowed to share a room, because you’re a guy. The last time I brought a boyfriend home, Dad wanted to put him up in a hotel.”

Noah smirked. “You have a boyfriend, Ava? Or did you slap a tie on a pile of work and bring that home?”

Ava didn’t reply but just leaned against Noah’s chest and sighed. He tilted his head up, as if looking at the ceiling, then put his arms around his sister.

“I’m so...happy.” Victoria clasped her hands over her heart. “Just so very happy. Let’s adjourn to the patio. It’s a gorgeous day and Ramona has made some of her delicious lemonade.”

There was an awkward moment in which we all shuffled about the foyer, the Lakes all wanting to help Noah but each hesitant or unsure what to do. I slipped in between all these tall Tree People, and offered my arm, which Noah took with a relieved sigh only I could hear. He unfolded his white cane—a spare, since his first had been lost last night.

It was surreal to think that only a handful of hours earlier, we’d been standing in the darkened street fearing for our lives, and now we were in the bright, airy richness of the Lake residence.

Lucien led the way out of the foyer, and while the Lakes were all too refined to stare, they turned frequently to beam at us. Mrs. Lake drank in as much of Noah as she could in little sips, watching him tap his way through the house with pride, elation, and sorrow by turn.

We made our way through the house that seemed a never-ending maze of one elegantly appointed room after another. We reached a kitchen—one of two, I learned—that looked as if it should be featured in a catalogue or home

and garden TV show. The view beyond the quartz counters and steel appliances was something out of a lottery-winner's greatest fantasy.

Lucien opened french doors and led us to a patio shaded by a pergola laced with vines. Deep seated chairs and couches in silvery gray with pale blue cushions—nicer than we had in our living room at home in Montana—were set up around a table that already bore a pitcher of lemonade and six glasses. I led Noah to the couch and sat on his left, staring like a fool at a second seating area to our left that had a *fireplace*.

I swung my slack-jawed gaze forward, to a view of a glittering pool, gardens, lawns, and a tennis court, all surrounded by trees instead of walls, though I suspected there was one lurking somewhere in the lush foliage, separating the Lake manor from its equally impressive neighbors.

"I know what you're thinking," Ava said, sitting next to me. "Where's the moat?"

"Oh, ha, no, it's beautiful. Like something out of a dream."

"But now Lucien tells us you hail from Montana," Mrs. Lake said. "I've heard that the views there are nothing short of stunning." She seemed to realize what she'd said and cleared her throat delicately, watching her son.

I fumbled for something to say, and Lucien rescued the whole situation with one word. "Lemonade?" He poured the drink but sat with us, and it was clear the Lakes considered him more of a family member than an employee.

"Would you like some?" I asked Noah, who had gone quiet. He nodded and I reached to take a glass. "Twelve o'clock," I murmured, and he took it with his right hand while his left found mine. I entwined my fingers with his, which immediately drew beaming smiles from his parents and Lucien. Ava gave us a more circumspect glance: not quite a frown, definitely not a smile.

Mrs. Lake led a conversation of small talk and niceties, inquiring about the weather in New York and how comfortable I found the townhouse. Hundreds of unasked questions buzzed around us, and Mr. Lake, apparently, wasn't one for holding back. Noah had told me he was semi-retired but the decisive boldness that had been a hallmark of his financing days was very much evident.

"So, how did you do it, Miss Conroy?"

"How did I...?"

"How did you tame our son? Lucien tells us you're a violinist. Was it music that soothed the savage beast?"

"Jesus, Dad," Noah muttered.

“I think it’s a fair question, especially given the last time we spoke. I thought I’d never see this day. None of us did, and yet here we are.” Mr. Lake turned his smile to me. “We owe Miss Conroy a huge debt of gratitude.”

“Oh, no,” I said quickly. “I was just doing my job. It was Noah who—”

“No,” Noah said, raising his head. “Dad’s right. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Charlotte, and if the rest of you want to heap praise on her for sticking it out through my bullshit, then go ahead. She deserves it. And while we’re getting things out in the open, I’ll officially apologize for being an insufferable asshole to all of you for the last six months. I’m sorry for that, and I hope you can all forgive me.”

There was a short silence wherein everyone glanced anywhere but at each other. It was broken by Ava’s slow clap. “That was just beautiful,” she said. “Really. So emotional...I’m overcome over here.”

Noah bit back a smile. “Oh, shut up.”

Everyone burst out laughing and the tension that had been hanging over us was dispelled at once. The conversation flowed easily from one topic to another while the afternoon grew progressively hotter.

“Would anyone like to take a swim?” Mrs. Lake asked. “Charlotte? If you’re not too tired...?”

I had been stifling a yawn and quickly brought my hand down. Noah had asked me not to mention the mugging until we’d all settled in a bit. I had agreed then and I agreed now, as his poor mother was obviously still trying to cope with the fact that her son was blind. I caught her watching him with a melancholy love that was full of joy to see him but also aching for his loss. I realized too, that the Lakes hadn’t been allowed to grieve for Noah either; he hadn’t let them until now.

“I’d love a swim,” I said brightly. “Thank you.”

“Noah?” Mrs. Lake asked, and there was just as much *Can you?* as there was *Will you?* in that question.

“Sure.” He shrugged with a smile. “Why not?”



Ava showed us to the west suite, bickering lightly with Noah all the while, before adjourning to her room to change into her suit.

“I’ll meet you back here in ten,” she said in a clipped, business-like tone.

“Don’t mind her,” Noah said as we stepped into our room. “Sounds like she’s still on office time. Ava lives to work.”

I nodded absently, staring. “You could fit my old apartment in Greenwich in here.”

Noah slipped up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Is it too much after last night? Should we have waited to come here?”

“No.” I said. “I don’t know. Maybe better to be here and distracted than in the city dwelling on it. What about you? This must be harder for you than for me.”

He stiffened. “This is hard for you?”

“Your family is wonderful, but it’s all a bit intimidating. I feel like a country bumpkin. I mean, Ava’s like a supermodel.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that unless you want an earful about sexism and women in the workplace.”

I turned in Noah’s arms. “You seem to be holding up well.”

“I guess. I didn’t treat them well for a long time.”

“I watched their faces as you spoke. They’re your family. All is forgiven.”

That cheered him, but I thought of the day Noah had a terrible migraine and wondered—not for the first time—what would have happened to him had I not been there.

Because none of them were there for him.

But the Lakes weren’t the cold, aloof rich people I’d built them to be in my mind. I could only guess Noah’s snappishness had been a thousand times worse when he was newly coping with his blindness.

We dressed in our bathing suits—mine an old two-piece I’d had since high school. It was faded by sun and chlorine, but it was all I had at short notice. Noah put on swim trunks, and I ogled his chest shamelessly until he put a T-shirt on.

“Tsk tsk,” he said, moving to take me in his arms. “Hardly fair when I can’t see you.”

“Take a look,” I said. The nightmare of what happened just last night was hanging over me, but so was the fact I’d slept with Noah for the first time too. I closed my eyes as he trailed his hands down my neck, my breasts, skimming down over my stomach.

“A bikini,” he said gruffly. “What color?”

“Faded pink and blue stripes,” I murmured. “Very chic.”

“I changed my mind,” he said, holding my hips against him. “Let’s not

swim.”

He kissed me hard and deep, but Ava rapped smartly on the door right on cue.

“Come on,” she called. “The parents are waiting to see how *normal* everything is now. Mustn’t disappoint.”

Noah sighed and reluctantly released me. He found his sunglasses and cane while I threw on a sundress.

Ava inspected us as we emerged, a sharp glint in her eye. “Shall we?”

I tried not to stare but holy crap, she was stunning. She had to have been at least five-eleven; the first woman for whom I could apply the word “statuesque.” She wore an elaborately patterned sarong in gold and black around her slender waist, and her silken hair flowed in thick, dark waves over her bare shoulders. Her small breasts were perfectly ensconced in a black bikini top, while I knew I’d spend the entire afternoon praying my boobs wouldn’t pop out of my worn-out old suit.

“Our parents bought this house when Dad retired,” Ava was saying as we took the stairs down. “Overdone, if you ask me, though Mom’s had a field day decorating it.”

“When were you back here, last?” Noah asked his sister.

“February. The paper got shut down by bomb threats and they sent all of us home for a week.”

“Jesus, Ava.”

“Cowardly, really, but after *Charlie Hebdo*, I can understand the reasoning. *Marginally*.”

“Where do you work?” I asked, wondering if she was a government official or a CIA operative. I wouldn’t have been surprised at either one.

“I’m assistant managing editor at *World Voice*. We’re in London. A political rag,” Ava said, though I didn’t miss the pride in her voice. “We report from the worst of the war-torn countries, trying to get the local people heard and bring attention to the injustices most other outlets only skim the surface of.”

“Oh, a journalist, like Noah,” I said. “That sounds like a very fulfilling job. But death threats? Is that common?”

“Yeah, Aves,” Noah said dryly. “Is that common?”

She smirked at him over her shoulder. “It’ll take a lot more than a scary phone call to shut us down.”

“And yet, one did.”

“That was the Ministry of Defence’s call, not ours.”

“So why are you here now?” Noah asked. “Another bomb threat? Because I know you don’t do vacations.”

“No, it was a miracle,” Ava said, opening the french doors to the patio. She gave him a playful elbow to the ribs. “Someone told me my brother had returned from the Land of the Dickheads, and I had to see for myself if it were true.”

We arrived at the patio. Lucien and Mr. and Mrs. Lake had moved to a covered table near the pool while the three of us set up camp on lounge chairs. Noah took off his shirt and I slathered sunscreen on his back.

“They’re staring at my scars, aren’t they?” Noah murmured under his breath.

I glanced to where his parents and Lucien sat. Mrs. Lake had her fingertips pressed to her mouth. “Yes,” I murmured back.

“I shouldn’t have shown them,” Noah said. “It’ll only upset her. Is she upset?”

I glanced again. “I think she looks grateful. She’s smiling. She’s just glad you’re here.”

He turned and kissed me. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I returned his kiss, feeling Ava’s eyes on us all the while.



Swimming proved to be easier for Noah than I think even he could have guessed. Once he had the dimensions of the pool in mind—gigantic by gigantic—I watched him hurl himself off the low diving board, flipping and rolling and diving with reckless abandon. I’d never seen him laugh or smile so much. He and Ava and I swam and cavorted like kids while the elder Lakes and Lucien sipped cocktails and watched.

“We used to play Marco Polo with the neighbor kids at the house in Florida,” Ava told me while the three of us clung to the wall in the deep end, taking a breather. “You know that game? Where one person keeps their eyes closed while the others try to swim away?”

“Oh sure,” I said. “I think it’s mandatory if three or more kids gather at a pool.”

“We played that constantly, only Noah was a terrible cheat.”

“Liar,” Noah said.

“No, it’s true,” Ava told me, ignoring the little splashes Noah sent her way as she talked. “I’d get out of the pool and Noah—cheater that he was—would call fish-out-of-water instantly.”

“Lies and slander,” Noah said, splashing more water now.

“I could even see the little shit squinting his eyes while pretending to feel around,” Ava told me and then spit out a deluge Noah sent crashing toward her.

“You’re dragging my good Marco Polo name through the mud.”

“We should play that now and Noah should be It,” she continued and shrieked laughter as Noah surged toward her, “because for the first time we can absolutely guarantee he won’t cheat.”

Noah caught Ava and dunked her under. She came up sputtering, wiping streaks of dark hair out of her eyes. She splashed him, catching him full in the face as he didn’t know it was coming. I hung back, watching them, as they laughed and bickered and splashed at each other like kids again.

I thought I’d be overjoyed to see Noah reunited with his family, and I was happy for him. But an ache of nostalgia gripped my heart. Watching Ava and Noah was like watching the ghosts of Chris and myself playing at our community pool or at a neighbor’s house. Inexplicably, the more I thought of Chris, the more I thought of my lost violin, and I felt as if a shadow were cast over the brilliant sunshine of the day, and it followed me around all through the afternoon.

We washed up for dinner, and I put on my nicest dress—a violet-colored sheath with turquoise beading along the bodice. It took me three tries to get the little laces up front to tie. I guessed the horror of the mugging was finally catching up to me. But Noah needed me to get through dinner, so I plastered on my best smile and went down with him.

A small, sudden storm had rolled in while we readied for dinner, scuttling our plans to eat outside. Instead, we sat in the formal dining room while light rain spattered the windows overlooking Mrs. Lake’s rose garden. Mr. and Mrs. Lake bookended the table while Noah and I sat to one side, Ava and Lucien across from us. Ramona, the housekeeper, served us grilled swordfish and roasted stuffed bell peppers, and the entire table watched, little smiles on their faces, as I described the table to Noah so that he was able to eat without incident.

As the main course was being cleared away, Mrs. Lake turned to me, a warm, grateful smile on her face. “Now, Charlotte, Lucien told us you are a

Juilliard graduate. That is quite an accomplishment.”

I tried to muster a word of thanks to Mrs. Lake, but my tongue suddenly felt too thick for my mouth. I nodded and smiled, unable to meet her eye. Some ugly heaviness was unspooling in my gut, and I wished mightily someone would change the subject.

Mr. Lake nodded from the other end of the table. “Juilliard, indeed. You must be quite a talented young lady.”

“She’s a virtuoso,” Noah stated, venturing carefully to find his water glass.

“Really?” Mrs. Lake clapped her hands. “How lovely. I have always adored the violin. Such a gorgeous instrument.”

I toyed with my fork and set it down; my hand was shaking. I glanced up and saw Ava and Lucien both watching me.

“You must play for us,” Mr. Lake said. “I hope you brought your violin.”

“No, uh...no,” I stammered. “I can’t. It was stolen. Last night.”

The pleasant smiles slipped from their faces with identical alacrity.

“Stolen how?” Ava asked. “From the townhouse?”

Lucien leaned over the table. “Did you have a break-in?”

Noah took my hand. “We didn’t want to scare you right off the bat,” he said and briefly, and without much detail, told them about the mugging.

“Oh, my dear.” Mrs. Lake put a hand to her chest. “How horrid.”

“Yes, and it was very frightening,” I blurted suddenly, the words tumbling out of my mouth. “But Noah was very brave, and he protected me. He fought the mugger off, but my violin was taken. It was taken and now it’s... Well, it’s just gone.” The reality of these words finally sunk in, like cold knives. “I’m really quite tired actually. If you’ll excuse me, I think I’d like to lie down. Thank you very much for dinner and...it was very good. Thank you and good night. Good night.”

I hurried up the stairs, and by some miracle, found the west suite without getting lost. I went to the cavernous bathroom of beige and copper tile and splashed some cold water on my face, which only made my inexplicable shivering worse. As I started a hot bath, a knock came at the door.

“Charlotte? Are you all right?”

I opened the door. Noah’s face was a mask of worry. “I’m sorry I just left you like that,” I said. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“No, it’s all on me. I didn’t realize you were upset. I should have.”

“I’m just being silly,” I insisted. “And God, how embarrassing. Please tell your parents I’m sorry. We got home late last night and I’m tired, and I think

it's all just catching up to me. I'm going to take a bath and get in bed. I'm fine, I promise."

His expression hardened, and I knew he'd never spend time with his family if I didn't convince him.

I kissed him lightly on the lips. "I'm okay, Noah. Truly. A scalding hot bath will do the trick."

"I'm tired too," he said. "I'll make sure my mother's not having a conniption, and I'll be back."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to spill it about last night."

"Will you stop apologizing?" Noah scolded gently. "They'd have to know eventually, and I don't care about that anyway. I'm worried about you."

"You should be worried that this bath is going to overflow if I stand here another minute," I said lightly. "Go. I'm going to soak in this mini pool and then lie down in that barge of a bed and sleep."

He nodded reluctantly and kissed me again. "I'll be back soon."

I eased a sigh as I shut the bathroom door, grateful for the first and only time that Noah was blind and couldn't see how my hands trembled or he never would have left me.

chapter twenty-six



Lucien had guided me up to the suite and was waiting for me when I came out.

“Everything all right?” he asked. “How is our girl?”

“She’s fine. Tired, I guess. We didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“I’d imagine not,” Lucien said. “Mon Dieu, how frightening.”

I nodded in agreement, but honestly, the sheer joy of sleeping with Charlotte for the first time was far more powerful than any leftover fear from the mugging. But then, she’d lost something precious to her, and she had been able to see the knife-wielding criminal. To me, he was only a voice in the dark.

Lucien led me back downstairs, and I tried to mentally map the way, but the house was too big, too full of furniture and hallways and doors. I could feel the size of it around me and thought it would take months to learn the layout. At my seat at the dinner table, I could practically see the pained expressions on my parents’ faces.

“She’s okay,” I said evenly. “It’s been a long day and even longer night, but she’s fine. She insisted I come back down and spend some time with you, so here I am.”

“She’s a generous little soul, isn’t she?” my mother said.

“Yes, she is,” Ava replied across from me, and I could tell by the tone of her voice she had something on her mind. But apparently, she was saving the lecture for later. She said nothing more but listened as our mother demanded I recount the mugging again, with heavy emphasis on the fact that neither of us was hurt.

“But she lost her violin, the poor dear,” my mother said. “No wonder the Juilliard talk upset her.”

“But now tell us about Charlotte,” my father said. “She left the table before we could...how did you put it? Heap praise on her?”

I couldn't possibly explain to my parents everything Charlotte was, and everything she had done for me, or how much she meant to me. It would have taken me all night. I shrugged. “She's extraordinary, and I care about her,” I said, those words sounding silly and inadequate in my own ears. “What else can I say?”

This answer sent my parents into apoplexy of joy, but I felt a cold front from Ava that only grew stronger as the conversation progressed.

“So what are your plans now?” my father asked. “Given any thought to a new career?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. A new career out of the ashes of the old, I suppose. *Planet X* is having its big party next week in the city, and I'm going to go.”

“Really?” my mother asked, and I could hear the dread, barely disguised, in her voice. “I thought you cut ties with the magazine after the accident?”

“You thought I'd burned all my bridges, you mean,” I said with a small smile. “It's okay, I thought I did too. But Deacon—Deacon McCormick, remember him? He tells me Yuri would love to have a sit-down so...” I held up my hands. “We'll see what happens, but Deacon made it sound like the door's open there.”

“Please don't tell me you're going to resume all those daredevil stunts,” my mother said. “It was bad enough when you could... It was bad enough before the accident. Honestly, Noah, I don't think I could take it.”

“I don't know what I'm going to do,” I said, the old irritation flaring with a vengeance, surprising even me. I reached carefully for a sip of cold water. “Obviously, I can't do what I used to do. Not everything anyway. I'm going to talk to Yuri... I wasn't a half bad writer, you know,” I added, hating how petulant I sounded.

“Quite so,” my father said, “and I think it would behoove you to put your energies there and not jumping out of planes. There's no reason to put your mother through another catastrophe. You're limited now. You have *limitations*. Don't be stupid enough to think you don't.”

The anger sparked and caught, and I waited to feel Charlotte's comforting hand in mine. But she wasn't there, and I clenched my empty hand into a fist.

“Believe me, I'm well aware of my limitations,” I said evenly. “I've done nothing but sit around, being aware of my limitations for the last four months.

Now I'm finally doing something and you're giving me hell for it."

"Noah, calme-toi, s'il te plait," Lucien said, and for some reason his voice wasn't fuel to the fire like my father's.

I took a steadying breath and turned to my mother's end of the table. "It's just a party, Mom. A meeting. It doesn't have to be terrible."

I heard her push her chair and come around; her perfume grew strong and then she was holding my shoulders. "I can't lose you again. Not again."

She departed, presumably to watch one of the dozens of CSI shows she loved. My father fixed me with a disapproving stare I didn't have to see to feel, and then he and Lucien retired to the study to smoke and talk overseas affairs. Ava remained at the table with me, and her cold front turned positively frigid.

"I need to get back to Charlotte, so say what you're going to say."

"Where to start?" Ava mused. "Mother's right, you know."

"About my 'daredevil stunts?'" I snorted. "According to the therapists at the facility, there is nothing I can't do if I put my mind to it, right? Isn't that the *Kumbaya* shit you guys were constantly spoon-feeding me?"

"Goddamn, but you're selfish," Ava snapped. "I meant, Mother was right about not being able to lose you again. You have no idea what you put her through when you worked for that fucking magazine. You pride yourself on your writing." She scoffed. "Yes, you're good. So good, in fact, that Mother was in tears reading about your sports, so exquisitely detailed. She was so scared all the time, what happened in Acapulco wasn't even a *surprise*."

I sat back in my chair.

"Oh, hadn't thought of that, had you?" Ava snorted in disgust. "No, you were so busy living your life, you never thought about what it meant to her or Dad. Or Lucien. Or me."

"Big talk coming from the woman whose offices are routinely shut down by *bomb threats*," I retorted. "You have some nerve, name dropping *Charlie Hebdo* and then lecturing *me* about how dangerous my job is. Or was. Face it, Aves, neither one of us is cut out to live boring, sedate lives. You, more than anyone, know I can't sit behind a fucking desk. Or maybe you were all happier with me being holed up at the townhouse, safe and sound?"

There was a silence, and I imagined Ava twisting her wine glass around, planning her next line of attack. Instead, she sighed.

"You're right. I hated your stunts too, but I hate the idea of you having to give it up more. I'm sorry that you've had to. But *Planet X*? I like Yuri; he

always seemed like he was looking out for you. But the rest of those guys were jerks, and Deacon their king.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“Really? And what does Charlotte think of your grand plan? Because she doesn’t strike me as a *PX* kind of gal. In fact, she’s the exact opposite of every single woman I’ve ever known you to be attracted to. And that’s a compliment.”

“How is she different? She’s smart, beautiful, talented...”

“She’s also sweet, generous, and must have a heart of gold to not only have put up with your temper but to see you through these last few months. But she was really upset tonight. What happened? And don’t give me the whitewashed version you gave Mom and Dad.”

“There’s nothing more to tell. The guy had a knife, he stole Charlotte’s violin, we ran away.”

I wasn’t about to repeat the vile threats the guy had made about Charlotte, not ever again.

“And that’s a pretty big deal to a concert violinist, I’d imagine,” Ava was saying. “She was probably really attached to her instrument.”

“Yes,” I said slowly. “But she hadn’t been serious about playing in a long time. She’s had...a rough year and is taking time off.”

“And that’s it?”

I shifted in my seat, thinking of the Vienna Touring Orchestra. The one that would take her away from me if she auditioned.

“Of course not,” I answered finally. “That instrument meant a lot to her. Her parents worked hard to save up...and it had sentimental value. Look, what are you getting at? She needs a new violin, so I’ll buy her a new violin.”

“She’s a Juilliard trained virtuoso?” Ava remarked. “You can’t just walk into a music store and pick some factory thing off the wall.”

“She doesn’t audition anymore,” I said, lowering my voice. “And that’s her business. I’m done discussing it behind her back.”

“Mmhmm,” Ava said. “You want to know what I think?”

“I can’t wait.”

“I think that girl has poured her entire life into yours, getting you out of that townhouse. She’s devoted to you. And what have you done for her?”

“Are you kidding me? You spend one afternoon with us, and you’ve got us all figured out?” I shook my head. “She’s the one good thing that’s happened to me since the accident. I’d do anything for her. *Anything.*”

“That’s beautiful,” Ava said without sarcasm. “She is beautiful. And kind. And not a *PX* girl. If she’s as talented as you say, then she needs to be playing and you know why. The adrenaline is not just limited to jumping off cliffs or giving the finger to bomb threats. My best friend is an actor in the West End, and she talks about it all the time. The rush. Performing is where *performers* feel alive.”

I drummed my fingers on the table. “I need her. I can’t function without her. I can’t even find my way to our room without her.”

“Needing her is not the same as loving her.”

Loving her. Loving Charlotte... My chest constricted painfully. *We don’t have to figure everything out all at once*, I told myself and realized Ava was waiting for a response.

“I can do both. I care about her more than anything, and that’s the last time I’m going to say it before I feel like I’m just trying to prove something to you.”

“I believe you,” Ava said. “I’ve never seen you like this. You’re a different kind of happy than I’ve ever seen. It’s not obvious; it’s in your bones or something, and I’m really happy *for* you, Noah. But about your job, you’re still restless and holding on to something that’s not there anymore.”

“You don’t know that, Ava. I’m going to *Planet X*’s ball, and I’m going to talk to Yuri about a job. A career—”

“What career? You can’t have your old life back,” Ava snapped. “You’re different now. And Charlotte is different. She’s not like Angelina—”

“Valentina.”

“Whatever.” I heard the scrape of wood as Ava pushed her chair back. “I like Charlotte. I agree that she’s the best thing to happen to you. Not since the accident but since *ever*.”

Her hand landed on my arm.

“Don’t fuck it up.”



It took me ten stinking minutes to find the suite, but I would be goddamned before I asked anyone for help. I opened the last door on a hallway and breathed a sigh of relief; I could smell fragrant steam, soap, and Charlotte’s own sweet vanilla scent hanging in the air. I stripped down to my underwear and climbed into bed with her. She immediately scooted closer to me, her

back against my chest.

“I thought you’d be asleep,” I murmured, holding her tightly.

“I did too.”

What have you done for her? Ava’s question rebounded in my mind.

“Talk to me, Charlotte,” I said gently. “Please.”

“I can’t help but think about my violin. And my music. And my career, whatever that may be. I don’t know what it is anymore. Or what’s left of it.”

I took a breath, forced the words out. “The Vienna Touring Orchestra. Are you going to audition?”

“With what?” she asked, and her voice broke. “It’s gone. My violin is gone. My parents worked so hard...and it’s gone now, and I feel like an amputee. Which is so strange because I had begun to think I wouldn’t play anymore. Not professionally. But I miss it. And I miss it a lot, Noah. I miss Chris.” She began to cry in earnest now and I buried my face in her hair, feeling her grief as she shuddered against me.

“Go ahead, Charlotte,” I whispered. “It’s okay.”

“He’s really gone, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, baby, he is.”

She cried harder, clutching my arm, and I just held her, my heart aching for her.

“It all comes from the same place,” she whispered, her breath hitching. “My music and love and the passion I felt when I played. And when Chris died...it hurt so much to play, and I didn’t know why. But I think I know now.” She swallowed her tears, or maybe she’d finally run dry. “It feels unfair to move on when the ones we love can’t.”

I squeezed my eyes shut until they hurt. “I want you to be happy, Charlotte. I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy.”

“I’m happy with you, Noah. Like nothing I’ve ever known.”

She turned to me and kissed me, and I tasted her salt tears and her sweetness and her love for me. Our kiss deepened quickly, and her desire burned away her tears, but I hesitated. She was so upset.

“I want to,” she breathed. “I want you, Noah. You make me feel like everything bad is so far away.”

She kissed me again and again, and I started to feel that peculiar feeling that was exhilarating and disorienting at once, where my world telescoped to nothing but Charlotte—her skin, her breath, the sweet softness of her body beneath mine. She slipped out of her shirt and panties, and then my body was

flush with hers. Then joined. I drowned in the sensations, losing myself completely in her.

After, she snuggled up to me and sleep claimed her quickly; she'd exhausted herself, purging herself of the grief that had been weighing her down. And I believed her that she was happy, but it wasn't enough. I could do more. I *had* to do more for her.

The next afternoon, before we said our goodbyes to my family, Ava took Charlotte aside for some "girl talk." I used the opportunity to find Lucien and tell him what I wanted. I spoke in French so that if Charlotte came by—and I didn't know it—she wouldn't understand.

"Are you certain?" Lucien asked doubtfully, though I could hear he was pleased. "It may take some time."

"I'm certain," I said. "Do whatever it takes."

I felt his hand on my shoulder. "Very good, my boy. Very good."

chapter twenty-seven



The week leading up to the *Planet X* party seemed to fly by, like a runaway train ready to jump its tracks. I went shopping with Melanie for a dress with all the enthusiasm of someone about to face dental surgery. A fancy party at a world-famous landmark should have given me pleasant jitters, and instead, my stomach twisted in knots that only seemed to tighten as the week progressed. Worse, Noah was distracted and jumpy, and I knew the idea of facing his old *PX* coworkers made him more nervous than he would admit.

"I still don't see why you can't just have a sit-down with your editor," I told him on Thursday night.

"I have to go to the party. It's the only way."

"I don't know what you mean. The only way?"

"To know if I have a career left at *Planet X*. If I still belong there."

He gathered me to him then, holding me tightly and inhaling deeply, as if drawing strength from me.

"No more living in one dark room," he said against my hair, and I nodded. I understood. I wanted a fulfilling life for him. But the notion that *Planet X* wasn't the way had dug its claws into me and wouldn't let go.



The night of the party arrived, and I put on my new dress: strapless with black chiffon that billowed prettily around my knees in diaphanous layers. I swept my unruly hair in a twist. A few tendrils escaped to frame my face, but it looked like I'd done it on purpose. Armed with makeup techniques from Sasha, I gave myself smoky eyes and glossy lips. Black strappy heels gave me a few extra inches so that when I slow danced with Noah, I'd be tucked

perfectly under his chin. He'd said there was a DJ and live music, and I'd comforted myself with a vow that if nothing else, I'd dance with him and fulfill some strange daydream I'd had since the very first time I met him.

I stepped out of my room and ascended the stairs to the third floor, bound and determined to be as optimistic as I could. It was completely possible going back to *Planet X* was perfect for Noah and that I was being ridiculous. Or maybe just nervous for myself. I'd been in New York City for five years, but "chic" or "elegant" weren't words used to describe me, and I knew this party was going to be teeming with women who were both. *Planet X* incorporated supermodels in some of its shoots, and Noah had *dated* more than one during his heyday. I'd seen the photographic evidence firsthand.

"You decent?" I asked Noah as I stepped inside his room.

"I have no idea," he replied, coming out of the walk-in closet.

"Oh," I breathed. "Oh, wow..."

He wore a stylish black tuxedo with a narrow tie and a vest beneath his jacket that was somehow the sexiest article of clothing I'd ever seen on a man. He'd slicked his hair back with gel to give it a wet look, making his angular features more prominent. An emerald-green kerchief in his jacket pocket set off the green in his eyes, turning them into gemstones.

"You look...devastating."

He smiled crookedly. "I was shooting for 'presentable.'"

"Then you overshot it by, like, a lot." I straightened his tie and smoothed the corner of his kerchief, then ran my hands down the silky lapels of his jacket, and somehow, he felt my mood though I hadn't said a word.

"What's wrong, babe?"

"Nothing," I said, forcing a laugh. "It's just...you look so handsome and sharp, and I know there're bound to be women there who are a million times more put together than me. Not to mention...*taller*." I gave myself a shake. "Stupid. I'm just being vain and stupid."

Noah laid his hands gently on either side of my cheeks, then carefully moved them up to feel my hair, to feel the tendrils I'd let loose and the small silver drop earrings I wore. He slipped his hands down to my bare shoulders. "Strapless," he said approvingly, a smile ghosting over his lips. He trailed his hands down my back, then around to my waist, feeling the material and letting it slide through his fingers.

"Color?"

"Black," I managed, as his hands had left little trails of heat all over my

body.

“Are you wearing lipstick?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to have to redo it,” he said huskily and kissed me deeply, his tongue sliding against mine, his hands around my waist, pulling me to him.

I moaned softly into his kiss and when he pulled away, he was breathing hard. He pressed his forehead to mine. “You’re more than beautiful.” He caressed my cheek. “You’re the dawn, Charlotte, and no woman can hold a candle to you.”

“Oh, jeez,” I breathed. “I was shooting for ‘pretty.’”

“You know I can’t do this without you,” Noah said, his eyes searching for mine in his endless dark. “And you know I need this. For us, not just me.”

“If it’s the right thing, Noah, then I support you.”

“It will be,” he said and turned away, so that I only barely caught his last words. “I have nothing else.”



The hired sedan took us through the New York night where city lights glittered all around us and above us, stretching upward so high I couldn’t see their end. The Empire State Building was lit up with flashing blues and greens, painting the night sky above. Noah told me that *Planet X* had paid for the light show and had rented out the entire 86th floor outdoor observatory for the duration of the party. The ball itself was in the Grand Empire Ballroom on the 85th floor, newly constructed after a hedge firm moved out.

Midtown was a cacophony of honking cabs and pedestrians crowding the street. Our car pulled in front of the Empire State Building, a place I’d only stepped foot in once, when I first moved to the city five years ago. Elegant people in formal wear exited limos and sedans, stepping under the front awning and through the doors amid art deco columns and glass.

I had been nervous about wearing a knee-length dress, thinking most of the women would be wearing floor-length ball gowns—the kind of dress that was too overwhelming to my short stature. But I was surprised to see most dresses were very tight, very short, and very strapless, embellished with beads or transparent swaths of material glittering with gemstones. The men wore tuxes or fashionable suits in flamboyant colors. I heard loud, raucous

voices from a group of men and the answering laughs of the women as our driver opened the door and handed me out.

I smoothed my dress down that now seemed a bit plain and helped Noah from the car. He'd put on his sunglasses and carried his white cane, both of which only enhanced his beauty in my eyes. I had only known him as blind, and that blindness was a part of what made him the man I'd entrusted with my heart. The people inside the hotel had known a very different Noah Lake, and how they were going to reconcile the two set my nerves on edge.

"There are so many people," I said to Noah as we waited with a crowd at the elevators. "I had no idea the magazine was this huge."

"This is the Global Ball," Noah answered. "People from all the offices all over the world are here, in addition to the huge staff from headquarters."

I nodded, noting people from varied ethnicities, some in fancy versions of their local dress, and heard voices speaking in accents or in foreign tongues. The inclusiveness and diversity bolstered me somewhat.

You let Deacon color your opinion of the entire magazine. This might not be so bad.

We crammed into an elevator with loud-talkers and a cloud of perfumes and colognes. No one recognized Noah so far, and we were tucked into the back corner anyway. He clutched my arm, and I knew he felt boxed in, but then the elevator shot up and we were all cracking our jaws at the change in pressure.

The doors opened on an elegant entry room, carpeted in maroon and gold. We followed the crowd down a hallway to a set of double doors marked Grand Empire Ballroom.

I described the hall, the décor, the people for Noah. "Imagine a flock of birds with brightly colored plumage and sequins, all squawking and cooing their way to a champagne watering hole."

He smiled gratefully. "I can see that."

We stepped up to the ballroom entry, to a table littered with nametags and seating charts. Two women were taking invitations and checking them to binders full of names and giving attendees their table numbers. One, a blonde in a shimmery silver dress, stared as Noah and I approached, her mouth agape. She elbowed her companion—a brunette in sapphire blue—and her mouth fell open in an identical expression.

"Noah Lake?" the blonde screeched. "Oh my God, honey, get over here right this instant!"

Noah cocked his head. “Barbara?”

“Yes, it’s Barbara. Oh shit, it’s true, you can’t see a thing, can you?” Barbara came around the table and threw her arms around Noah. “I can’t believe it. I saw your name on the list and thought someone was playing a trick on me. Didn’t I say that, Wendy?”

The brunette nodded and took her turn hugging Noah. They both stared and gabbled and cooed over him, taking possession of him as other old friends and coworkers came to the table. He clung to my arm like a vise, or else I would have been shunted to the side.

“We’re all so happy you’re here,” Wendy said, wiping tears and moving back to the other side of the table. She consulted the guest list. “And you must be...Charlotte Conroy? His assistant?”

“Charlotte is my girlfriend,” Noah said, and it was the first sentence in the whole exchange that didn’t make me cringe. Their pity was as tangible as their perfume.

“Oh damn, but that’s precious,” Barbara cooed and handed me our nametags. “So sweet of you to take care of him like that.” She huffed a sigh, regarding Noah as if he were something beautiful, now ruined. “You’re at table forty-two with Yuri, and I’ll tell you right now, he does think your name on his table is a practical joke.”

They laughed their tears away, and we were finally allowed to go in. Noah read my silence as he so often did.

“Charlotte...”

“You’re not a joke.”

“They didn’t mean it literally.”

“Or something to be pitied.”

“You’ve only known me as blind,” Noah said, his voice low. “They knew what I was before.”

At the head of the ballroom was a small proscenium with a drop screen hanging over it. The word “Welcome” flashed in a dozen different languages. A third of the room was cleared of furniture, and people danced to pulsing music from a DJ table set up to the left. I looked for the live music Noah said would be here but saw nothing, not even a stage where a band might set up later.

I wended us through beautifully set tables with gorgeous centerpieces of twinkling LED lights and crystals. We were stopped several times by old friends wanting to shake Noah’s hand and inquire about his health. I tensed

every time but was relieved that most were polite and genuinely happy to see him.

Of course they are, I scolded myself. *We're not surrounded by monsters.*

Then we arrived at table forty-two and my heart sank.

I saw his coppery curls a split second before Deacon stood up from the table, his booming voice carrying even in the crowded high-ceiling ballroom.

“The man of the hour,” Deacon crowed. He hugged Noah and then took my hand and kissed it. “Sweet Charlotte. Always a pleasure. You look ravishing. Do you know how ravishing your sweet Charlotte is, Mr. Lake? You probably don’t, or you wouldn’t have brought her to this pit of vipers.”

He gestured at the people seated at the table: a portly man with great shocks of white hair, two young men—Logan and Jonesy by their nametags, the former possibly Irish, the latter African American—and a wiry, spikey-haired woman in black leather. Her nametag was upside down. Polly, I deciphered. They all stood up to greet Noah and hug him and shake his hand.

I was introduced to everyone and then we sat, Noah on Yuri’s right, then me, then Deacon. Somehow, I knew that arrangement was no accident.

“I thought Barbara tells me a lie,” Yuri Koslov said, rubbing his reddened nose. He reminded me of Santa Claus without the beard and red suit but with a flask of something in his pudgy fingers that made his eyes shine. He hauled himself out of his chair and thumped Noah on the back. “I miss your face. But never thought to see you here. Strange business.”

“No business just yet.” Deacon laughed. “Noah and sweet Charlotte haven’t even had a drink. Business can wait.”

Yuri leaned back, watching with dark eyes as Deacon pulled a bottle of champagne from an ice bucket in the middle of the table and poured two glasses. He gave one to me and reached across to offer one to Noah.

“Here you go, buddy.”

Deacon pressed the glass to his hand, but Noah set it down, twisting the stem in his fingers.

“To Noah: *PX*’s very own Lazarus!” Deacon reached across me again to clap Noah on the shoulder. “Welcome back, chief.”

The others toasted and I saw them all exchange awkward glances.

“So,” Logan said. He was a short, stocky guy wearing a plaid suit and red bowtie. “How’ve you been, Lake? Last I heard you were in rehab. How’d... uh, how’d that go?”

“It sucked,” Noah said, smiling thinly.

“He’s just being modest,” Deacon said. “I paid a visit in the beginning. This guy had to learn to walk and talk all over again. Isn’t that right, buddy?” He shook his head. “Fuckin’-A.”

After a few cursory questions for Noah, the four of them—Logan, Jonesy, Polly, and Deacon—spoke at great lengths about recent articles they’d been working on and the countries they’d visited. Noah sat in stony silence as Yuri had been called away to talk to some other people.

The DJ started a slow song, “Time After Time” by Cyndi Lauper. I started to lean in to ask Noah to dance when I watched him find his champagne glass and down the whole thing in one go. Jonesy was talking about a village in Vietnam he’d been to, and Noah jumped in.

“Do you remember that year we were in Cambodia? The year of the flooding?”

“The leeches!” Jonesy shouted, laughing, and soon Noah was embroiled in reminiscences of his *Planet X* days.

Deacon refilled Noah’s champagne glass, then mine—though mine didn’t need refilling—and flashed me a wink. “So, how do you like our little shindig? Pretty sweet, right? The fucking Empire State Building. Too classy for us bums. The higher-ups must’ve had a very good year. In fact, I know they did, because everyone from Accounting has been drunk all week.”

I smiled thinly. “Congratulations.”

Logan stood up suddenly. “Come on, Lake. There’re some people you haven’t seen yet.”

“Oh,” I said as Noah got to his feet. I noticed his champagne glass was empty again. “Do you need me...?”

“I got him,” Logan said. “I promise not to walk him into a wall.”

“It’s you we’re worried about, Loge.” Deacon laughed.

Logan flipped Deacon the bird. His face was bright red, and his eyes were glassy as he went around to take Noah’s arm.

I glanced up. “Noah?”

“I’m fine.” He bent down to plant a kiss on my cheek. He missed and got my nose, and I could smell the champagne on his breath. “We’ll have that dance, I promise.”

I watched Logan lead him away, and my hands strangled the linen napkin in my lap.

“The drunk leading the blind.” Deacon laughed, and the remainder of the table laughed with him. “And Lake’s a total lightweight! He’ll be shitfaced in

no time.”

“So what do you do, Charlotte?” Jonesy asked. “You’re Noah’s assistant? How’s that working out?”

“Yeah, how’s that job? He was a dick to us when we tried to visit,” Polly grouched. “Seems better now but damn, permanently blind? I’d be pissed too. More than pissed.”

“Suicidal,” Deacon said, nodding solemnly.

I glanced at Jonesy who quickly killed another glass of champagne. “What’s his plan?” he asked me. “To write for *PX*?” He blew air out his cheeks. “Noah belongs on a mountain, not behind a desk. I can’t picture it.”

“He’s not going to try to climb again, is he?” Polly wondered, and I wasn’t sure if it was to me or not. And it didn’t matter, as she kept talking anyway. “Christ, I hope not. Enough is enough, right?”

“Can you imagine the HR nightmare? Insurance?” Deacon laughed. “But hey, we gotta make...what’s it? Accommodations? If a person’s handicapped but they want to go back to work? That’s the law.”

“He wants to write,” I said, my voice sounding pathetically small in my own ears. “He can’t do everything he once did, but he’s not done.”

Polly shook her head and sipped her drink that was a lot stronger than champagne. “It’s a fucking shame. It’s almost too hard to see him here like that. Painful. He was one of the best.” She leaned over her arms, her gaze cast down. “This place isn’t for him. Not anymore.”

Jonesy looked to me, his dark eyes serious. “We all loved him. We do love him. Management loved him. Hell, people in nowhere villages loved him. But now...”

“The ladies loved him,” Deacon chimed in. “Casanova, that guy.”

Polly frowned at Deacon, then raised her pierced brow at me. “Are you and he...?”

“Yes,” I said. “And in fact, I’d better check on him. He needs...”

I let my words trail off, as I realized just then that I didn’t know what Noah needed.

chapter twenty-eight



I searched the dim and crowded ballroom and found Noah near the bar, leaning heavily on a pillar amidst a group of people, a cocktail in his hand. I slipped up beside him.

“It’s me,” I said. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

I turned him away from the crowd and steadied him as he was already swaying. “You’re drunk.”

“Can you blame me?”

“They’re serving dinner now,” I said, watching a small army of waiters come out with plates of chicken or steak or vegetarian pasta. “You need to get some food in you, and then I think...I think we should leave.”

“I’m not eating in front of these people,” Noah said darkly.

“*These people?*” I crossed my arms. “You mean, the ones you were just talking and laughing with? Aren’t they your friends?”

“They are and they aren’t.” He drained his glass. “I need to talk to Yuri.” He forced a pained smile. “And you haven’t had your dance.”

“I don’t see how you’re going to accomplish either of those things if you keep boozing it up.”

“I know,” he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I feel like I’m on a cruise ship. The floor’s moving and I’m getting seasick.”

I leaned closer to him. “Are you enjoying this? Is this what you want?”

“It’s one night,” Noah said. “One night to prove I’m not a fucking lost cause and then it’s over. Then I’m back.”

I bit my lip.

“Please, Charlotte,” he said, clutching my arm. “It’s like everything I left behind has been here the whole time, waiting for me. It doesn’t have to be over.”

I could hear the longing in his voice, and my heart ached for him. I nodded, then caught myself. “Okay,” I said, “but under one condition. You don’t leave me alone with Deacon again.”

“Is he harassing you? He’s obnoxious, but I’ve never known him to go too far.”

“Just promise me.”

“Anything, baby. Let’s head back.” He took a step then stopped. “Wait. Could you get me a seltzer with lime? Tell them to put it in a highball glass so it looks like a gin and tonic.”

I did as he asked, and we headed back to our table where the others were already eating. Yuri Koslov had returned as well, and he watched Noah with a peculiar look in his pale blue eyes; a half-sad, half-glad kind of glance. The older man caught me staring and flashed a warm smile. I liked him. Noah was right; he reminded me of Lucien. I just wished he wasn’t so drunk. Everyone was drunk and kept drinking, including Deacon, though his eyes never lost their sharpness. I felt them on me as Noah and I returned to our seats.

Noah’s dinner was steak, mine chicken. He struggled a little with cutting the meat. I didn’t dare offer to help and he gave up after one or two bites.

I felt the others watching him, pitying him, not for his blindness—I thought if another blind person were among them, they’d treat him or her like anyone else. But Noah hadn’t been anyone else. He had been one of them, and now he was scarred and disabled—a walking example of the price they could pay the next time they jumped or dove or careened down a mountain. Noah was an outsider now. Or worse. An exile. I knew they’d never accept him, not because he was blind, but because at one time he wasn’t.

I wondered if Noah felt it too, and I guessed he did. Hardly anything slipped past his awareness, and when Polly passed her flask around, Noah abandoned his seltzer and took a long pull.

As the waiters cleared the dinner plates, I excused myself to use the restroom. I didn’t want to leave Noah, but I couldn’t stand watching him torture himself another minute.

I stepped out of the ballroom, down a quieter hallway lined with plush couches and paintings in gilded frames. In the bathroom, I checked my reflection as a trio of women came in, each wearing a designer dress, their voices loud and sharp. They clustered around, gossiping as they touched up their makeup.

“Oh, hey, you’re with Noah Lake, right?” one asked, catching my eye in the mirror. “His assistant?”

“I’m Charlotte—”

“He’s completely blind, right? I can’t fucking believe it,” said another, tucking a stray lock of auburn hair back into her up-do. “You didn’t know him from before, but he was a legend around here,” she told me. “A *legend*.”

“Did you see the photos of him in the hospital?” asked a brunette. “Jesus, what a nightmare. What a *waste*.”

“What’s he doing here?” the blonde asked me. “I mean, the Observation Deck? What’s he going to observe? And there’s going to be a *slideshow*. They do it every year, showing the highlights. A slideshow,” she repeated and made a motion at her eyes. “Poor thing. Who invited him anyway?”

“Deacon,” I managed.

The brunette made a face. “Figures.”

The other women exchanged glances, muttered a few pleasantries, and moved off. I gripped the sink with both hands. A slideshow. And Deacon must have known. Was he trying to humiliate Noah? It didn’t make any sense.

Another woman—a tall, stunningly gorgeous blonde in a periwinkle blue dress, most definitely a model—emerged from a stall behind me. She’d been so silent, I hadn’t known she was there. I recognized her at once from Google: Valentina Paquette. Noah’s ex-girlfriend.

We exchanged small smiles as she washed her hands, and then she strode out, all long, bronzed legs and a cloud of Chanel No. 5. I waited a minute to make sure she was gone and then left to find Noah.

As I passed the men’s room, I heard Noah’s voice and then Deacon’s answering. Noah sounded hoarse. He’d probably thrown up, and Deacon, good buddy that he was, had been there to help him. I waited outside, fuming, torn between wanting to be a supportive girlfriend and wanting to drag Noah out of the building. In any case, I wasn’t about to leave Noah with Deacon and sat down to wait on the cushioned bench just outside the bathrooms.

The men’s room sounded just as cavernous as the women’s. Deacon and Noah must have been standing by the sinks near the door, as I could hear their conversation plain as day.

“Did you see Mona?” Deacon snorted a laugh. “Ha! What am I saying? You didn’t see her. Pity, man. She’s looking hot tonight. And I saw Valentina not a minute ago. *Goddamn*, I can’t believe you couldn’t get serious with her.

And she was *willing*. What a waste. I'd have given my left nut for her, and you just walked away."

"Deacon," Noah said, sounding weary, "I'm with Charlotte..."

"Yes, you are," Deacon replied, his tone strange. "Interesting choice, but then I guess you've changed a lot."

I felt a sliver of ice slip down my spine.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Noah asked.

"Oh, come on, man," Deacon said. "Charlotte's adorable, but you *remember* Valentina, right? Need a reminder? Killer body, legs that go on forever... Hell, I don't need to tell you. You know *exactly* what I'm talking about."

I waited, every muscle in my body having gone rigid, waiting for Noah to tell Deacon to shut up or punch him in his stupid, ugly mouth. I wanted to get up and run but felt glued to the seat. Then Noah spoke and my blood turned to ice.

"I remember Valentina." Noah sounded terrible. "But Charlotte...what does she look like, Deacon? I can't see her face."

"Charlotte? You want me to describe her?"

"I can't see her face," Noah said so quietly I almost didn't hear him. "I'll never see her face."

"She's cute, like I said. Sweet. A luscious little thing, but I don't know that you'd have given her the time of day."

"Don't say that," Noah said. "That's not what I... Don't say that, man." He muttered something else I couldn't hear, or maybe it was the blood rushing in my ears that deafened me.

Deacon's voice was loud and sharp. "Come on, buddy. You're three sheets to the wind. Let's get you back in your seat and you can hash out some shit with Yuri. What's your plan, anyway? To write our articles for us?" He laughed snidely. "Stick a fork in you, you're done, my friend. D-u-n, done."

I stood up on shaking legs, ready to face them both. Tears stung my eyes. Was Noah ashamed of me? Or afraid I wasn't up to his usual standards? A small voice told me my own insecurities were probably feeding on Noah and Deacon's conversation like a feast, but it hurt to hear Noah ask at all.

They came out, Deacon supporting Noah who looked rumped and tired. I thrust my chin forward, braced for a confrontation, and felt a cold spot grow in my chest as Deacon looked right at me...and kept on walking.

chapter twenty-nine



Deacon led me to my chair, and Yuri decided it was time to have our one-on-one. But it wasn't the pseudo-job interview I'd stupidly thought it would be. Instead, Yuri told me to get out and not look back.

"I need to tell you this?" he wondered.

His accent was made thicker by the vodka I could smell on his breath. He held my neck in a vise, for which I was sort of grateful, as the floor kept trying to spin out from under me.

"I know why you're here, and I'm happy to see you, *bratishka*, but what did you want? To sit with me in the office? Like English teacher grading papers when their articles come in? No, no. Not for you."

"I don't know what I wanted," I muttered. "To go back to where I was before. That someone would show me how or tell me it was okay to try."

"Try," Yuri mused and finally released me from his neck hold. "Try to dive and soar and fly again? Not anymore. Not here." He clucked his tongue. "You remember Lyle Baker? He blows out his knee in Switzerland and comes back here. A hero in a wheelchair. And everyone laughs and claps, and six months later, he's back in Switzerland, and the snows are melted so he climbs the naked mountains instead. And everyone is happy and goes on with their business."

Yuri belched and eased back in his chair. "But you, *bratishka*. You almost die and you cannot walk or talk or see, and when you come back, they do not see the hero who can now walk and talk again. They see your blindness. They see the danger. The price that can be paid."

Yuri's words sank into me like little teeth.

"What am I going to do?"

"Long time now I say you're better than the work. You can write. You can

tell your story.”

“I have nothing to say,” I whispered. “It’s all black, Yuri. Empty.”

“You write from here.” He tapped my chest. “Is that empty? Or full?”

I thought of my ridiculous attempt at writing—on a typewriter, for God’s sake—where my words vanished the second I hit the key. But I’d sat down to write about Machu Picchu and somehow that experience tied itself to Charlotte because my heart was full. Of course it was. It was full of her.

“Yes,” Yuri said, as if I’d spoken aloud. Maybe I had, I was so damn drunk. “She is a thing of beauty. Her eyes...they are full of love when they look at you.”

It’s what I had been drunkenly asking Deacon; trying to articulate a longing I had to see Charlotte, to see what she felt for me reflected in her eyes. I needed it like I used to need the adrenaline high, and I realized, sitting in a ballroom full of meaningless noise, that there was nothing more important in this world than finding her and telling her what she meant to me. That I loved her. I was in love with her.

I’m in love with Charlotte, I thought, and there it was. The rush I’d thought I’d lost forever.

“Thank you, Yuri,” I said. “Thank you. It’s time to go.”

“It is, it is.”

“Where is she?”

“Not here,” Yuri said. “Maybe...she already go?”

“Wouldn’t blame her.” I clapped Yuri on the back and fumbled my way into my jacket before beginning the arduous trek out of the ballroom.

I felt my way through a maze of clogged tables and chairs to an open space, realizing—too late—that I needed my damn cane. I’d stupidly left it under the table.

It took no time at all to realize how futile everything was. I made it out of the ballroom itself but so what? I had no idea where I was or where the elevators might be. I was surrounded by noise and bodies brushing past me and clinking glasses. I was lost without my cane or Charlotte to guide me, and my senses dulled further by the alcohol I’d drunk to dull the pain. The whole night was pain. I should have listened to Charlotte. Instead, I pathetically tried to hold on to something that had slipped through my fingers the moment my head struck those rocks a year ago.

“Time of Your Life” by Green Day began to play in the ballroom, and I recalled its second title, “Good Riddance.”

“Good riddance is right,” I muttered.

A collective cheer went up every now and then. I guessed the slideshow had begun. My skin burned and I took several more halting steps forward. The humiliation was second only to the awful disorientation. I’d drunk too much; I’d lost count of how many I’d had. My usual darkness now pulsed and writhed and tried to pull me under like a cold, black riptide.

I found a wall, a rounded pillar. I leaned against it and sank down, hanging my hands over my upraised knees. Someone would come along eventually, I guessed.

Charlotte, find me. I’m so sorry...

Someone did come along, but it wasn’t Charlotte.

“Jesus Christ, Lake! Are you playing limbo by yourself? How low can you go?”

Deacon. He managed to sound disgusted and triumphant at the same time. I felt hands under my arms as he hauled me to standing.

“I have to find Charlotte,” I said, reeling in the dark. How utter blackness could spin was beyond me. “Help me find Charlotte.”

“Sure, buddy. You want a nip?”

The stringent stench of whiskey filled my nose. “Damn, Deacon, I’m drunk enough. Just help me. Do you see her anywhere?”

“Not sure. Observation Deck, maybe? Happy to take you.”

Something in Deacon’s voice told me all or part of what he said was a lie, but I had no choice. I couldn’t sit on the fucking floor all night. I took his arm and let him lead me to the elevators and then the deck. I had a vague idea of the layout from a visit a few years ago. A jazzy-sounding band was playing in the gallery, but Deacon took me outside to the deck itself. I could feel the cool wind against my alcohol-heated skin.

I felt my chest tighten to think of Charlotte up here, alone, against the sparkling backdrop of the city, and the music playing...

I’m so sorry, baby. I want that dance with you, I do...

“Do you see her?”

No answer.

“Deacon?” And suddenly I knew he was gone.

What the hell?

I heard the clack of high heels move close and then stop. A woman.

“Charlotte...?”

The scent of Chanel No. 5 filled my nose. Many women wore that

perfume, but I recognized it on Valentina at once, and a slideshow of its own began in my mind; of her and me in various hotel rooms, in various positions, with various cityscapes outside the bedroom windows.

“Hello, Noah,” she said, her French accent thick and rich, just as I remembered. “I’ve missed you.”

chapter thirty



Deacon led Noah out of the bathroom and back into the ballroom, and I stared, rooted to the floor, not knowing what to do. I sank down and sat for a good ten minutes on that stupid bench outside the men's room, feeling lost.

When I finally went back to the table, Noah wasn't there. Neither was Deacon. The others glanced at me with mixtures of pity and embarrassment as they watched the slideshow at the front of the ballroom.

I stood before them, arms crossed. "Where is Noah?"

Logan pointed one finger to the ceiling. "I saw Deacon take him up to the Observation Deck."

I returned to my seat to grab my wrap, and Yuri Koslov beckoned me to Noah's empty chair beside him. I scooted over and the big man leaned close, bestowing upon me a gust of vodka-drenched breath.

"Have you read your Shakespeare, *devochka*?" Yuri asked, his accent thick and made thicker with drink. "*Othello*?"

"It's been a while, but yes."

"Iago, he pretends to be Othello's friend. But he is a green-eyed monster. He fills Othello's head with jealousy so that Iago might watch the mighty king fall. And how does it end?"

"Not good," I muttered. My stomach tingled and a sour taste rose in my mouth. "Not good at all."

"If I were you," Yuri said so that the others wouldn't hear, "I take Noah away from Deacon McCormick and *Planet X*, and do not look back."

"Yes," I said. "That sounds exactly right."

I gave him a peck on one ruddy cheek and made my way back out to the elevators, to the 86th floor.

As soon as the doors opened, I heard the music; the live band was here,

playing jazzy little numbers as the entire city lay spread out below like an ocean of lights.

I wandered through the gallery, the closed-in room with tall windows in the center of the deck. A small trio: clarinet, drum, saxophone played while half a dozen couples slow-danced before them. My eyes stung and the lights became blurry puddles of white and gold. I went outside and let the wind—bracing at this height—dry my tears.

I wandered the perimeter in search of Noah and saw a swath of periwinkle blue dress against the dark of a tuxedo. Noah stood against a cement rib, Valentina Paquette pressed against him. He held her by the wrists, and I thought for a moment he was pushing her away. But my heart cracked as she rested her hands on his chest without protest from him, speaking words I couldn't hear for the music. There was a familiarity between them, between their bodies, as if they were used to touching each other.

I turned and went down the way I'd come, feeling weak and shaky, as if I were going to shatter into tiny pieces. In the hallway that led to the ballroom, Deacon was there, looking as if he'd been waiting for me. He pushed off the wall and strode over, blocking my way.

"I need to talk to you," he said, taking my arm.

I wrenched out of his grip. "Don't touch me!"

"Please," Deacon said. "Talk to me."

"I have nothing to say to you, and if you think you're going to get me alone somewhere, you're crazy."

I marched into the ballroom, to the table to grab my purse.

A cheer went up. The slideshow was still going: a year's worth of memories and stunts and gorgeous, exotic locales flashed over a dropped screen, flipping one after another.

I glanced around at the others at the table. They were all still there, settling in to watch the show or maybe too drunk to do anything else.

"Tell Noah I've gone," I said, hoping I sounded more put together than I felt.

Logan blinked blearily at me. "You're leaving? Aren't you Noah's assistant?"

Polly rolled her eyes. "No, dude, that's his girlfriend."

Something in me moved, a tectonic shift that reordered me like a puzzle whose pieces had been strewn all over and now came together to show the whole.

“I’m a concert violinist,” I said softly. Then again, louder. “I am a concert violinist.”

The others blinked at me. “Come again?”

I didn’t answer; I didn’t owe them anything. I turned on my heel and left the ballroom for the bank of elevators. I jabbed the Lobby button, not permitting myself to feel or think anything until I got back to my room in the townhouse. Or maybe the cab, since I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to make it as far as the townhouse.

As I waited, I cast my gaze around everywhere, to fill my eyes with something besides the image of Noah and Valentina together.

The doors opened on an empty elevator. I took a step, saw a flash of copper, smelled a whiff of whiskey, and then a hand on my back pushed me inside, and Deacon blocked the door as it closed behind him.

chapter thirty-one



Valentina pressed her body to me, and I fell back against the cement wall. Her hands held my cheeks, warm breath on my face, and then soft lips on mine that quickly turned insistent. She smelled wrong. She tasted wrong. Everything about her felt wrong and yet completely familiar at the same time. But I was moving in slow motion. I went to take hold of her wrists, to thrust her from me, when her fingers in my hair found the ridged scars.

She gave a little cry and flinched back.

Charlotte never flinches, I thought blearily. She never does...

“Val, no.” I tried to push her away, but I felt wrung out, boneless. I leaned against the wall and just held her hands until they sank onto my chest. “You have to go. Leave me. Before Charlotte sees...”

“Charlotte?” Valentina stood away from me; I felt the weight of her body lift. “Deacon told me she was only your assistant.” A pause. “He lied?”

“Yeah, he lied.” I closed my eyes, but it made no difference. “Do you see her?”

God, did she see that kiss? Did Deacon set me up?

“She is not here.”

I shook my head, tried to think. “It’s Deacon. He’s fucking with me.”

“I think you’re right,” Valentina said quietly. “He told me you wanted to see me. That you missed me. That you...wanted to try again.”

Lies. All lies.

“What else did he tell you? Where is he?” An ugly, knotted feeling tightened my guts. I felt guilty for the pain in Val’s voice but something close to real fear for Charlotte was making me panic. I cursed myself for drinking so much. I needed a clear head, and I couldn’t think, couldn’t imagine what Deacon was up to. *Don’t leave me alone with him*, Charlotte had made me

promise.

“Christ, help me, Val. Help me find Charlotte. Something’s not right.”

“Yes. Here.”

I took the crook of her arm. It was bony where Charlotte’s was soft. Valentina walked almost too fast for my drunken state, taking me across the deck, yet not fast enough.

In the quiet of the elevator, I felt the weight of Valentina’s crushed hopes. She had always wanted more from me when we were together, and I was always with one foot out the door.

“Val, I know I ended things...badly.”

“You didn’t end them at all,” she said. No accusation, but her voice sounded bruised with old pain. “You stopped talking to me. And then Acapulco happened, and you were gone.”

God, was that how it was? Did I do that to her?

That’s what Keith did to Charlotte.

The sick feeling ratcheted up. I’d never felt so lost, cast adrift in the black nothing without Charlotte to hold on to.

“I’m sorry, Val. I really am.”

“It’s okay,” she said, and I heard a smile. “This is not the best circumstance, but it’s nice to see that you love someone.”

I do, God help me, I do. I love Charlotte and I never told her...

The doors finally opened, and Valentina took me back through the ballroom. “She’s not here,” she said.

“Deacon?”

“I don’t see him either.”

Oh, Christ.

“Downstairs,” I said. “Maybe Charlotte left.” I hoped she did. I hoped to God she was safely tucked in the back of a cab, hating me but safe. Please, I prayed as Val led me back to the elevators. *Anything. I’ll do anything so long as she’s okay.*

I thought it was taking an eternity for the elevator to arrive and Val said, “Looks like one elevator is stuck.”

An alarm went off; a loud ringing, over and over, from the elevator shaft. My blood turned to ice in my veins.

“Charlotte.”

chapter thirty-two



“No, no, no!” I shrieked. “This is not going to happen, Deacon. It’s *not*.”

“Charlotte, calm down,” Deacon said. He’d hit the emergency stop button and was holding out his hands in a calming manner, as if trapping a woman in an elevator was perfectly normal and I was crazy to be upset about it. “I just want to talk to you. That’s it.”

“Liar,” I said. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it would burst from my chest. “You could’ve talked to me out there. You don’t follow someone...you don’t *corner* them...”

Deacon towered over me, as most people did, blocking the door. And he was drunk. Much drunker than I’d noticed before. His cheeks were ruddy, his eyes shining but dull at the same time. For the first time since I’d met him, his loose laugh and smug smile were gone, replaced with a lazy, predatory expression that made my blood run cold.

“You wouldn’t talk to me out there,” Deacon said. “But this is better. Quieter. Away from everyone.”

He stepped forward, and I stepped away; my back hit the elevator wall. “There are security cameras,” I said, clutching my little purse to my chest as if it were some sort of shield. My voice trembled as badly as my hands. “People are watching. They have to be.”

“Let them watch,” Deacon said, moving closer. “We’re just talking. That’s all I want. To talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you, except that if you were ever Noah’s friend, you will open those doors right now. *Right now*.”

“Noah’s friend,” he snorted. “That was my title: Noah’s Friend. It may as well have been my name, and you want me to go back to that? Fuck no, sweet Charlotte. Not going to happen.”

“Deacon...”

“When he was around, everyone else became invisible. I became invisible. To the managers at *PX*, always giving him the best assignments. To the women...to *Valentina*. I met her first. Did you know that? She was supposed to be with me, but no... She took one look at Noah and that was it. And he didn't even love her. I could have loved her. I could have...”

He moved closer, and I darted for the panel of buttons. He blocked the way with his arm, pinning me to the wall, his whiskey breath wafting over me wetly.

“Deacon, I'll scream...”

The alarm began to sound, ringing over and over; the elevator had been stopped too long. Deacon didn't even react. He leaned into me, nuzzled my cheek with his nose. I winced, my skin crawling.

“I thought I was done feeling bad. I thought it would make me feel better to bring him here and show everyone... See? O, how the mighty have fallen. But no. I still feel *bad*, Charlotte. I know he's covered in disgusting scars, and he'll never see how you look at him, and you love him anyway.”

Deacon's hand caressed my cheek softly, and then his gentle touch became a painful grip on my chin.

“So I think that if I kiss you, Charlotte, maybe I won't feel so bad anymore. I think, maybe, if I get a little taste of what he has, I might stop feeling so goddamn *bad*.”

He leaned in without resistance from me since I was opening my clutch to grab the little canister of pepper spray Ava had given me before we'd left Connecticut.

Just as Deacon's lips brushed mine, I drove my knee between his legs. It wasn't very hard, but surprised him, and the weight of him moved off me. I brought my hand up, squeezed my eyes shut, and pressed the release. A short, fast blast, as the elevator was so small.

Immediately, my nose stung, and my eyes watered under my closed lids. But Deacon fell back with a strangled cry and began to cough as if his lungs were clawing their way out of his chest. The alarm rang and rang...

I slipped around from the wall, toward the panel, blinking hard. Deacon collapsed on his hands and knees on the floor, his face brilliant red and his eyes streaming, his body wracked with coughs.

I jabbed the door open button, coughing a little myself at the peppery mist that hung in the small space. The doors slid apart, and I dashed out, crashing

straight into Noah.

“Charlotte?” Noah cried, holding me by the shoulders. “Are you okay? What the fuck...? Pepper spray?”

“Yes,” I said on a shaky breath. “Deacon...”

I didn’t need to say any more. Noah’s face twisted in a grimace of pain that quickly morphed into rage.

A crowd was gathering to watch. Deacon had crawled halfway out of the elevator and sat slumped just outside. The doors kept trying to close and then opened, over and over. He coughed, his eyes streaming. Noah moved forward, guided by the stinging smell and sound. He bent over his friend, felt for the man’s lapels and lifted him, then slammed him against the wall.

“What did you do to her?” he raged. “*What did you do to her?*”

Deacon’s eyes were squeezed shut, the skin fiery red and wet with tears. He half-laughed, half-coughed. “I just wanted a little taste, buddy.” He scoffed. “And I was right. Sweet Charlotte is so very sweet...”

Noah swore and pressed Deacon against the wall by his chin, holding him there so he could reach back with his right fist and punch him square in the face. The crowd that had gathered made a collective “Oh!” Somebody snickered.

“Noah, stop!” I rushed over and took his arms. “Please!”

I pulled him away, and Deacon slumped back to the ground.

“Didn’t your mother...ever tell you...not to hit a blind guy?” Deacon chortled weakly.

Noah loomed over his friend, his hands balled into fists. “I’ll kill you. I swear to God, I’ll kill you...”

I kept hold of Noah’s arm. “He didn’t hurt me, Noah. I’m okay.”

Deacon snorted derisively, then coughed. “Kill me. Over a woman? All for show. You’ve only ever given a shit about one person: Noah fucking Lake. A *legend*. Ha! Look at you.”

A vein pulsed in Noah’s neck, and the only other sound was the footsteps of the security guards trotting down the hall toward us.

Deacon coughed a scratchy laugh. “How’d you like the Observation Deck, good buddy? How’d you like the slideshow? I knew you couldn’t stay away. But it’s too bad you’re blind, Lake, because you can’t see how everyone feels sorry for you. You’re a joke. That’s all you are now. A goddamn joke.”

The crowd around us had gone silent, and I was sure Noah was going to fly at Deacon and beat the hell out of him. But he only shook his head,

disgusted. He turned to me.

“Did he hurt you? Tell me the truth.”

“He didn’t,” I said. *All the hurt is on the inside.* “I want to go now. Can we go now, please?”

Noah nodded and took my arm, and already it felt different. One night, and it already felt different.

chapter thirty-three



Security took Deacon away and asked me a bunch of questions I don't remember answering. I'd have to file charges against him. I didn't want to. I wanted to go to sleep for a thousand years and wake up on a sunny day where this night would be just a dim memory. But I might not have been the first woman Deacon cornered. I might not be the last. For that reason only, I went to the station and filed the charges. Noah came with me, saying nothing.

After, we took a cab back to the townhouse. It was nearly four in the morning by the time I unlocked the door, but before I could close it, I saw another cab pull up, and Valentina, all long legs and elegance, stepped out. She told the cabbie to wait and took the front steps quickly, Noah's cane and sunglasses in hand.

"I'm sorry to follow. I thought he might need these."

I glanced uncertainly at Noah. He had already started up the stairs.

"It's okay," Valentina said. "I don't wish to bother. Tell him..." She shook her head. "I don't know what to tell him."

"Neither do I," I said.

"I kissed him," Valentina said, not meeting my eye. "Deacon told me Noah wanted to see me. To reconcile. So I agreed to go to the deck."

I crossed my arms. Her words hurt, like little knives in my heart.

"He didn't kiss me back," Valentina said quickly. A small, sad smile danced over her lips. "Noah didn't love me. He never did. But I always carried the hope, you know? And that's hard to let go of." She raised her gaze, looking at me now intently. "I shouldn't have believed Deacon, but I *wanted* to. Do you see?"

"I see." And I did, but that didn't make it easier.

Valentina nodded, a faint, sad smile on her beautiful features. "Okay.

Good night, Charlotte.”

I watched her return to the taxi and drive off, and then I shut the front door and locked it tight.

Noah was upstairs, on the third floor. I found him in his walk-in closet, throwing a change of clothes into an open rolling suitcase.

“That was Valentina. She brought your cane and glasses,” I said slowly, not quite comprehending what I was seeing.

“Did she tell you what happened?” Noah asked, tossing a jacket in the general vicinity of the bag.

“She said she kissed you.”

“Yeah, she did. I pushed her away, but so what? I know how pathetic that sounds.” He stopped, turned to me. “You didn’t see it?”

“No. Deacon crafted a pretty good set-up, but his timing was off. I only saw you...together.” I hugged myself as the room suddenly seemed chilled. “Noah, what are you doing?”

He knelt by the bag and felt for the zipper. “What I should have done when I first knew how much I cared about you. The first *second* I felt something. That’s when I should have left.”

“You’re...leaving?”

His hands dropped to his knees, and he craned his head up at me, his face a mask of anguish, his eyes shining. But he didn’t speak...or couldn’t. He stood up, taking the bag with him, and threw it on the bed.

“Talk to me,” I breathed. “Why aren’t you talking to me?”

“Because I’m so disgusted with myself that I can’t...” He carved his hands through his hair. “When I think about what happened to you...what almost happened to you with Deacon. If he’d touched you...God, Charlotte, if he’d really hurt you? It makes me sick to think about it. And I did that. I let that happen.”

“*Deacon* did that. You can’t blame yourself—”

“No?” He barked a harsh laugh. “You told me not to leave you alone with him. You made me promise, and what did I do? I got fucking drunk and left you alone with him. So that he could shove you into an elevator and try to...” His words tapered away, and he shook his head, a stricken grimace on his face. “I can’t breathe just thinking about what might have happened. And why? Because I was too fucking wrapped up in my own bullshit. I just had to prove that I could work at *PX* and pretend like everything was just the way it was when it wasn’t. My old life is gone, and until I learn to live with that, this

shit will keep happening to you. More pain and more pain. I'm just piling it on you."

I shivered with dread at where his words were taking us. "No, that's not true..."

"Isn't it? The subway ride..." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I can still hear how you cried that night, the pain in your voice and your fear for me because I'd been so selfishly reckless. I did that. I put that there, Charlotte. And the mugging—your violin is gone because of me, and then tonight. Oh Christ, tonight."

"Noah..."

"I didn't need this clusterfuck of a night to tell me that I couldn't go back to *PX*. You knew that. You told me and I didn't listen. But deep down, I knew it too. It's all still here, waiting for me. The anger and frustration and rage." He zipped the bag with an angry swipe. "I have to go. I have to leave and find a way to let go of my old life, and I have to do it on my own. I can't lean on you or weigh you down or cause you one more ounce of pain. I can't."

He turned to me and took hold of my shoulders, looking at me intently in his own way. "The only thing that matters right now is that you go to that audition for the touring orchestra. You win that spot, Charlotte. Reach out for it and grab it. Seize it because it's yours, and you know it."

His hands dropped away, and I watched him feel for the suitcase, pull the handle up on it because he was truly leaving. I couldn't believe it...or want to.

"Noah, what are you going to do? Where are you going to go?"

"I called a cab. I'll go to Connecticut first. After that? I don't know and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

He paused, a muscle in his jaw twitching, his voice gruff. "I know this hurts. God, believe me. My heart feels like it's ready to explode for the pain I'm causing you. But it's better. You can't see it now, but it is. I have to go and make myself worthy of you, Charlotte. If I have to fight and claw my way through hell, I will, if it means we can be together the way you deserve."

I stared, unable to find the words. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do or say. Goodbye? Am I supposed to just let you walk out of here? No." I moved in front of him, blocking him from his bag. "I know I have to go to that audition. I can feel it waiting for me. That tour. But how am I supposed to leave you like this? I thought..." The tears were breaking through the

shock now. “I thought you’d come with me.”

He held me this time, his arms wrapping around me, his words against my cheek. “I’m going to find you, Charlotte. I’m going to come back to you as the man you deserve. Whole. Don’t say goodbye to me. Wait for me. Please. It’s the last thing I’ll ever ask of you. Wait for me. Trust me. I will come back to you. I swear it. Okay?”

I clung to him. “No, I can’t...”

He held my face that was wet with tears, his own hazel eyes shining.

“I love you, Charlotte,” he said brokenly. “I love you more than my own self, and that’s the only reason I can walk out that door tonight.”

I closed my eyes, feeling his lips on my mouth, his hands holding me, the pain vibrating off of him. He deepened the kiss for a moment and then let go, a small sound of anguish tearing from his throat. And then his hands fell away.

I kept my eyes closed a long time, seeing nothing but blackness. When I opened them again, the house was empty. Noah was gone.

act iii: cadenza

Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.
—Helen Keller

chapter thirty-four



I stepped onto the sidewalk in the early morning hours. It was still quiet. The air felt thick with humidity, maybe rain. I unfolded my cane and tapped my way down the sidewalk until I felt the curve of the curb.

My knuckles ached where I'd struck Deacon. I concentrated on that to keep from turning around and going right back. Because those bones should have been broken. My hand didn't hurt enough. I hadn't hit him *hard enough*.

"What are you doing?" Charlotte had asked, her voice breaking and filling with tears.

Saving us, I wanted to say, but that sounded too heroic, and I was anything but. I had failed to protect Charlotte. Deacon, I realized, had hit me much harder than I had hit him. He hit me where it hurt the most, and Charlotte had almost paid the worst price.

I kept walking.

I rounded the corner, out of sight of the townhouse, should Charlotte think to come after me, and fished my cell phone from my pocket. I'd told her I'd called a cab, but that was a lie. I had no plan, no idea what to do next. I told my phone to call Lucien.

I was still wearing a tux, for Christ's sake, though I'd long ago torn off the bow. I ripped the top three buttons of my shirt open as I waited for the call to go through, feeling like I was suffocating. Lucien's sleep-thickened voice answered.

"Allô? Noah?"

So much concern. And I'd treated him so badly. This man, who'd been like a second father to me. Who'd put up with me, who hired assistants for me while I systematically fired them or drove them away. But for one. He'd brought me Charlotte, and had I ruined that too? All the bullshit I'd

barricaded myself behind was falling away, leaving me naked and exposed out there on the street. Lost.

“Lucien,” I croaked, my voice sounding as broken down and raw as I felt. I said something I hadn’t said to him since the accident. “I need you.”



I hadn’t been to Lucien’s high-rise condo in a decade. I vaguely remembered tasteful art—mostly glass sculptures and Waterford crystal—and the smell of his Dunhill cigarettes. As he led me inside, the scent of that smoke and his expensive cologne were like a shot in the arm of pure nostalgia.

He sat me down on a leather chair—if it was the same as I’d remembered, it was a deep green color—and lit a cigarette.

“So,” Lucien said, exhaling. “Tell me.”

“I left Charlotte.”

“So I have observed. Why?”

“To save us.”

From outside the windows, I felt the warmth of the sun on my arm and the sounds of the city coming to life while I was dying inside. I told him everything that happened at the *Planet X* party, the words pouring out of my mouth—a torrent of shame I needed to let out before pride dammed it back.

“Charlotte worked tirelessly to show me a better life, and I repaid her by leaving her alone with that bastard, Deacon.”

“But she is safe now,” Lucien said, his voice tinged with ice.

“Yes,” I said. “Safely away from me. She has an audition next week for a touring orchestra. They go all over Europe, and I know she’ll get in. She’s too good not to.”

“I was under the impression Charlotte felt out of touch with her music as of late. Since her brother passed?”

“She’s getting it back. Finding it again. This tour...it’s perfect for her. It’s her time. I know it, and I think she does too. And she...she wanted me to go with her,” I said, pain squeezing my heart. “But I can’t tag along. I’d just drag her down. She’s spent the last few months living for me. She needs to live for herself.”

“And you don’t think that’s a determination she can make on her own?”

“Of course she can,” I snapped. “And if I weren’t fucked up, I’d do whatever she wanted. But I *am* fucked up—the party last night is proof

enough. I can't go with her and fuck that up too. She'd keep putting herself before me instead of concentrating on her music. And tour or no tour, I have to figure out how to live. If I can't do that...I'm not good for her. Not how I am."

Silence.

I shifted irritably. Admitting to screwing up is hard enough. It's a million times worse when you can't see the face of the person you're admitting it to. I felt like a blindfolded captive waiting for the axe to fall. Or not.

Finally, Lucien's chair creaked; I imagined he sat back, pondering, smoke wafting around his silver hair in lazy tendrils.

"The question remains, then, what are you going to do? You told Charlotte to wait for you. Wait for what?"

"I don't know. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing." I rubbed my hands over my face. "Feel free to share any bright ideas."

"Noah," Lucien said, "even if I had an answer, it is for you to discover. But I would remind you that you have the love of an extraordinary young woman. Please remember that before you bury yourself in self-hatred."

Charlotte's words back at the police station came back to haunt me.

"Deacon backed me into the corner of the elevator. He...gripped my chin. Hard. To pry my mouth open..."

I shuddered. "Too late."

"Quoi?"

"Nothing."

I rubbed the back of my head where a soft glow of pain began to swell. Apparently, the night wasn't done being monumentally shitty; the Monster was waking.

"Migraine?" Lucien's voice sounded sharper, jolted by concern.

I nodded and fished around in my tux jacket for my meds. Charlotte, of course, had thought to drop them into my pocket before we left for the party.

"I'm fucking hungover, too."

The air tightened with Lucien's surprise. "You drank?"

"Sure did. I'm just full of bad decisions tonight."

I heard the chair squeak, footsteps over floorboards, and then a running faucet. Lucien returned and pressed a glass of water against my hand. I tossed back the Azapram, washed it down, then felt his hand on my shoulder.

"Come."

He led me to his guest room that smelled clean but unused. I sat on the bed

and immediately realized how tired I was. The headache was sluggish, slow. I thought the drugs and sleep would catch it before it blew up, but I didn't care all that much.

Serve me right.

“There is a bathroom across from the bed on the left,” Lucien said. “After you’ve had a chance to rest, we’ll talk and perhaps a solution to your predicament will make itself known.”

“Lucien,” I said before he shut the door. “Thank you.”

“Of course, my boy. Sleep well.”

He said it like a friend and not like a man paid gobs of money by my father to take care of me, and that was the best goddamn thing to happen to me all night.

I slumped onto the bed. The pain in the back of my head slunk away, and I fell into nothing.



I woke reaching for Charlotte, for her warmth, for her skin and the softness of her hair. I wanted her lips on mine, smiling against my mouth as she told me “Good morning.” I’d only been sharing a bed with her in the townhouse for little more than a week, but it had already begun to feel like real life.

There was only empty space on a cool sheet. She wasn’t in the townhouse. I wasn’t in the townhouse. It took me a moment to organize the scents and sounds of the room and remember it was Lucien’s guest room in his Park Avenue condo. He was on the twenty-third floor and had a spectacular view of Central Park. I had been thirteen years old or so the last time I’d been here, and of course hadn’t appreciated the view.

Then, I’d wanted only to go higher.

Then, I’d thought I was invincible.

I sat up slowly. No migraine, but my mouth felt like I’d been eating dirt by the handful all night and my stomach wasn’t happy about it. I felt my way around the wall until I found the bathroom door, then had to feel around for the goddamn toilet. I cursed myself for not visiting Lucien more often when I could see the fucking layout of his apartment. And his face. Lucien’s appearance—the exact details—was slipping from my memory, like a sketch slowly erased. My parents too. And Ava. I had Charlotte but only because I touched her face so often. But now that she was gone...what if I lost that too?

The thought made me more nauseated than my hangover.

I took a piss that lasted approximately ten hours and then fumbled my way toward the kitchen. Mercifully, Lucien heard me and directed me to the breakfast table while he poured me a cup of strong, black coffee.

“Hungry?” he asked. “It’s well after lunch time.”

I shook my head. “Am I keeping you from work?”

“Not at all.”

Lucien, like my father, was semi-retired. He had an office on Wall Street where he managed my father’s money and real estate deals and those of several other clients. But mostly for my dad. He was more family than employee and now spent most of his time handling my parents’ retirement. Since my accident, he’d been relegated to my handler, taking care of me after I’d evicted everyone else from my life.

Why him?

I don’t know what it was about Lucien Caron, but he was the only person I could tolerate, even when in the grips of my blackest moods. There was something constant about him that soothed me, or maybe he was just impervious to my vitriol where everyone else had been driven away by it. And I sincerely hoped that that wasn’t going to fade away too.

“And did you sleep well?” he asked now, his voice mild.

“I guess. I haven’t woken up to any epiphany.”

Lucien made a noise like *Hmm*. I heard the flick of a lighter and smelled smoke. “And Charlotte? Will you speak to her today?”

“No,” I said. “That’s the only thing I know to do. To stay away from her. To let her prepare for her audition without interference or distraction from me.”

“Are you certain she will audition at all?”

“Yeah, she will. She’s strong. And brave.” I swallowed. “She’ll do it and she’ll get in. They’d be crazy not to give her a seat.”

“Hmm.” An exhalation of smoke. “On that note, I have news regarding that transaction you asked me to make in Connecticut.”

“You found a violin?” I asked. “Or did you sell the car?”

“Both, in a manner of speaking.”

Three years before my accident, I bought a 1969 Camaro Z28 Tribute. Black with white racing stripes, monster block, and 450 horsepower after I’d souped it up. I had bought it needing some work, and after I’d spent a year on it, off and on, it was a masterpiece of engineering and speed. I had a buddy

who let me drive it at Daytona once, and that had been one of the greatest thrills of my life.

In Connecticut, after we'd been mugged, I'd pulled Lucien aside and told him to buy Charlotte a new violin.

Lucien had been hesitant. "The type of violin you wish to purchase for Charlotte is cost prohibitive. You could drain your savings or draw from your 401(k), neither option I recommend. Or..."

"Or sell the Camaro."

"Oui."

I couldn't drive it. I couldn't even stash it somewhere and admire it. It was stowed in a garage in Miami, gathering dust. And yet, it hurt.

I'd spat the words before I could take them back. "Do it."

Now, I mentally prepared myself to hear him tell me the car was gone. It shouldn't have fucking mattered. It was for Charlotte after all, but it was quite literally the last remnant of my old life. An actual embodiment of the fast and dangerous lifestyle that was forever closed off to me.

"You found a buyer for the Camaro?"

"I did. The offer is quite generous, and the sale shall be finalized by the end of the week."

I waited to feel supremely shitty about that, but instead it felt like a burden had been lifted.

This. This is the first step toward letting it all go. This moment, right here.

"The violin is another matter," Lucien was saying. "There is an auction at Christie's in The Hague for a Johannes Cuypers."

"A what?"

"A fine violin. Exceptional."

Exceptional. Exactly what Charlotte deserved. "Good. Get it."

Lucien chuckled. "Would it were that simple. But I shall do my best to secure it for her before her tour begins."

Business concluded, a silence fell between us. I could practically hear Lucien's smile slide off his face.

"Go ahead," I said. "Say it."

"And what is it I am to say?"

"You think I'm making a mistake? Or being an asshole, to leave her like I did?"

"You would know that better than I," Lucien replied evenly. "But am I concerned for her? Yes, of course."

“It’s the best thing. And aren’t you always telling me that the best thing is rarely the easiest?”

“I have been known to use that phrase from time to time.”

“Well, this isn’t easy. It’s the hardest fucking thing I’ve ever done, so it has to be right.”

“Your conviction is admirable,” Lucien said, “but quite pointless if you haven’t any direction. My support of your leaving Charlotte—a young lady whom I love and cherish as if she were my own—is tolerable so long as you do what you promised. So?” He clapped his hands. “Allons-y. Braille classes? A seeing-eye dog? I’m quite certain there are facilities for the blind in which you can be taught how to live independently. Say the word, and I shall do or acquire anything you need.”

“I...don’t know.” I turned my coffee mug around and around. “I’m willing to take classes, I guess. But...it doesn’t feel right. Or enough. It doesn’t feel like *me*.”

Lucien made another *Hmm* sound, deep in his throat. “You need to find your epiphany, Noah,” he said flatly. “And quickly. Charlotte is suffering from your departure, yes? And you are quite miserable without her.”

“Miserable doesn’t begin to cut it.”

I heard a chair scrape; Lucien rose to his feet, his words rained down from on high. “Then it is imperative you answer the question, *What will you do?* with the right answer. And quickly, before it’s too late.”

chapter thirty-five



“Are you ready?” Melanie asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, and that was the truth. My stomach felt like it was trying to climb out of my guts, and yet my skin was strangely cool all over. “I’m scared and I’m calm at the same time. How is that possible?”

“You’re scared because you’re going to get this, and you’re calm because you know it’s supposed to happen.”

I squeezed her hand in gratitude. The lobby of the Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center was teeming with hopefuls, mostly violinists, though I saw some bigger instrument cases of violas and even a few basses. The setting should have thrown me: it’s where Keith and his Spring Strings auditioned—my last audition until today. But Keith and his lies and betrayal felt far away now and couldn’t touch me.

“How’s the violin?” Melanie asked. “Ben promised it wouldn’t suck.”

“It doesn’t. But it’s strange,” I said. “All week, I’ve felt like I’ve been practicing on stolen property.”

“Speaking of which, no word from the cops about your Eastman?”

“It’s gone. But then I never expected to get it back.”

We stopped talking as a young man in a tight sweater, plaid pants, and glasses stepped into the lobby. “Gregory Carter?”

A violin hopeful got up and followed the young man backstage.

“Carter. You gotta be close, Conroy,” Melanie said. She eyed me up and down. “You look good. Really good. Like you’ve aged a decade.”

I smirked. “Is that a compliment?”

“Not aged in your face, in your eyes. You look wiser, my friend.”

“I don’t feel wiser.” I looked down at my hands. “I miss him. I miss him a lot, Mel.”

She pursed her lips. “Still in Connecticut?”

“I don’t know. I guess. I don’t know where he is or what he’s doing...”

“He wants you to have this,” Melanie said softly, “because he knows it’s the best thing for you.”

I blinked back tears. “I know. And it is. But he’s the best thing too, though he doesn’t realize it. Not yet.”

“Give him time.”

I shifted in my seat and glanced around. “I don’t know what’s going to happen when they call my name. I don’t know what will happen when I play. I might kill it, or I might melt into a blubbering mess. And even if I do nail it, who’s to say it’s enough to win a seat? This place is packed with talent. One or more is bound to be better than me. Certainly better prepared.”

Melanie heaved a long-suffering sigh. “I’m going to miss you when you’re in Europe.”

I stifled a laugh. “Oh, stop. You won’t have a chance to miss me since I’ll be moving in with you and Sasha after I blow this and become homeless.”

The slender man in the plaid pants returned. “Charlotte Conroy?”

“Oh shit.” I rose to my feet, my borrowed violin in hand.

“Break a leg,” Melanie said and gave me a thumb’s up.

I nodded and followed the man backstage.

For Noah. For Chris. For me.



A screen was set up on the stage, shielding me from the seats in the audience, but I’d been to enough auditions to imagine it clearly: a panel of directors—maybe three, maybe more—sitting in the middle rows with a table set up for them. They’d have already reviewed my audition submission, which listed the three pieces I was prepared to play: Sibelius, Mendelssohn, or Mozart.

The young man led me to a chair behind the screen.

“You don’t have to sit,” he said in a thick German accent, indicating the chair. He smiled kindly. “Up to you.”

I wasn’t permitted to speak; the panel couldn’t know anything more than my name, to prevent bias, so I nodded and heaved a breath. I sat in the chair and took out my borrowed violin. It was a middle-of-the-road model. Fine for students or semi-serious musicians. A quality instrument but not a classic. I wondered if it was enough. I wondered if what I was about to do was enough.

“Charlotte Conroy,” said an older woman’s voice from the theatre. Sabina Gessler, the director of the Vienna Touring Orchestra, maybe.

“The cadenza of the Mozart, please.”

I swallowed hard. Of course. And not just the Mozart but the cadenza of the concerto, the movement in which the violinist breaks from the orchestra and lets fly with everything she has. The fireworks. The beating heart of the piece.

I readied my bow and closed my eyes, listening to the phantom orchestra in my head playing the melody, and put my bow to strings, half-curious myself as to what was going to happen, as if I were out of my body, watching from above.

And then I played. The first notes glided off the strings and I fell in.

No other composer could reach across the centuries and rip my heart out like Mozart. Like coming home again—that feeling of walking through the door in Bozeman, Montana and seeing my family, Chris included, gathered around the table, waiting for me. A feeling like I’d been searching for something for a very long time, and I’d finally found it. A feeling of relief, of hope, of love...I played, and Noah’s beautiful face swam before me, his sightless gaze landing on my chin, as it always did, and that was perfect and right because it was him. I played, and everything I thought I had lost, all that music, came pouring out of me, surging over the pain and grief, not washing it away but cleansing it in salt water tears, turning it into something I would always live *with*, instead of that lived within me, hidden and heavy and dark.

And when it ended, I felt as if I’d slept for years, or lost a thousand pounds, or could breathe again when all this time I had been drowning. I lowered my borrowed violin and bow and looked around, dazed. I had begun the piece sitting in the chair and now I was standing, though I don’t remember getting to my feet. My cheeks were wet. My breath came short. A shuffling of footsteps came from in front of me and the screen was suddenly torn away.

A woman of middle years with blond hair and a neat blue suit stood before me, staring. Sabina Gessler, the director of the Vienna Touring Orchestra. Up close, I recognized the sharp brown eyes from her publicity photo, only now they were red-rimmed and shining.

“Charlotte Conroy,” she said, her accent thick.

“Yes,” I breathed, shocked to find the tears were still right there, drawn out by this woman’s emotions that were just as strong as mine and emanating

from her like a vapor.

“Senden Sie sie weg,” she called over her shoulder to the other two panelists who were both on their feet, staring. “Alle von ihnen.”

One started to protest, but Sabina held up a hand and they went instantly silent.

“Do you know what I just tell them?” she asked me, stepping closer.

I shook my head no.

The woman stood before me, clutched my shoulders in her hands. “I tell them to send the rest away, Charlotte Conroy. All of them.”

I felt my face crumple in a vain attempt to hold back the flood, but when Sabina herself burst out in a tearful, joyful laugh and hugged me to her, I just let go. She stroked my hair, and I smelled the silk of her blouse, her perfume that was like nothing my mother had ever worn but smelled comforting and familiar, nonetheless.

“You play with your whole heart,” Sabina said. “With fire and lust and love and joy and pain.” She held me at arm’s length and wiped a tear from my face. Her features turned sharp, her eyes scrutinizing but playful too.

“But question: you do this every night, yes?”

I laughed and nodded, and we embraced again as if we’d known each other for years. But sometimes that’s just how it is with people; a connection is made, and it can transcend space and time.

It can make family out of strangers.



I arrived back at the townhouse near midnight. I’d had to work out a few details of my new position with the VTO, and then Melanie had insisted on calling the gang together to celebrate at the Pony Bar.

“She played the Mozart,” Melanie told Regina, Mike, and Anthony, “and then *they sent everyone else home.*”

Regina nearly spit out her craft beer. “Jesus, Char. What did you do?”

“*They sent everyone else home,*” Melanie said again. “What else do we need to know?”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I said, thinking the others would be put off, but my friends were generous with their happiness for me and said they’d miss me when I was away in Europe.

I went back to the empty townhouse that felt even emptier without Noah.

In the morning I'd have to call Lucien and make my resignation as Noah's assistant official. It was terribly short notice: Sabina wanted to start rehearsals in Vienna next week. I'd be gone until September at least, maybe longer if the VTO decided to keep me after the tour.

But then again, Noah wasn't around to be assisted.

I thought I'd call my parents in the morning too, but with the time difference, it wasn't yet ten o'clock there. The house felt too empty and quiet without Noah. I needed to hear another voice, and my parents probably needed some good news.

My father picked up after two rings. "Charlotte? It's late where you are. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Dad," I said, wincing. "I'm sorry to worry you. How are you? How's Mom?"

My father eased a sigh. "She's good, actually. Better. She had a headache and went to bed early, but I'm happy to say that's as bad as she's been lately. She's even able to go back to work."

I closed my eyes. "Oh, I'm so happy to hear that."

"And how are you, sweetie? How's your job working out?"

"Well, actually, that's why I'm calling."

I told him about my audition and how I'd be moving to Vienna within a week. I had to assure him that the VTO was a solid company and that I'd be safe with them, so many miles away. I was nearly twenty-three years old, but distance seems to take years off a child in the eyes of a parent.

He whistled low. "I'm so proud of you. I'm a little sad you'll be another few time zones over, but mostly, I'm proud of you. And I know your mother will be too."

"Will you come and see me? We'll be touring all over Europe. You pick a city and I'll see about arrangements."

"Of course, honey. Wouldn't miss it. But what about your current position? Won't they miss you too?"

I cleared my throat. "They're very understanding."

"Okay, love, you sound tired," my father said. "You've had an exciting day. Get some rest and call us before you leave. I know your mom will have a million questions."

"I will," I said and felt tears well up in my eyes. Suddenly my dad seemed so far away. "I love you."

"I love you, Charlotte. I'm happy for you. And I know that Chris would be

too.”

My vision blurred in earnest. It was the first time my father had spoken of Chris without sounding as if he were breaking apart on the inside.

We're all finding a way to move on, I thought after we'd hung up. And moving on, I realized, wasn't the same as forgetting or even letting go. It was making a tentative peace with tragedy and doing the best we could forever after.



The next morning, I called Lucien and tendered my resignation, and the entire time I spoke to him, I strained to hear Noah's voice in the background. More than once I had to hold myself back from asking Lucien to put him on.

But in the end, I couldn't hang up without knowing.

“Lucien?”

“Yes, ma chérie?”

“Is he okay? Can you at least tell me that?”

“He's fine, my darling girl,” Lucien replied, his voice thick.

“Okay,” I said, my own voice drowning in tears. “I just wanted to make sure. Tell him...” I swallowed hard. “Tell him I'll wait. I will.”

“He will be overjoyed to hear that. Remember, please, that the best thing to do is rarely the easiest. For you or for him.”

I hung up, in a kind of numb shock, thinking being apart from Noah couldn't possibly be the best thing for me. I'd leave for Vienna in four days. Was I not going to see or talk to him before then? It was unthinkable, but maybe this was what he wanted. That he meant what he said about keeping away from me until he could let his old life go and move on.

The house was too empty. I climbed into Noah's bed instead of mine and snuggled down under his sheets, into his pillow. It still smelled of him and I inhaled deeply, clung to his pillow as if it were him and fell asleep immediately.



The next three days were spent with more packing and saying goodbye to old friends. Melanie and Regina threw a going-away party for me the Friday before. My Juilliard friends were there, and Anthony, and Samneric, and I began to miss them even before the night was over, Melanie and Anthony

most of all.

“I’m not leaving forever,” I reminded everyone, including myself. “I’ll be back in September.”

“You know how these things go,” Melanie said. “Doors are going to open, and they might not all lead back to NYC.” She hugged me tight. “Go where it takes you and enjoy the hell out of it, okay?”

I left the party and walked to the subway station, taking it all in for the last time, this city that had been my home for five years. A glittering symphony of sound and light, steel and concrete, and teeming humanity, each person connected to the rest by the electric hum that couldn’t be felt anywhere else on earth.

chapter thirty-six



I stared at the ceiling. Or rather, I directed my eyes into the blackness above me as I lay on the bed in Lucien's guest room. Since I'd left Charlotte, I hadn't done a damn thing. My parents wanted to see me, but I had no desire to go to Connecticut and explain my *Planet X* failure to them, nor had I figured out my grand plan. I lay around, wracking my brain for a solution to my problem that didn't involve sitting behind a desk studying Braille, or learning cute fucking tricks for labeling food cans, or how to cook a meal without burning myself or the house down.

Then, Lucien got the call. Charlotte formally tendered her resignation as my assistant. I wanted to fly at Lucien and grab the phone, to hear Charlotte's voice, even if it meant her cursing my name. But I glued myself to the couch with white-knuckled fists and listened. It was a short call, and when Lucien ended it, I heard him sigh.

"So?" I leaned forward. "She got it, right?"

"She did."

Fierce pride swept through me. "Good for you, baby," I murmured under my breath.

"She will be departing for Europe in four days," Lucien said.

My head shot up. "Four days? The violin won't make it in time."

"I thought of that," Lucien said. "Charlotte arrives in Vienna next week, but the tour doesn't begin for two weeks after that. It is quite possible that we'll have secured the violin by then and can send it prior to her first concert on July 2nd."

"I wish I could just put it in her hands myself," I muttered. "I'm happy for her, but goddamn, she's going to be so far away."

"Yes," Lucien said. "Quite the whirlwind tour from what she told me.

Seventeen cities in a month and a half.”

“Which only proves my suspicion that had I gone with her, she’d have spent all her time dragging my ass around instead of concentrating on her music.”

“Mmm.”

“But I’d like to hear her play,” I said, talking mostly to myself. “I’d really like that.”

“I have taken the liberty of researching a facility that will help you live independently,” Lucien was saying. “The Helen Keller Foundation. In Brooklyn. Quite reputable.”

“Oh. Great.”

“Perhaps you could spend the summer studying and then meet Charlotte in Europe on your own. Show her you have put the time and effort into fulfilling your promise by putting your newfound skills to the test.”

“What? Alone?”

The idea seemed preposterous. And frightening. I’d spent the better portion of my adult-non-visually-impaired life navigating the world’s cities and their airports. It was often a challenge as a sighted person. To do it blind? Impossible.

But as for the rest, I asked Charlotte to wait for me, but wait for what? And for how long? If I wasn’t going to make the effort to learn how to live blind, why the fuck did I leave her?

I waved a hand. “Yeah, go ahead. Sign me up. Classes, Braille, all of it.”

“Wonderful,” Lucien said. “I will make the arrangements this minute.”

I sighed. “Wonderful.”



That evening, I was still in the guest bedroom, listening to Mozart’s Violin Concerto No. 5 on my phone when Lucien knocked.

“I’ve downloaded the software Charlotte recommended,” he said, and I felt the bed dip. “You can read and write on a computer and even go online and peruse the internet. It will read the screen for you. Quite extraordinary technology!”

He sounded so excited about it. I managed a thin smile.

“Sounds great.”

“Quite!” Lucien said. “And your enrollment at the Helen Keller

Foundation is complete. Classes begin next week, so there is time to squeeze in a visit to New Haven. Your parents are anxious to see you.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Noah?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m proud of you.”

The door closed and I sank back down on the bed. He was proud. I was as conflicted as ever. Classes at the Helen Keller Foundation. Whoopee-fuckin’-doo. It still felt off to me, though I couldn’t see I had any other option.

Back in the day, when I was still working for *Planet X* and some article wasn’t coming together the way I wanted it to, I’d just start typing. Anything and everything about the subject I was working on, just off the top of my head. Riff writing, someone called it. And when I was done, I’d go in and pick all the best, truest parts and organize those into the article.

I called Lucien back into the room and asked him to show me how the software Charlotte sent worked on my laptop. Lucien was pushing seventy-five, but he was still sharp as a whip. He got it up and running, and showed me how to speak into it, and how to have that read back to me. Then he left me to it.

I toyed with the mic for a good ten minutes, feeling supremely stupid. But the question needed answering.

You want to learn how to live blind? Then fucking learn, snowflake. There is no other way.

Except that wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t *want* to learn to function blind. I didn’t want to be blind at all. My grief wasn’t deep or poetic. It was sinister in its simplicity. I wanted to see again and I never would. That was my torment: two implacable forces, smashing up against one another like tectonic plates along a fault, waiting for the other to give. My blindness couldn’t and I didn’t want to, so I remained caught between them. And it was crushing the life out of me.

“I don’t want to be blind,” I said aloud.

Tell us something we don’t know, genius.

Apparently, my inner editor had become an asshole since the accident.

But it wasn’t the crux of the problem. It *was* the problem. I didn’t want to be blind. I wished I’d never fucking jumped off that cliff. Or that I had jumped at the right time, or a different time and suffered a different injury. Something that wasn’t so goddamn life-altering.

Without realizing it, I began to speak, soothing my bitter anguish with an alternate reality. A fantasy of what might've been...

I dove too late. I know it even as my feet leave the rocky outcropping. I have time enough to think 'This is going to end badly' and then I'm in the water, curving into the dive. The water tosses me, and I slam against the rocks. Pain explodes up my right side. It feels as if a giant steel trap has snapped over my leg from ankle to hip. Or maybe a shark bit me. The pain is both the deep agony of shattering bone and the burning fire of torn flesh. Panicked, I nearly inhale ocean water as I claw my way to the surface.

Local divers haul me to the shore. I suck in deep breaths to calm myself and then nearly lose it all over again to see my right leg. It's a fucking horror show; there's no other way to put it. Bent and twisted, skin torn away, it looks like I have three knees instead of one, and blood is seeping into the sand. The sun is hot on my damp skin, but I begin to shiver.

An ambulance arrives, and I'm whisked to the naval hospital, then airlifted to UCLA Medical Center the next day. Three surgeries later, I wake up to Lucien and my parents around me, all of them trying really hard not to look at my leg. I don't want to look at it. It's caged in metal scaffolding from my ankle to just above my right knee. Steel pins from the scaffold penetrate my bloated, bruised skin in eight different places, holding my bones in place, though I have more titanium rods than bones now.

I want to vomit, but the doctors tell me that while it looks godawful, I'll be able to walk and run and live a normal life again, given time and a shit-ton of rehab.

"It could've been worse," they tell me over and over.

It could've been worse. A-fucking-men.

When I'm able, they fly me to Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City for another few weeks, until the pins come out. My imprisoned leg is free, and then I head to White Plains for physical therapy. My therapist is a great guy named Harlan Williams. We talk and joke around—nothing serious—as I work to get my leg back to where it was.

Two weeks later, I'm in an ankle-to-hip leg brace and hobbling around on crutches. The brace can't come off for another six weeks, so my parents lend me their townhouse in New York City and Lucien hires an assistant to help me out around the house. Some guy named Trevor. He's okay, but I don't give him much to do. I want to regain my independence as fast as I can and get back out there for *Planet X*. Yuri, my editor, is griping that he needs me back, and I'm more than happy to oblige.

But I still need to recuperate, and I'm bored as hell cooped up in the townhouse. Some buddies of mine from *PX* stop by and we head out to a brunch place on Amsterdam Street my assistant sometimes orders from.

Deacon, Logan, Polly, Jonesy, and I take a table in Annabelle's Bistro and settle in for a good two hours, running our waitress ragged. She's a cute little brunette doing her best to stay cheerful for us while we give her a hard time with endless coffee refills, loud laughter, swearing, and general obnoxiousness.

Her nametag says Charlotte, and Deacon calls her "Sweet Charlotte" and ogles and teases her, sometimes inappropriately. She has pretty eyes, I muse, but otherwise pay her no mind. I have my leg up on a chair in the corner, leaning

back, as if I haven't a care in the world. And I don't. I'm going to make a full recovery and pick up my life right where I left off.

Finally, a manager with a severe hairdo and too much makeup, politely, yet pointedly, inquires if there's anything else we need, and we take the hint. We gather our shit and Deacon picks up the tab. We file out, through the maze of tables, and I'm last, hobbling slowly on crutches.

I'm halfway out when I realize I left my Yankees baseball cap on the table. I return to get it and find the waitress staring at the check with tears in her eyes. She snaps the black leather book shut when she sees me and hurriedly turns away.

"Forget something?" she asks with false cheer and a shaky smile.

"My hat," I say. She's short and I'm tall. I tower over her. "Did Deacon leave a shitty tip? He does that."

"Oh no, no, I mean...it's fine," she says, turning away to wipe her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I just...um, kind of a rough month. You know how it is." She glances me up and down in my expensive jeans and designer shirt. "Or maybe you don't."

The waitress realizes what she said, and another round of apologies bursts out of her as she begins stacking our dirty dishes. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. Really. I have this bad habit...blurting. I don't know why I said that. Anyway, um..."

I laugh, and fish into my back pocket for my wallet. "Don't worry about it. And take this. For your trouble."

I offer her sixty dollars and her eyes widen. Up close, her eyes are even prettier—large and luminous, but sad too.

A blush turns her skin scarlet. "Oh, no, I couldn't. No, please. It's fine, really." She bustles even faster now, not looking at me.

I shrug and drop the twenties on the table. "I hope your month improves."

She stops and stares at the money, at war with herself.

"Okay. Thank you," she says finally, her voice cracking. She takes the money and stuffs it into her apron.

I feel sorta bad, poor girl.

"Have a nice day, Charlotte," I say and start to hobble away.

She calls after me, "I hope your leg gets better soon."

That was big of her, considering what ginormous bastards we'd been to her all morning. Or maybe she's just doing her job.

I wave a hand to her without looking back and leave Annabelle's.

Time heals me. I go back to work. To *Planet X*. To the world and all its thrills and beauty. I don't go back to my parents' townhouse; hell, I'm hardly in NYC anymore. I don't go back to Annabelle's, and I never see—or think about—that cute waitress with the sad eyes ever again.

"Fucking hell," I whispered as the machine read the last line of what I'd 'written.'

I felt sick. Disgusted. *Terrified*. My own imagination took my 'just a broken leg' fantasy and carried it on a terrible tide to a fucking terrible conclusion—a life without Charlotte. When I was sighted, I would've been blind to someone like her. Someone sweet and good and full of unimaginable

talent. But I was blind, and if I wanted a life with her, I had to fucking live that way.

Clarity hit me like a breath of fresh air.

I knew what I needed to do, but spending a sweltering summer in a classroom in Brooklyn, trapped behind a desk and thousands of miles away from her wasn't the way to do it. I wasn't sedentary. I was a world-traveler and always had been. Now that my ass was out of the townhouse—thanks to her—moving slowly was better than not moving at all.

I had to keep moving. Always. To her. She was at the end of a long, dark road where I was going to be beset with impossible obstacles, and maybe even danger, but I had to make that journey. I had to do everything possible for Charlotte. Everything and anything.

Because the idea of failure, of living without her in my life, was a nightmare worse than blindness.



Lucien and I went to my parents' house in New Haven, and I told them my grand plan: to follow Charlotte's tour through Europe—without her knowledge—on my own. Naturally, they thought I was insane, and my father was about ready to disown me for worrying my mother. Lucien wasn't happy either, but he managed to soothe my parents. Only Ava, of all people, thought I was doing the right thing.

"It's not stalking, is it?" I asked over the phone as she was still in London. "I mean, will she think I'm some sort of creepy asshole for following her around...?"

"Hiding in the bushes outside her hotel room?" Ava laughed.

"Something like that."

"She's more likely to be upset you were there the whole time and she couldn't be with you," my sister said, serious now.

"I'll have to take my chances that she'll hear me out when it's over and forgive me."

"She loves you. She'll forgive you."

"Would you?"

"I would," Ava said, "if it worked."

I felt second thoughts trying to creep in. What if traipsing blind around Europe alone didn't slay the demons that plagued me? More likely, the trek

would wear them down until they croaked of exhaustion. Just the idea of navigating one city alone—never mind seventeen—made me want to lie down and pull the covers over my damn head until the whole crazy idea went away.

“It has to work,” I said to Ava. “I have nothing else.”

“Then go for it,” she replied. “But Noah? Be fucking careful. I mean it. London is only a short flight to anywhere in Europe. You call me if shit gets dangerous or weird. Or hell, come home if it’s too much. Okay?”

“Okay,” I lied. I didn’t know if my crazy plan was going to work, but I knew—with total certainty—that giving up was out of the question. And certainty, as my old buddy Harlan used to say, is its own kind of peace.

chapter thirty-seven



Sunday night. My last night, and I let myself cry into Noah's pillow. I'd spent the entire day preparing to leave the next morning, and he hadn't called. Was he really going to let me leave the city without saying goodbye? Or was I the one who was leaving without calling him, without telling him that I loved him too?

It didn't matter. I couldn't get on that plane the next day without hearing his voice and knowing what he thought or felt. I grabbed my cell phone off the side table, found his number in my contacts and punched it.

He's not going to answer. Because it's over. I just know it.

"Hi, babe."

I closed my eyes against the swift rush of emotion that swamped me at the sound of his voice. And he sounded terrible, hoarse and tired, as if he hadn't slept in days.

"Hi," I said. "I'm sorry to call you so late. Or at all. I didn't know if you wanted to talk to me..."

"Of course, I do," he said. "I've wanted to talk to you every day the last few days. But I was afraid to make it harder on us."

"It's already too hard."

"I know." He inhaled sharply. "Lucien told me about your audition. That's incredible and yet I'm not surprised at all. I'm so proud of you."

"I leave tomorrow," I said, my throat threatening to close. "Did Lucien tell you that too?"

"Don't cry, baby," Noah said, sounding anguished. "Please don't cry."

"I don't have much say in the matter. Noah, is this the right thing? Because it feels awful."

"It is. Please trust me." He made a harsh sound, clearing the tears out of

his voice. “Lucien is going to take you to the airport tomorrow. He’ll meet you at the townhouse around eleven.”

“And where will you be?”

“Wishing I was there, to kiss you and hold you one last time before you go. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I whispered. “I love you, Noah. I do.”

There was a short pause, and then he said, “Have a safe flight, Charlotte.” Then the line went quiet.



Lucien drove me to JFK for my four o’clock flight to Vienna, Austria. I was grateful for the ride and glad he was there, so I could thank and say goodbye to the man I considered my fairy godfather in many ways.

“Oh, wonderful,” I groused, wiping my eyes. “I’m a mess already and I haven’t even gone through security.”

“Charlotte, my dear, it’s an honor knowing you,” Lucien said, his own eyes wet. He bent in a formal bow and kissed my hand. “You will no doubt be as bright a shining star to the audiences of Europe as you have been in our lives here.”

I threw my arms around his neck, inhaling his cologne and his smoky elegance. “Thank you,” I whispered. “For everything. For him.”

I felt him shake his head. “It is you who has given Noah back to us. For that, I can never repay you.”

“Keep him safe, Lucien. Whatever he does or whatever he thinks he has to do, you keep him safe.” I smiled through my tears. “That’s how you repay me.”

chapter thirty-eight



Lucien returned from taking Charlotte to the airport. Jealousy churned in my gut that he got to see her, talk to her, hug her goodbye.

“Did she make it through okay?”

“Yes, yes,” he said. I heard him lower himself into the chair across from the desk. “She made it fine.”

“How did she look?”

“Lovely, bien sûr,” Lucien replied. “Are you quite certain that you wish to do this?”

I barked a short laugh. “Hell no. But you know what’s at stake. You just took her to the airport.”

Lucien made a noise, but I could hear he was smiling. “Indeed. And I have good news. You had the winning bid for the Cuypers violin.”

I smiled in what felt like the first time in eons, since I’d left Charlotte. “Really? Hot damn. How much?”

“\$42,000. The Camaro sold for \$47,600, which left you just enough to pay for insurance and special shipping and handling to Vienna.”

I sat back, relief washing through me. “And it’s a good one, right? The violin?”

I heard Lucien’s smile color his words. “The best. Or, at the very least, the best in your price range.”

Because that’s what Charlotte deserved. The best violin I could afford and the best version of me when all was said and done.



The next morning, Lucien made a second trip to the airport, this time taking

my crazy ass to JFK. He waited with me at my gate. He was allowed a special dispensation from security to accompany me until the plane took off. We sat side by side in the business class lounge of Austrian Airlines, he sipping champagne, me a bottle of water.

“If you recall,” he said, amused, “I suggested you try to navigate *one* city alone.”

“Go big or go home,” I said, grinning like an idiot. I felt good. Optimistic. Naively unaware of the shit storm that awaited me. “You told me to answer the question, so I did. This is what I’m meant to do.”

“I know. I’m worried about you to the marrow of my old bones, but I also know this is right for you.” Lucien chuckled. “Nothing has changed. You’re still the daredevil you’ve always been, and I wouldn’t change you for all the tea in China.”

I eased a sigh. “Thank you. That means a lot to me, Lucien. *You* mean a lot to me, though I know I haven’t told you that enough.”

“Noah! I hadn’t pegged you as the sentimental sort.”

“Blame Charlotte for that.”

“Hmm, I believe I will thank her instead.”

They called my flight, and we rose, Lucien guiding me to the queue to get on. I felt him studying me.

“Second thoughts?” he asked softly.

“A million of them. But that’s not it.” I hesitated. “I’m...I don’t remember what people look like anymore. Mom and Dad... They’re like blurred photos. And Ava. I know she’s beautiful and that’s all that sticks. And you. I can’t remember you, Lucien.”

“It’s all right, my boy. I’m quite past my prime,” he said, trying to be light while I was suddenly stricken with a glut of emotion. A dam—one of hundreds within me—began to crack.

I turned to Lucien, and before I could second guess myself or worry what other people thought, I put my hands on his face and looked at him...and he came back. All of him; his kind eyes, heavy brow, and a face drawn with laugh lines.

“Thank you for everything,” I said thickly and then cast off from the safety of him into the black unknown.

chapter thirty-nine



The Vienna Touring Orchestra practiced at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, a gorgeous coral and white architectural marvel on the outside and a gilded concert hall on the inside. Sabina Gessler toured the foreigners in her new ensemble through the hall, our necks craned, our tongues practically lolling. It was where we were to begin our tour—in two weeks’ time—with a series that was almost entirely Mozart.

“A Viennese critic once said the Gesellschaft was Mozart’s ‘Jupiter’ symphony come to life.” Sabina winked at me. “We’ll find out, shan’t we?”

For our Vienna stay, the entire orchestra—all sixty of us—were set up in the Hotel Domizil, a charming little hotel that was a short walk to the Stephansplatz station from which we could explore Vienna, and a literal two minute walk from Mozarthaus, the flat where my beloved composer lived for a time while he wrote one of his most famous operas, *The Marriage of Figaro*.

My roommate was Annalie Dalman: a chain-smoking, red-headed flautist from Innsbruck. I suspected Sabina paired me up with her because of our close proximity in age and so that Annalie could help me with my German, which was nonexistent.

We unpacked together and she eyed my borrowed violin dubiously. “You’re going to tour with that piece of Scheiße?”

“Until I can afford something better, I’m going to have to.”

But this was Vienna. City of Music. I figured I could walk into a music shop and buy something that was a hundred times better at half the cost.

As it turns out, I didn’t need to.

On my second day, I came back from a sidewalk café with Annalie and some of the other younger musicians. I’d drunk only one beer, but it was

from a stein the size of a small barrel. I was a bit tipsy when we returned to Hotel Domizil.

There was an oblong wooden crate on the small table in our room. An intricate stamp in black ink on the blond wood read The Hague. There was a packing slip taped to the front and I opened it. My small beer buzz evaporated, and my heart began to pound as I read the short, typewritten note tucked in among the shipping details.

Charlotte.

I hope this has reached you in time and in one piece. I also hope it's not so damned old you're afraid to breathe on it, let alone play, but Lucien assures me it's fit for a virtuoso like yourself.

Make it sing, Charlotte. and maybe think of me when you do.

All my love,
Noah

I held the letter to my heart for a moment until Annalie cleared her throat and tapped my shoulder with a crowbar.

“Where on earth did you get a crowbar?” I asked, wiping my nose.

“My luggage.” She gave me a strange look. “You don’t have?”

We pried open the crate. A violin case rested snugly within the confines of packing material and Styrofoam buffers and shredded paper, stiff like straw. I unclasped the case and opened it. Butterflies took flight in my chest and my hands trembled as I lifted a small card, a certificate of authenticity and with a reproduction of the maker’s looping signature on the front.

Johannes Cuypers

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “I can’t believe it.”

Annalie clucked her tongue from beside me. “That is not piece of Scheiße. From your boyfriend you tell me? Noah?”

I nodded, blinking back tears. “Yes. My boyfriend.”

The love of my life.

I let the card go and lifted the instrument from its case. The wood was dark and rich. Scratches told of its age—Cuypers made some of the finest violins in the world almost two hundred and twenty-five years ago—and I could see it had been re-varnished at least once, but the body still felt clean and light. A silver-mounted bow lay in the black velvet of the case, and I took it in my other hand, staring dumbly at the yellowed horsehair stretched tight along its length that looked original.

Impossible...

With shaking fingers, I put the violin to my chin and set the bow along its strings, marveling at how perfect both felt in my hands. I played a long C. The sound was clear and vibrant, and I quickly lowered the instrument back to its case, overcome.

“How...? How did he...?” My words tapered away helplessly. I didn’t want to ruin the moment with crude thoughts about cost, but a Cuypers violin could run upwards of \$70,000, depending on the condition. And then I knew.

He paid for it. Not his parents, who could have bought an orchestra full of Cuypers and Stradivariuses.

Noah bought it with his own money because he sold his Camaro.

My heart swelled and tears came again. He sold off one of the last vestiges of his old life and used the money to help give me a new one.

Think of me every time you use it.

“I will,” I promised. As if I could help it.

chapter forty



It's pretty sad when the *flight* is the best part of your European tour. Granted, I knew that this wasn't going to be a fucking picnic, but I wasn't prepared for how utterly *unprepared* I actually was. I slept through the flight and woke with hope and optimism. I mentally geared myself up for the whole ordeal, as I used to do before a big jump or stunt back in my old *PX* days. And it worked...until we landed.

The plane taxied, stopped, and then people started their mad exodus to get off. I was in business class, but that didn't stop my fellow travelers from acting as if there were a contest to see who could get up, gather their things, and stand around waiting for the doors to open the longest. I was walled-off by legs and carry-on bags.

I sat, unmoving in my seat, my guts twisting into knots, until it sounded like the plane was nearly empty. A soft hand touched my arm.

"Sir?"

"Not a fan of crowds."

"Of course."

I put on my sunglasses, took up my cane and carry-on bag: a leather messenger that held my laptop, phone, passport, and other special devices for the blind I'd brought with me. My lifelines.

"Can I assist you? Or call someone at the gate?"

I wanted to say 'yes' so bad I could taste it. But I had three iron-clad rules:

1. Never miss a concert
2. No holing up in hotels
3. Don't ask for help unless absolutely necessary

I had to do as much as possible on my own, I reasoned. Otherwise, what

was the point?

“No, thanks. I got it.”

I disembarked and used my cane to find the dimensions of the tunnel that led from plane to gate. It was quiet in the tunnel. Safe. Then it ended and the Vienna International Airport opened up before me. Right away I knew, with that famous Harlan certainty, that I was utterly fucked.

A wall of sound. No, a *cavern* of sound. Sounds pummeling me from a million different directions and angles, distorting the dimension of the space and completely obliterating any hope I had of navigation.

I froze. My chest tightened, and my palms clutching the cane were sweaty. How in the ever-loving hell did I think this was a good idea? That I could do this? I *couldn't* do this. I wasn't off the plane thirty seconds, and already I was done. It was impossible.

No! I inhaled through my nose and tried to ignore how I felt almost exactly the same as I had standing on the ledge in La Quebrada, mustering the nerve to dive.

A soft hand on my arm startled me.

“You are on Level 3,” said the woman, the flight attendant from the plane. “The level is one wide but straight hallway. Customs is at the end. Beyond that, the elevators. You will need to go down to the first level. There is baggage claim and then you can find the train or...?”

“Taxi,” I said, swallowing down my panic.

“Taxi, yes. But please. Let me call an attendant to help you.”

“No, no, thanks,” I said, feeling better already now that I had at least the smallest of ideas of the layout. “I can do it. Thank you.”

“It's no trouble, really.”

Irritation flared. My old nemesis. It was laughing at me, showing its teeth. *You think you can beat me? Just wait.*

“I can do it,” I said through my own clenched teeth, then forced myself to smile. But Christ, the distance from where I was and where I needed to be for Charlotte was a line so long and so deep, even *I* could see it from a mile away.

The flight attendant let go. “If you insist, sir. Enjoy your stay in Vienna.”

I can do it. Just do it. Like the ad says.

I started to walk.

My cane tapped from side to side, unobstructed, but the sheer size of the airport was overwhelming. I felt it open above and all around me, and my

skin broke out in gooseflesh and sweat at the same time. I don't know what you called the anxiety that gripped me: the opposite of claustrophobia but with the same panicky overtones. Overhead speakers made announcements in German, French, and English. Conversations, close and far, were a background hum, though some whizzed past, growing loud and fading as people walked by. Many people. Too many fucking people. My flight had been a red-eye; it was nine in the morning in Austria. A new day. And it sounded as if the entire country were bustling about the echoing halls of this airport.

I found Customs, but only because I bumped into the guy at the end of one of the lines. And waiting in line, I came to learn, was another contingency I hadn't prepared for. It seems like the easiest thing in the world: you stand in line. The line moves up, you move with it. Except that I had no way of knowing when the line moved. I stood as close as I dared to the guy in front of me; a man who smelled of leather, coffee, and the sterilized airplane cabin. I'm sure I looked like a skulking creep, towering over him, but it worked. When I felt him move, I moved, carefully using my cane at his heels to keep a sense of distance. Finally, it was my turn.

"Passport, sir."

I'd already had it clutched in my hand for fear of holding up the line by fumbling through my carry-on. I went to offer it up and smacked my hand into the bullet-proof partition that separated me from the Customs guy. I felt my neck burn as I found the little space below where you slide your documents.

"Are you visiting Austria for the purposes of business or pleasure?"

"Pleasure," I said, though I knew already that was a big fat lie.

"Anything to declare?" he asked.

"Only my pride."

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, nothing. Nothing to declare."

I heard him stamp my passport and then felt it touch my fingers. "Elevators are to your left. Enjoy your stay."

I moved left—or what I thought was left. My sense of direction was shit. What I thought of as 'left' was often not left enough or too much. I had countless barked shins from my townhouse days to prove it.

I found a wall and a drinking fountain instead of a bank of elevators. I almost bent to take a drink, as if to show I'd meant to be there—and to

quench my blazing humiliation. But that would be too pathetic, even for me.

I felt around for my phone, hoping the street navigation might somehow work in here. I could ask it to find the nearest Starbucks—there’s always a Starbucks—and then ask a barista where the damn baggage claim was. I could even be bold and buy a coffee while I was at it.

“Directions to Starbucks,” I told my phone.

“Starting route to...Starbucks,” my phone replied. “Head northwest along concourse three.”

Northwest?

“Fuck me,” I muttered.

I was wracking my brain for another bright idea that didn’t involve me walking aimlessly, when I learned that Austrians didn’t stand by and watch dumb blind guys flail helplessly without doing something about it.

An older man’s voice addressed me. “Was brauchen Sie?”

“Uh...the elevators?”

“You are American?”

“American,” I agreed.

“What you need? Baggage?”

“Yes, baggage claim. If you could tell me where—?”

“Ja, okay. Kommen.”

He took me by the arm and tugged me.

“Wait, sorry. If you could just tell me where to go...?”

“Eh?”

I could picture the guy blinking at me like I was some kind of moron for resisting his help. And he was right. It was quite obvious that my rule about not asking for help had to die a swift death. Before I even left the airport. It just wasn’t possible to do this without help, and it wasn’t like *getting* help would make this trip a walk in the park.

I mentally modified Rule #3: Ask for help without suffering a kick to my pride every damn time.

Respectfully—I hoped—I angled out of his grasp and took the crook of his arm instead. I smiled in his general direction. “Better like this.”

“Okay, gut,” he said, and I felt him shrug.

We walked about ten paces before the man stopped and said, “Rolltreppe.” A nano-second later I learned that was German for *escalator*. I nearly lost my balance trying to find the downward rolling step, and my heart dropped somewhere to the vicinity of my balls as I clutched at the railing.

“Es tut mir Leid. Langsamer,” the man said. “Uh, slower? I go slower.”

If you don't fucking mind... Humiliation burned my neck. Langsamer, I thought. I'd have to remember that one.

We took two escalators down to the main concourse, and then the airport's size swelled to even greater heights and widths. Evidently the baggage claim was roughly six hundred miles away, as we walked for ages in this loud, crowded, cavernous mini-city, where the sounds bounced up and down, all around, each one amplified and multiplied to infinite numbers. The smells of coffee and hot food came and went, and while I'd have killed for a strong coffee, stopping was out of the question. My guide was on a mission, and I was too freaked by the unknowable enormity of the airport to do anything but be led.

Finally, we arrived at the baggage claim; I heard the trundle of suitcases, the whirr of conveyor machines that spat out luggage, and voices. Hundreds of them. The place was packed, and the reality of how unprepared I was hit me again like a lead weight. So many contingencies I hadn't even considered. Like how to know which baggage wheel was mine, or which fucking bag to grab as they went by. The old anger flared, like sneering laughter.

“Die Airline?” the man asked.

“Uh, Austrian,” I said. “From New York City.”

“New York...the Yankees, eh?”

“Yep.”

“Kommen.”

My guide tugged me through from one morass of people to another. “Here. I go. Ich bin spät.” I felt him pat my arm, his voice was heavy with concern. “Viel Glück, junger Mann.”

“Danke,” I said. “Vielen Dank.”

A grunt of acknowledgement and then he was gone.

Cut off from my anchor, I was adrift in a sea of black sound. A storm battered me; people standing too close, speaking words that meant nothing to me; no way to orient myself, no memory to rely on. This was insanity and I felt less than sane, standing in the hub of all that chaos.

For Charlotte. You're doing this for Charlotte.

The thought calmed me a little. I inhaled deeply several times, concentrating on my breathing, letting the people part around me like a rushing river around a stone. Having no way to identify my bag, my grand plan was to wait until the crowds thinned. After everyone else had grabbed

their luggage, I'd see if I could feel what remained, or find an airport worker to help me before they put my bag in the lost luggage jail.

After about ten minutes of standing in the overpopulated blackness, trying my damndest to look casual and not panicked or pathetic, a soft hand touched my arm.

"Are you waiting for your bag?" A woman, an American. She laughed sheepishly. "I mean, of course you are. We all are."

I smiled wanly. "I'm waiting for the crowd to thin out a bit."

"Oh, you don't have to do that! I can help. What does it look like?"

"It's blue and kind of big. The rolling kind."

The young woman went silent for a few moments, then, "Maybe this?"

I heard her struggle and bent to help. Together, we hauled a bag over the side of the conveyor.

"Here's a tag...Noah Lake. Is that you?"

"That's me. Thanks, very much."

"Sure thing," she said and cleared her throat. "Do you have someone coming to pick you up?"

"No, but if you could point me in the direction of a taxi stand, that would be awesome."

"I'd be happy to help," she said brightly, and it didn't escape me that the tone of her voice had changed to one I remembered well from my past life. The light, feathery sound of flirtation. And then I felt her hands on me, as she gently turned me around.

"Straight ahead are automatic doors. Go out and turn right, past a little café, and it's right there."

The vagueness of her directions made my teeth ache, but this woman must have seen my hesitation.

"You know what? Let me take you there myself. We can stop at the café...I'll buy you a coffee?"

In my past life, I would have taken her up on that. And beyond. To my hotel and a mid-morning roll in the sack, maybe. Then a late lunch, more naked gymnastics, and finally a smoothly executed getaway that left no hard feelings or attachments. I marveled at how easy it all had been...and how far away I was from that guy. I only wanted Charlotte, would only *ever* want Charlotte. My love for her ran so deep, it left room for nothing else, not even curiosity.

"That's kind of you to offer, but I have to get going," I said. "Thanks

again.”

I gave the woman what I hoped wasn't a dickish smile and followed her instructions toward the cabstand. Or tried to.

Before I left New York, Lucien and I had debated what I would need to bring to survive and not bog me down as I traveled. I brought the barest minimum of clothing to wear for every day, but for Charlotte's shows, I'd had to bring something nice. Lucien tried to talk me out of it, but my overriding need to not look like a fucking schlub won out. I had to bring a suitcase large enough for two suits and added finding dry cleaners in every city to my quest.

But that fucking luggage. It took me exactly 3.2 seconds to determine it was going to be the bane of my existence. Rolling it behind me with one hand and holding my cane in the other made me feel like someone had chopped off my left arm. My shield arm. Plus, it was heavy as hell, and I tried not to think about what it was going to be like dragging that thing on trains or buses, from city to city.

I exited the airport, felt the carpet under my feet turn to cement, and headed right. Slowly. Christ, I was slow. Not just slow. *Timid*. The controlled chaos of the airport morphed into an untamed wilderness of a strange city. The sounds of cars alone—so many cars—filled me with dread. I had to remind myself that they were just cars pulling slowly to the curb to let people in, and not death machines driven by crazed maniacs.

I moved forward until my tapping cane struck an obstacle. I hoped it was the cabstand sign, but it was someone's heel.

“Eh?”

“Sorry. Taxi?”

“No, no, dieser Weg. Kommen.”

This time, the man took my arm and I let him. *As if you have a choice*. He led me down the sidewalk a few more feet. “Here.”

I waited in the cabstand queue for a good twenty minutes until it was my turn. A cabbie—at least I hoped it was a cabbie—took my luggage from me and I felt my way to the backseat of the cab. I slumped into it, feeling as if I'd just played sudden death chess for fifty straight hours.

“Wo gehst du hin?”

“Uh...Grand Hotel Vienna?”

“American?”

“Yeah,” I said, leaning back.

“Oh yeah! Go Yankees, eh?”

I offered an unenthusiastic thumbs-up. “Go, Yankees.”



The Grand Hotel Vienna was an expensive luxury hotel, chosen by Lucien because of its concierge services. He’d booked me in five-star hotels in every city, so that I’d never be without first-rate help in English, should I need it.

But this hotel was a few minutes’ walk to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde where Charlotte would be playing for the next three nights. It was risky to stay so close, but Lucien had insisted on making things as easy as possible in Vienna, my first city, until I got acclimated to the whole experience.

I let the bellboys take my luggage and lead me to the front desk. I checked in and readied my credit card but learned Lucien had paid for this hotel himself. A little bon voyage gift. A wave of homesickness crashed over me so strong I had to grip the counter for a second.

I was led again to the elevators, then my room. I tipped the bellboy with a ten euro note—identifiable to me by the fold I’d made in its corner. When he was gone, I slumped on the bed, savoring the merciful silence. The stillness. The fact that I didn’t have to feel my way anywhere but the bathroom and that I could do with no curious or pitying eyes on me.

I wanted to sleep but Rule #2 reared its ugly head: No holing up in hotels.

With a groan, I hauled myself off the bed, hauled my luggage *onto* the bed, and started to unpack. I felt my way around the room to get its layout, put the clothes in the dresser, hung up the suits, and then turned to my messenger bag that carried all my lifelines.

Navigation was my first priority. Prior to departure, I actually did go to the Helen Keller Foundation for a cramming session on how to get around. They advised me to bring earbuds so I could listen to directions as I walked the streets of the strange cities, and outfitted my phone with a program called Lingo that would translate any phrase or word I asked it to.

They also gave me 3x5 notecards, each marked with a polite request for assistance across busy streets, printed in different languages. The idea being, you stand on a street corner, holding a card into the black ether and wait for someone to investigate. They read it and help you cross. Sounded all well and good...in theory.

In real life, the idea of standing on a corner like that was one tiny step away from begging. I took the cards with a polite smile and a mental promise to myself to never use them. But somehow they'd ended up in my messenger bag. Lucien, I reckoned.

Second to navigation was not being ripped off or robbed. I had a money reader that was the size of a business card. I slid the bill into the reader, and it would tell me the denomination. I'd then fold the corner of the bill a certain way, so I could tell how much it was before I put it in my real wallet, which I kept on a belt that tucked into my pants. My credit cards were in there as well, while I had a dead credit card and fifty Euros stashed in what I called my bait wallet—one I kept in my jacket pocket. If someone tried to rob me, I'd give them that and hope it would be enough.

I set up my laptop, with my writing software, on the suite's desk that faced a window. I felt the sunlight on my hand and turned my face to it, allowing myself a moment of satisfaction. I had done it. It sucked and was mentally exhausting in a way I couldn't have imagined, but I'd made it. I was in the same city as Charlotte, and tonight I'd be in the same room with her.



Eating dinner in the hotel restaurant, getting a cab to the concert hall, and making my way to the will-call ticket booth were each and every one fraught with difficulty and stress, but at four minutes to seven, an usher led me to my seat: last row, upper level, closest to the door so I could make a quick escape.

I slumped into the plush chair, my cane propped between my knees, utterly wiped out. My earlier satisfaction was obliterated. This was too much. Too hard. Too stressful to cast off again and again into unknown spaces, without the slightest ability to get my bearings. I had made it to the concert hall, but at what cost?

The orchestra, Charlotte among them, tuned up, and then the crowd around me erupted with applause—the conductor taking his place at the podium I guessed. A silence and then...music.

I had no idea of the program, of course. I recognized nothing of the four or five pieces they played, but it didn't matter in the slightest. The music washed over me and carried me along its soft currents. Charlotte's violin was indistinct from the rest of the orchestra, but I imagined I could hear her anyway. She was there. In the same room with me, even if that room was

enormous and she and I at opposite ends. My Charlotte was there, and I could feel her; her energy and love and everything she poured into her music. I felt the stress of the day loosen its grip on my mind and muscles.

That feeling, that euphoria of possibility, reinforced the idea that I was doing the right thing. It was quite obviously going to be harder than I ever foolishly imagined it to be. The hardest thing I'd ever done, but wasn't that the point?

I wouldn't give up. I couldn't. The long, black road lay stretched out before me, but I would walk it because Charlotte Conroy was waiting for me on the other side.

chapter forty-one



The tour began and it was immediately obvious it was going to be a daunting whirlwind of dates and cities and one gorgeous concert hall after another. I was only a section violin, second chair, but I played as if I were our soloist, pouring my heart and soul into my music.

And my love, that is all for Noah.

I played as if he could hear me, suffusing every note with my love for him, sending it out into the ether.

“He has supersonic hearing,” I murmured to myself one night in a hotel with Annalie snoring gently in the opposite bed. “Maybe he’ll hear me.”

In Venice, Sabina gave me a small solo with a promise of more to come. With every performance, I felt the music grow and bloom in me, my heart thawing from the longest winter. As an artist performing and perfecting her craft, in the cities of Europe that held so much of the musical history, I was having the time of my life.

Except for missing him. Always missing him. There were nights I played with my heart in my throat and tears staining the chinrest of my Cuypers violin. Noah hadn’t contacted me in more than a week, and I began to wonder if the violin was a parting gift. That wherever his journey toward wholeness took him, it didn’t include me.

But in Florence, nine days into the tour, I finally received word. I sat on my bed in the hotel while Annalie lay on the other, listening to the German industrial metal band, Rammstein.

“What?” she’d asked earlier, when I wrinkled my nose at the relentless sound blaring out of her air pods the one and only time I agreed to have a listen. “You don’t like?”

“It’s the exact opposite of classical music,” I’d teased.

She raised a brow. “Exactly.”

Now, she drummed on her leg while I scanned the email, drinking in every word like a woman dying of thirst.

Dear Charlotte,

Check me out, writing an email using the poor blind guy software my amazing girlfriend recommended. Sort of an act of faith, that this machine is dictating what I say and not making up some terrible, sappy poetry about how much I miss and love you. Because you know that’s not my style. I want to tell you in plain words, my heart ripped open, how much I miss and love you. I might not write to you enough, but it’s only because I’m not sitting on my ass. I’m working really fucking hard to make myself good for you, Charlotte. I sound like a broken record to myself, but all I can do is ask you to trust me, wait for me, and believe me when I say that I will not give up, and so not give up on us.

All my love forever,
Noah

Tears blurred my vision. *Wait for me*, he’d asked and so I would. I hastily typed, *I will wait for you as long as it takes*.

Then I shut the laptop, wiped my tears, and took a deep breath. Annalie pulled out an earbud.

“All is good?”

“I wouldn’t say good, but...”

“You miss your Noah very much,” she said, somehow loading that statement with empathy and compassion.

“I do. But I also trust him. So...?” I shrugged.

“So you wait,” Annalie said, “and one day you won’t have to wait anymore, yeah?”

I smiled. “Yeah. One day. But jeez, we’re always talking about my stuff. I’ve never asked if you have a boyfriend. Or girlfriend. Or just...someone special.”

Her brows came together. “I did. A year ago.”

“Was it...difficult?” I asked tentatively since her expression was unreadable.

She tilted her head from side to side. “A bit. Neither of us wanted to break up, but he was going one way, and I am here, with the tour. We know that we’d not be good people for each other if we tried to stick to it. Not good for our...” She searched for the word. “Souls. Not good for our souls to not do what we’re meant to do.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. But I totally know what you mean.”

She smiled. “I think you must.”

“Will you get back together when it’s over?”

Annalie shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t think there’s enough love there.” She looked at my eyes clouded with thoughts and doubts. “You are not like me. There’s plenty of love for your Noah, yes?”

I smiled, feeling lighter. “Yes.”

Lifetimes’ worth.

Annalie nodded. “You’re going to be okay, Conroy. No matter what happens.”

chapter forty-two



The tour moved and I followed. After Vienna, to Venice, a city of immeasurable beauty and uniqueness, now reduced to a maze of precarious walkways, squares filled with flapping pigeons and pigeon shit, and narrow streets that dead-ended at sandstone walls. Then on to Florence, where the cobbled streets threatened to trip me every other step, and its famed art remained locked away on the other side of the black curtain.

I wish I could say it got easier, but it didn't. Countless missteps and obstacles marked every hour, and I considered a good day one in which I didn't get hopelessly lost. I made it to Charlotte's shows, but the effort it took to do so was extraordinary.

There were too many details to list; a litany of frustrations and embarrassments that left me with teeth clenched, rage boiling beneath the exhaustion, my skin scarlet with humiliation. I held up busy lines trying to pay for tickets or lunch or coffee. I suffered the polite silences, impatient sighs of clerks and tellers, waiters and hotel concierges, as I fumbled my way through ordering food, or picking up dry cleaning, or lugging my fucking bag onto a train that was already crowded.

I had to ask for help everywhere, every day, of strangers as they passed by, snagging them as they went and hoping they'd forgive my intrusion. Or—worse—interrupting conversations with terrible German or halting Italian, praying for an English speaker to tell me which seat was mine? Which way to the ticket office? Which way to the cabstand or train station or hotel front desk? *Which way to Charlotte?* I wanted to scream and fall at her feet and touch her cheek, her hand...just for a moment, to remind me what it was all for.

Crossing streets in the dark, sticking close to other pedestrians, feeling

unasked for hands guiding me, or yanking me out of the way of oncoming cars whose horns blared my humiliation for everyone around me to hear. Using those stupid cards the Foundation had given me because they actually worked and I'd have been road kill without them.

The vast majority of people on the planet are kind before they are cruel, but I didn't escape the snickers and jabs of the not-so-kind. I caught stealing hands on trains and felt the jolt of fear surge through me, wondering what would come next? To be left alone? Or maybe a knife sliding between the ribs by a more insistent thief? I had no way of knowing, of assessing the people around me for potential danger. I had to trust. I had to hope. And sometimes, I just straight-up prayed.

Words that had never, in my past life, been used to describe me hung over me every day. Helpless. Slow. Hesitant. Lost.

And that was just the first week.

I called Lucien at night to check in and told him again and again, I was fine, the lie rolling so easily off my tongue. I emailed Charlotte once that week, speaking into my little machine that didn't translate the weariness or the longing in my voice. Just words. To her, black lines on a white screen that didn't reveal one hint of the struggle behind them. I told her I loved her and that I missed her and that I was working to make myself whole so that we could be together, because it was clear to me that I'd have to shatter first and be put back together. This journey was going to break me down in every way, and I'd either arise from it victorious, or it would destroy me, and the way things had begun, I worried it would be the latter.

And then it got worse.

On the overnight train from Florence to Rome, a migraine woke me from a shallow doze in my sleeping compartment. I slept with my bag of lifelines under the thin pillow and felt inside it for the little bottle of pills. The train jolted and they all spilled into my hand.

All three of them.

I struggled to remember the last time I'd had a migraine. It had been a while. Was it the one that nearly killed me? The one that ended with Charlotte saving me, bathing me, and the kiss that had changed everything between us?

I swallowed one Azapram dry and made a mental note to tell Lucien to send me more. The migraines were pretty infrequent, so I'd probably be okay for the rest of the tour, but better safe than sorry. One Monster with no

Azapram would do me in.

And I was walking a thin line, already. The old anger and bitterness—the absolute hatred of my situation—had been awakened, and each difficulty was another log on the fire until the inferno was raging. I felt feverish. My teeth clenched, and I had to remind myself to loosen up before the Monster awoke again.

Rome was a city of art and history, but to me it was just noise and smells and people and an infinite number of ways to become hopelessly lost. What was the Sistine Chapel to me? Or the Pieta? Or even the Coliseum? Another loss to contend with; another battle to fight against bitterness: I was visiting the world's oldest cities, and all that made them magnificent was locked away from me but for vestiges of memory.

I tried to appreciate Rome as I was, not as I wished I could be, for wasn't that one of my goals too? *The goal?* I couldn't stay in my cushy hotel. I had to face the enormous, crowded, chaos of the city, to soak it in as best I could. Experience it as a blind man and find the soul of Rome—or any other city I visited—without *looking* for it.

On a more practical level, I planned to have lunch, buy a gelato or a cappuccino, and then prepare for Charlotte's show that night. But Christ, the complications embedded in each one of those acts were enough to make me want to tear my hair out.

I walked from my hotel to the Trevi Fountain, obeying the commands of the GPS in my ear. I arrived without incident, without getting lost, or honked at. A minor victory. I felt pretty good. The sun was warm but not stifling, and the sound of the fountain was soothing. I envisioned the droplets catching the sun and sparkling like diamonds for a brief moment before disappearing into an impossible blue basin.

I sat for a long time and may have even smiled. The rage that boiled just beneath the surface was reduced to a simmer for the time being. Charlotte might be sightseeing with her friends. It wasn't wise to stay too long in one place. I decided to use my GPS to find a café and grab a late lunch before heading back.

I stood up quickly, and the sudden pain almost knocked me back down. The Monster had been awakened by my movement. The back of my head glowed white hot almost at once, and I caught my breath.

Again?

I'd just subdued a migraine the night before. Was this the same pain,

having escaped from the Azapram, or was this another? I felt in my bag for the pills and took one. Only one remained. I reached for my phone to call Lucien and tell him to send me more. Then the earthquake hit.

It had to have been an earthquake, didn't it? Why was the ground tilting? I stumbled sideways, as if I were a failing Vaudeville performer and the big hook had come to yank me off the stage. I got my elbow up in time and pain radiated all up and down my arm, and then my hip, as I struck the ground. My white cane clattered and rolled. My bag hit hard, and I had a flash of worry for all the devices in it I needed to survive. Immediately, voices and shuffling feet surrounded me; grabbing hands sat me up.

I held my hand out to nothing, as if I could hold on to whatever was making the lazy spin I felt in my body, and slowly it stopped. Voices bombarded me with questions I couldn't answer.

“Stai bene?”

“Posso chiamare qualcuno per voi?”

“Chi è con questo uomo?”

I felt around for my cane, and someone pressed it into my hands, while someone else slipped my bag over my shoulder. More strange hands helped haul me to my feet.

“I'm okay,” I said, my voice a croak. “Okay, grazie. Grazie mille.”

“Where do you go?” asked one man in a thickly accented voice. “I help.”

I was about to politely decline, but my legs felt like jelly and my hands shook. The migraine was roaring in the background. *What is wrong with me?*

“Where do you go?” the man asked again. “Hospital?”

“No, no. No hospital. Hassler,” I managed. “Hotel Hassler.”

I heard whistling and shouts, and then I was being guided into a cab—or so I hoped. My rescuer climbed in beside me.

“Per favore, Hotel Hassler, e rapido.”

“You don't have to...” I started but gave up. I didn't know how much English my helper knew, and the cab was already moving anyway.

It had been a short walk from my hotel to the Trevi: the cab arrived in less than five minutes. I dug for my wallet but felt a hand on my wrist.

“No. Sit.”

I nodded weakly. Sitting was good. Lying down would be better. After some back and forth in Italian, the door opened on my side and my rescuer was helping me out. He guided me up the steps and into the cool of the hotel. I knew he'd led me to the right place—the sounds and smells were as I

remembered them.

“Va bene, adesso?”

“Uh, sure. Thank you. Thank you very much. Let me pay you for the cab...”

“No, no.” A rough hand patted my shoulder. “Prenditi cura di ti. Take care, eh?”

Another nameless, faceless stranger, here and gone again. My world was populated with them; guardian angels I would never meet but who made it possible for me to take the next step to Charlotte.

I made my way to my room on the third floor and sat on the edge of the bed. I wanted to collapse down and sleep, but something damn close to fear held me rigid.

“It was the heat. And exhaustion,” I said.

And the migraine? Two in two days. That’s never happened before.

“Stress,” I answered, and that seemed right. God knew I was stressed beyond all reckoning, every fucking second of this trip.

Faint relief loosened me and the exhaustion swooped in. I told my phone to text Lucien for more Azapram in the next city—Barcelona, Spain—and then set a timer for a nap. I wanted to sleep for a million years, but Charlotte had a show that night and I couldn’t miss it. Rule #1.

I woke in the throes of my usual nightmare, choking on nothing, struggling for air. I sucked in a deep lungful and tried to remember where I was. A bed. I was dressed—jeans and a T-shirt. My shoes were still on, and the room felt hot and airless.

Rome. I’m in Rome.

I pushed the button on my watch. *The time is 6:07 p.m.*

Fuck! I thought I’d set a timer, but apparently, I screwed that up too. Charlotte’s show was at seven. That gave me less than an hour to shave, shower, dress, eat, and find my way to the concert venue. In my state, I needed *at least* two hours to accomplish all that. And that’s when I wasn’t feeling as if my bones were filled with lead. But missing one of Charlotte’s shows was out of the question.

Pushing all my fears and unease over the dizziness out of my mind, I felt around the side table for the hotel phone. After a few frantic tries, I found the button that called the front desk and ordered a plate of spaghetti, because that was all my feeble brain could cough up. Italian food = spaghetti.

“And your wine?” the woman asked.

Judging by how many times I'd been offered wine in Venice and Florence, Italians didn't get out of bed without a glass of Chianti first.

"No wine. Just water. Please."

I felt my way to the bathroom, to the electric razor I'd set up by the sink. I shaved my thin scruff of a beard a little thinner, then wrangled the water temperature into submission in the shower. I was hurrying as fast as I could, but once the water hit me, I slumped and turned my face to the spray, my weariness expanding and spreading through me with the water's heat.

Charlotte. Where are you? Why aren't you here with me?

As if on cue, desire for her rampaged through me, swift and hot. My body missed her as much as I did. Fiercely.

With my sight gone, I experienced intimacy with Charlotte almost entirely through touch. I couldn't look at a photo of her and soak in her smile, or the beauty of her hair falling around her face, or the swell of her breasts against her dress. I had to touch her to remember her, as all of my memories of her were sensation only.

And God, I missed touching her. I missed the way her lips felt on mine as she smiled. I missed the silky strands of her hair through my fingers. I missed the soft weight of her breasts in my hands. I missed her kisses, especially the maddening way she'd skim her tongue over my lips, then graze her teeth with a hot little gust of breath, before finally giving me her whole mouth, granting me entry. Christ, just that kiss made me hard. Every time.

I imagined it then, of having her in the shower, up against the wall, naked and wet, her skin warm and slippery... I groaned and took myself in hand, needing the release, the relief. Some shred of pleasure in this wasteland of misery.

But I couldn't have even that. My supersonic hearing picked up a knock on the outer door. Room service. I didn't have time to finish and figured it would probably be best to *not* greet the guy with a raging hard-on. I turned the water to icy cold and the heat of imagined passion flamed out. My anger, however, burned brighter.

With a tray of delicious-smelling food waiting for me, I ran my hands over my suits, trying to remember which was the dark gray sharkskin, and which was the light navy. I couldn't concentrate. My fingers, like tired eyes, couldn't focus. I spent a good five minutes I didn't have trying to remember where I'd put my goddamn ties. By the time I was dressed, the spaghetti was cold, but I sat down to devour it anyway.

After, I threw on my suit jacket and shoved my lifelines into my messenger bag but for my phone. I asked it how to say, “Where is the ticket office?” in Italian and then spent another few harried seconds searching for my goddamn cane that had rolled under the bed.

“Dove si trova la biglietteria?”

“Great. How do you say ‘fuck me’ in Italian?”

“Fottermi,” my phone helpfully replied.

“You got that right.”

chapter forty-three



“What did you get?”

“Pistachio,” Annalie said, taking a swipe of her gelato. “You?”

“Chocolate.”

“Chocolate...what?”

I smiled into the Italian sun that I was certain was completely different—and better—than any other sun. “Just chocolate.”

“Pfft,” Annalie sniffed. “So boring.”

“I beg to differ,” I said as we strolled along the Piazza di Trevi, heading toward the glorious fountain. “This is gelato. In Rome. It’s the best chocolate there is.”

Annalie thought about this for a moment and then nodded. “I’ll allow it.”

I laughed. My new BFF had honed her English skills on GIFs.

We had the day off, until our show that evening at seven. Annalie and I were trying to cram as much of Rome into our short stay as we could. But we quickly learned the folly of our ways—Rome was too much. Too full of beauty and museums and history, that we amended our excursion to one museum, one lunch, one gelato and the Trevi Fountain and a pinky swear to come back and do it all again, but better.

With Noah?

My smile drooped, thinking of how the beauty of Italy—of the entire world, really—was now locked behind a black curtain that would never lift. Annalie and I sat on one of the concrete benches near the Trevi Fountain and I closed my eyes—experiencing the bustle of tourists and inhabitants, conversations, little cars and burbling water—the only way Noah could.

Don’t feel sorry for him, came a voice that sounded suspiciously like a certain beloved Frenchman I knew. *The beauty of the world is not closed to*

him; he just experiences it differently now.

That's what Noah was currently trying to do, I realized—fall back in love with life and living.

A sudden commotion from the other side of the Trevi Fountain caught our attention. I turned to see a huddle of people surrounding someone on the ground. The fountain obscured the fallen person.

I started to rise with a half-baked idea to help, but there were already plenty of Good Samaritans at work. I turned back to Annalie.

“I hope whoever it is, is okay.”

Annalie nodded, more intent on her gelato. But something itched at me. I didn't like to ogle other people's misfortune, but I had to look. I turned in time to see a man being helped into a cab. I only caught a flash of leg and something long and white. A cane?

“White cane,” I whispered and slowly got to my feet. “No...”

Another man had climbed in after the first, and before I could move, the taxi was speeding away.

Without a word to Annalie, I hurried around the fountain to the spot where the crowd had gathered. “The man who fell?” I asked no one in particular. “Is he...?”

Okay? Blind? Is he Noah?

People stared at me, a few snickered at the American girl with a gelato dripping down her hand. Heat crept up my neck, as I suddenly felt so foolish. My aching heart was turning complete strangers into Noah. It did that a lot. I saw his face in passing men, hoping, wishing, always disappointed.

I made my way back to Annalie, throwing the remnants of my gelato in the trash as I went.

“Why would you run away?” she asked, studying her phone, then turning it to show me. “...When Sabina is giving you a solo tonight?”

My heart pounded on a flush of excitement. “She...what?”

Annalie smiled. “Come on. She's calling an early rehearsal.” She gave me an appraising glance, lips pursed. “And you need to wipe that chocolate off your hands before you touch your Cuypers, yes?”

“Yes.” I laughed, and the man in the cab was forgotten.

chapter forty-four



I made my way to the lobby of the Hotel Hassler and asked the concierge to hail me a cab for the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and slumped heavily in the backseat. My phone said it was ten minutes to seven while the GPS in my ear said the drive was fifteen minutes long.

"Fottermi," I muttered. That one would come in handy, I thought.

Traffic was bad. At least I guessed it was judging by the herky-jerky starts and stops of the cab, and the intermittent swearing and honking I heard up front. I was going to be late, there was no way around it. And if the venue was the kind that didn't allow late-comers to skulk in, I was fucked.

But seriously, who cared? All this goddamn rushing for nothing. For what? To listen to my girlfriend, but not see her? To not even hear her, if I were being honest; she was just one of three or five or however fucking many violinists a symphony needed. The dumb bastards didn't even have the sense to let her play solo, so why the fuck was I bothering? What was all the toil and suffering for? To make myself better? This wasn't *better!*

Rage boiled through my blood, and that old Monster-conjuring hate writhed and coiled through me like a nest of snakes. How did I ever think that this would work? Or that Charlotte would even be there for me when all was said and done? What if she was pissed that I was right there the whole time and she never knew it? Or if she thought it pathetic that I followed her around Europe like a stray dog whose owners had moved on without him? What if she got sick of waiting?

What if she met someone else?

My leg had been bouncing with impatience but stopped dead at the thought. Every part of me ran cold and my rampaging litany went silent.

What if Charlotte had met someone else?

Yes, wondered the snide voice in my head. *What if she met some guy, some musician in the orchestra? A flautist with a big instrument he wanted her to blow?*

“Shut up.”

“Che cosa?” my cabbie demanded.

I ignored him. I had more important questions to answer. Such as: with whom was Charlotte spending all her time? Some dorky musician, perhaps, who could talk about librettos and sextets and tempos until the fucking cows came home? Or a suave bastard who took her to sidewalk cafés and bought her gelato or coffee or wine? Enough wine to get her tipsy so that he could steal a kiss and she could decide she liked it? That she liked *him*, this guy who could see her face and tell her how beautiful she looked in the Italian moonlight, and who could visit museums with her on their off-days, or the Sistine Chapel, or the Trevi Fountain...

A guy whose advantage over me—besides his perfect 20/20 vision, of course—was his *presence*. He was there for her, sharing her journey, and while it wasn't in Charlotte's DNA to cheat on me, her heart was big and generous and full of love she was eager to share, that she *needed* to share.

Why not? It made sense that she'd fall in love with a musician, a more cultured man who didn't swear as much as I did, or have *vision problems*, or mood swings, or...*who didn't get drunk and allow her to be assaulted in an elevator by someone you called a friend?*

Or that.

My fevered and jealousy-choked imagination even composed a sound bite of the email I was now sure waited for me on my laptop when I got back to the hotel.

Noah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen...

My hands clenched my white cane like it was her new boyfriend's throat. I nearly told the cabbie to turn around. Towel thrown. White flag up. Stick a fork in me, I was done.

“Okay, Teatro,” the cabbie said, and I realized the cab had stopped.

I didn't move. I didn't want to. It was too fucking much. Too hard.

Quit your whining. You're here, so go listen to her.

Well, why the hell not, I thought with a sneer. I had nothing better to do.

I paid the fare and made my laborious way to the venue. Ushers guided me to my seat—always last row, corner—and I listened to some damn concerto

or sonata or whatever the hell it was, waiting for the music to soothe me as it so often had other nights. Not this night. This night I was as impervious as a brick wall; the musical notes bounced off me like pebbles.

One piece ended, and the audience returned respectable applause while I thought about slouching down and having a nap. With my sunglasses on, who the fuck would know? And did I care anyway? Nope, I surely did not.

And then it happened.

A lone violin began to sing a soft, melancholy melody while the orchestra played behind—gently, as if not to disturb the soloist’s simple song. A delicate web of silver hung in the black of my imagination, whorls and garlands of sound, emerging from that single violin, until the entire Teatro was glistening in my mind’s eye.

I listened, hardly breathing, and when it ended, the audience was hushed. One heartbeat, one breath, and then an eruption of applause ten times louder than for any piece before.

I turned to the person on my left, found the delicate wrist of a woman. “Who was that?” I asked and motioned to the stage. I hoped this lady spoke enough English to reply, though my heart already knew the answer.

“The program says her name is Charlotte Conroy,” said the woman with a Middle Eastern accent. “I have never heard of her, but she was quite extraordinary, wasn’t she?”

“Extraordinary.” I sat back in my seat, and the next piece began—some rambunctious Italian rondo I barely heard.

Okay, baby, I answered, because Charlotte had been speaking to me, even if she hadn’t known I was there to hear it. She hadn’t met someone else—the idea was ludicrous to me now. She was waiting for me, and her heart ached for me as much as mine ached for her. I heard it in her music, as plain as if she were speaking words.

My anger melted away like wax in the hot sun.

I won’t give up, I promised her. *I won’t. No matter how hard it gets, I swear to you, Charlotte, I’ll keep going. For you, baby. For you...*

I climbed out of my chair the moment the last note of the last piece dissipated in the air and headed back to my hotel, determined to make a fresh start in the morning. No more whining, no more tantrums. Charlotte was still waiting for me, and I’d be damned if I didn’t do everything in my power to make her heartache mean something.

I lay in bed feeling better than I had in days and dove into what I hoped

would be a deep, restorative sleep...

...that lasted maybe all of an hour. I woke up with pain raging at the back of my head. I barely made it to the toilet before vomiting up my \$23 plate of spaghetti and flailed around—in profound agony—to find my bottle of Azapram. One pill left. I took it with trembling hands and swallowed it down.

And now I had none.

chapter forty-five



The Monster was faster than the mail.

My first night in Barcelona was spent riding out a migraine. I had no pills to take. I'd called the front desk for some aspirin, but that was like putting a band-aid on a gushing artery.

I lay curled in the bathroom of my five-star Barcelona hotel, banging down the seconds until the migraine's iron-tight grip on my head began to loosen. At first, I thought I was merely delirious with the pain, but no, I sensed a gradual lessening from molten agony, to plain agony (a huge step up), to a really fucking bad headache, to finally none at all.

A sound like a sob burst from my chest and throat, and I threw my arm over my eyes, sucking in deep breaths. *I can't do this anymore*, I thought. *Enough. I'm done.* But I couldn't be done.

I hit the button on my phone. "*The time is now 8:10 a.m.*"

I thought of all I needed to do today before Charlotte's eight p.m. show. Dry cleaning and laundry, lunch and dinner, finding the concert hall...too much.

So quit, came a thought.

"No," I told it and the empty room.

That's the third migraine in five days, came another.

"Fuck you. I'm stressed."

But the little sliver of fear that had wedged itself into my gut when I'd lost my balance in Rome dug deeper. The idea that something was wrong with me was like a weed in my mind that kept trying to take root, and no matter how many times I yanked it out, it grew back.

"No," I said again, into the black. I was just tired—more than tired. Exhausted from this ordeal, constantly stressed out and fearful of being

robbed, lost, or ruined, and missing Charlotte so badly I could hardly breathe.

Still...

I snarled a curse and hauled myself off the bathroom floor. Dizziness assaulted me at once. The room canted and tilted under me, like a ship tossed at sea. I braced myself on the counter, while my fear poured in and tried to sink me.

It passed. *You sat up too quickly and you haven't eaten. Nothing tragic about that.*

I had to eat. I felt weak as hell, and I couldn't venture out to do the laundry, much less anything else, until I'd had some food. I felt for the phone on the nightstand, and my fingers trailed over the buttons hoping for one that felt more prominent than the rest. They all felt the goddamn same. I pushed one at random and heard a recording, in Spanish, of what I presumed was an ad for the hotel itself. One of those informational things that are constantly playing with soft music behind them.

I slammed the phone down and picked it up again. I felt at the numeric keypad and was relieved to find that 0 was still alone, at the bottom, where it should be. I pushed it, hoping for an operator. I got one. A young woman answered.

"Buenos días, recepción. ¿Cómo puedo ayudarte?"

"Yeah, do you speak English?" I asked roughly.

A pause. "Sí, señor. How may I assist you?"

"I want to order some breakfast. Room service."

"Very good, sir. What will you have?"

"I don't know." I rubbed my forehead and my eyes that felt tired, even though they'd had the last two years off. "Food. Breakfast. I don't care."

"Do you need a menu, sir?"

"I have a menu," I said through gritted teeth. "I can't read it. Can you please just tell me what you have?"

"You...wish for me to read to you the whole menu, sir?"

"Yes...no, just..." I thought I was there, at the breaking point. I sucked down a deep breath. "Eggs. Do you have fucking eggs?"

The woman cleared her throat, obviously trying her damndest to maintain her cool with the American dickhead barking at her over the phone.

"We have eggs, sir."

"Fine. Good. Eggs, coffee, toast...whatever. Just bring it. Room 42."

I slammed the receiver down, and a second later I swept the phone and everything else that was on the side table onto the floor. My hands were shaking. My breath came in harsh gasps. *What is happening to me?*

I took several deep breaths, concentrating only on the in and out until the urge to scream or smash something else faded. I stood on trembling legs and felt my way to the bathroom where I splashed cold water on my face. I lifted my face to the mirror. On the other side of the black curtain was a haggard man, pale and sickly, with bags under his dark-circled eyes. And the eyes themselves—that Charlotte found so attractive—were haunted and dull. Their useless stare more blank and empty than ever before.

I didn't have to see to know that. If Charlotte saw me now, she'd cry. Ava would yell and *then* cry. My mother would weep, and my father would curse me for hurting her again. And Lucien...

I stumbled back into the bedroom, stubbing my toe on the lamp I'd knocked off the table. I found my phone on the bed, buried under the covers. I nearly called Lucien, telling myself it was just to hear his voice. To talk to someone who knew me so I didn't feel so goddamn trapped. But I knew if I called him, it wouldn't be to chit-chat. I'd tell him to book me a flight home that very night.

Do it, said the voice of reason that so often sounded like Ava in my mind. *You're done*. She was right. I couldn't survive another migraine without the medicine. Not now.

"Charlotte, I'm sorry," I croaked and started to push the button on my phone when a knock came at the door.

"Room service, señor."

I held the phone in my hand, my head dropping from exhaustion.

Another knock. The button on my phone was smooth under my thumb.

"Señor?"

I drew in a breath, as if I could suck in strength and fortitude and courage from the air around me. *Charlotte...*

"Come in."

"Your breakfast, sir." I heard a tray set down. "And a package has arrived for you. Just this morning."

I held out my trembling hand. "Show me. Please."

"Of course."

A cool, dry hand took mine and led me to the tray, to a square package wrapped in paper. I tore it open and a bottle fell out, rolled onto the table.

“What does it say?”

“Az...Azapram...”

“Fine, good, thank you. Go. You can go now.”

I sat on the bed for a long time while my breakfast grew cold, turning the bottle over and over in my hand. Twelve capsules. That’s all they’d give me at a time. But if the migraines kept up at this rate, I’d be out in two weeks.

Quit. Just quit.

But I didn’t. Charlotte had never quit on me. Never.

I got up and ate my breakfast.



I persevered through that breakfast, and dozens more after, but the writing was on the wall: I was breaking apart just as I had predicted. The raging anger in Rome had degenerated into desperation in Barcelona and worsened through Nice, Paris and Brussels; a terrible erosion that left me feeling hollowed out. I was below anger, somewhere. Under the stairs in a lightless basement. A dusty crawlspace. Or in Sylvia Plath’s bell jar, maybe, where everything was airless and stale.

By the time I hit Amsterdam, I was about done in.

It was around nine in the morning when the train from Brussels arrived at the Centraal station, and a hand jostled me from a shallow doze. I dragged my bag off the train with help from someone—the conductor, maybe—and then dragged myself into the terminal.

“Information desk?” I demanded of someone I felt walk past me.

I called it going fishing: I’d cast out a line—my arm—hoping to snag someone who could give me the information I needed. It had been humiliating to do it at first. Now, I didn’t bother with niceties. Niceties were too tiring.

“Uh, yes,” said the guy I’d caught. A young guy, maybe my age. “Okay, this way.”

He led me to the info desk, and from there I was guided to the cabstand with a waiting taxi. Cab rides were usually a reprieve. Mustering the willingness to exit the known space and safety of a taxi for the unknown of a street or some hotel rattled my nerves and left me drained. But I was already drained, and my nerves seemed to have fallen asleep. I rode in the cab. I paid the fare. I got out, *que sera, sera*.

In my deluxe fucking luxury suite that I couldn't see or appreciate, I found the king bed and wanted to face-plant straight into it and not move all day. But I discovered I wasn't really tired. Mentally exhausted beyond all reckoning, yes, but mostly I just didn't give a fuck.

I unpacked my bag and went about my process—not because I needed or wanted to, but because I couldn't think of a reason not to. Or anything else to do. Just one mechanical step after another.

I laid out my suit for Charlotte's show the next night; the VTO had the night off which meant I did too. I arranged my devices, set up my laptop, and then wandered the perimeter of the room to get its dimensions and orient the bed to the bathroom.

I took a hotter than usual shower, wondering if that would kick-start my body. It didn't. By then, it was noon, and I decided to head out for lunch. I had to. If I lay down in the bed, I wouldn't get up again. Not for days, maybe, and when Lucien called, he'd hear it in my voice that I had to stop.

After eating lunch, I sat at my table at the café and vaguely wondered what I should do with the rest of the day. I had been to Amsterdam in my past life. A beautiful city of canals with bicyclists riding over the stone cobbled streets; important landmarks and history. The Anne Frank House was here, but what would I get out of that? A small and dwindling voice urged me to go and just experience it as I was. That I'd feel the momentous history of that place, even if I couldn't see it, and to miss out would be a terrible waste.

I opted to miss out.

Then there was the Van Gogh Museum. Priceless art not three feet from my face, and it may as well be chicken scratch.

It may sound like I was feeling sorry for myself, but in actual truth, these losses had no effect on me. Just facts I had no way of changing and couldn't be bothered to care about in the first place. Was that progress? Or acceptance of my fate? I told myself it was, but that same little voice whispered it was the furthest thing from it.

I had to get out of this funk. It was so deep; it wasn't even depression. Just nothingness. I asked the waiter to give me the name of another café. A different kind of café that sold more than food. If I couldn't change my reality, I'd bend it a little and just let go of *thinking* so damn hard.

My waiter gave me a name and helped me hail a cab.

"Café J," I told the cabbie. Nope, no Anne Frank or Van Gogh for me. I was going to get high, and fuck it all, that sounded like the best idea I'd ever

had.

It was early afternoon. The streets were all but empty when I got out of the cab. It sounded like the café was tucked into a sleepy little corner of the city. But people—not me, but real people—had jobs and worked and didn't smoke pot at 2:04 in the p.m. on a weekday. Inside the café, I expected some tourists at least, but couldn't tell from the muted conversations if there were any other Americans there.

"A joint, please," I told the guy behind the counter. The place felt dim and cozy, but I imagined neon lights behind the counter or maybe menus of colored chalk.

The guy cleared his throat. "Uh, okay. Can you be more specific? We got about a hundred different strains."

"Surprise me," I muttered.

"More expensive, better quality," he said. "But you gotta buy a coffee too."

I smirked. "Yeah, that makes sense. A stimulant to go with my depressant."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Coffee, black. And your most expensive cigarette. Are we on a canal?" I thought I smelled the water but couldn't be sure, as the café itself was pungent with a variety of other strong aromas.

"Yeah, you want a canal seat? I can help you."

Either Dutch pot baristas were customer service fanatics, or the fact that I paid the equivalent of \$33 for one fat joint made him go the extra mile, but the guy walked me through the café to an outdoor terrace and sat me down on a couch. I heard a few talking voices around, but the couch I had to myself. For the time being.

"Your coffee's on the table to your right." The guy pressed a book of matches into my hand. "You want me to light it?"

"Nah, man, I'm good. Thanks."

And after two hits on the joint, I *was* good. Better than I'd felt in eons. I'd paid a premium and that's what I got.

"Primo shit," I muttered and laughed at myself.

I hadn't laughed in forever. That felt good too. My whole body felt good, and I could feel—but do nothing about—the stupid, lazy grin on my face.

This was a better apathy. My bones melted into the couch, and the blackness that entrapped me felt lighter somehow. All the heavy thoughts and

grief and the pain of missing Charlotte that had been weighing me down were now weightless and drifting. I waved them away and they vanished into thin air. *Like smoke*, I thought with another laugh. I sat back on the couch while my coffee grew cold beside me.

I honestly don't know how long I sat there; time oozed by, marked by conversations around me that came and went. I had presence of mind enough to let my joint go out before it was halfway gone, or else I'd probably have slipped into a coma. Thoughts of food infiltrated the green haze around me, but to get off that couch was much too much effort. Instead, I decided to do something I'd never done before on this entire trip: strike up a conversation.

There was a small group of people who were now sharing my couch on my left. The pot was making me bold. Or stupid. Or boldly stupid. I turned to them and said, "Nice day for it, yeah?"

A pause. A silence. I just laughed, and then they laughed too, and just like that, I had four new friends. All youngish—my age, or close to—and all college students, all able English speakers.

Bram's handshake was rough and strong, like his voice.

Schuyler was the jokester, his handshake loose and light, like his laugh.

James was a Brit; he gave my hand one stiff, formal shake and called me "mate," his voice fully loaded with curiosity.

And Ilsa was soft and sweet and smelled like caramel. She shook my hand and held it. I realized she wasn't going to let go until I pulled away.

My new buddies bombarded me with questions: why I was there, who I was with, and what the fuck was a blind guy doing all alone in Amsterdam? I answered all their questions with a moronic lack of caution, and someone helped me light the joint again.

"What do you do for a living, Noah?" James asked.

"I'm...uh, I'm a journalist," I said. "Or was."

My time at *Planet X* seemed so far away now, it may as well have happened to someone else. "I used to write for a magazine. Now I'm a freelancer...so to speak." I laughed harshly, thinking how anything I 'wrote' would be dictation into a machine. "*So to speak*. Get it?"

They didn't, but they all laughed the way high people laughed—just because.

"And why are you traveling around Europe? Are you alone?" Schuyler asked.

"Seems bloody mad to me," James added quickly.

“My girlfriend is a violinist with a symphony,” I answered slowly, trying to make the words that came out of my mouth match the words my brain wanted me to speak. “She’s on tour and I’m following her...it. The tour. Research,” I added. “How a blind person would travel Europe. That’s my book.”

Yeah, that sounded okay. Sloppy, but enough truth to be believable.

Ilsa sidled up to me and cooed. “Aww, you’re doing it for your girl. For love! You’re doing it for love!”

“Yeah,” I said, smiling lazily. “That too.” *That most of all.*

I shared my joint with them, and while I’d clearly already won Ilsa over, that brought the guys around. Instant best buddies.

“Fuck me, mate, this is some strong shit,” James said, coughing.

“Neuk mij dood,” Bram said, and it sounded like he was pounding his chest. “Sterk. That’s *strong* to you, Amerikaanse.”

“It’s primo,” I said helpfully.

“Primo!” Schuyler said with a screeching laugh, and we all laughed with him.

“Do you speak Dutch, Noah?” Ilsa asked excitedly. It seemed like everything she did was excitedly. She couldn’t sit still. I could feel her vibrating next to me, like a live wire.

“I speak French,” I said.

“Oh, I love French. So romantic. Tell me, what do you say to your girl in French to get her hot, eh?”

The others laughed. I managed a smile.

“She doesn’t speak French.”

“No? Too bad. What a waste.” Ilsa leaned closer. “I speak French. Maybe you will say something hot to me, oui?”

Naturally, I hadn’t the faintest clue what Ilsa might look like, but right then I was hit with a very strong impression: a girl with a soft face but hard, cold eyes. Of warm skin but a bruising touch. A slapper. Someone who would hit a man and then cry hysterically after.

“Ilsa, niet een slet van jezelf niet te maken.” Schuyler laughed. “Noah, thank me. I just told her not to make a slut of herself in front of you.”

“Slet?” Ilsa shrieked in my ear. “Here’s some *English*. Go fuck yourself, Schuyler!”

Schuyler just chuckled and knocked my knee with his hand to get my attention. “Hey, you need to learn Dutch, ya? I teach you. Say this one. Very

important: Neuken in de keuken.”

“Noykehn in de koykehn,” I muttered, feeling stupid. I took a hit off the joint and felt instantly less stupid. “What’s that mean?”

“Fuckin’ in the kitchen,” Schuyler said and laughed like a hyena.

“Sort of loses something in translation,” I said. “If you want something to rhyme... ‘Fuck in the truck.’”

We all burst out laughing at this, the dumbest conversation in the history of the spoken word.

“Schuyler, idiot. Teach him something he can use,” Bram said. “Noah, say, Ik moet mijn zonnebrils avond dragen.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said dryly.

“It means, I wear my sunglasses at night,” Bram said. “And you do, ja?”

“Ja,” I said, smiling softly as an old memory echoed faintly in my mind. “Like Bono.”

“Like Bono!” Schuyler screeched.

Everyone laughed so hard, I knew they had to be high as kites, and the vague disquiet I felt for my new ‘friends’ was relegated to background buzzing. We talked and laughed at nothing and made stupid jokes until I could no longer feel the sun on my face.

“Eh, Noah!” Schuyler said suddenly. “We’re off to get dinner and then... you’d say ‘clubbing.’”

“Have you ever been to a dance club in Amsterdam?” Ilsa asked. “You must come with us!”

“Yes!” Bram bellowed. “But which? Paradiso? Escape, or—”

“Escape,” I said immediately. “Escape.”

“Noah wants Escape,” Schuyler cried. “Let’s help him escape!”

Ilsa linked arms with me, and they led me out of the café on a cloud of pot, laughter, and maybe even a little bit of danger. I felt it, lurking just beneath the surface, but hadn’t the faculties or the energy to investigate. Over the last month, my instincts had become a fifth sense, drawing me away from situations—or dark alleys—I could feel but not see. But these four moved too fast, and I was caught up with them like a swimmer tossed by a wave—helpless to do more than tumble along until it let up. And God help me, the part of me that had craved danger, that had sought it like a drug, *enjoyed* this. The rush. The lightning that skimmed along my nerves was a million times more potent than the pot.

We scarfed down broodje sandwiches from a sidewalk café, and then the

gang took me to Club Escape in Bram's car. I thought it must have been much too early for a nightclub, but before the loud, pulsing music swamped me, my watch told me it was close to nine p.m.

"You have a talking watch?" Ilsa shouted in my ear. "Super cool!"

My sluggish and sound-drowned brain couldn't come up with a response, but it didn't matter anyway. Ilsa tried to drag me to the dance floor, but I refused. I was high but not so stoned out of my mind that I was about to dance in front of anyone.

I resisted the tug of her small but strong hands. "I wanna sit. Smoke."

The music was too loud, and the place was packed with bodies. Too many people. If there was a fire or some other emergency, I'd be done for.

That's just the pot making you paranoid. You're safe.

That didn't feel entirely true. Not by a long shot. But, fuck it all. I was tired of the routine, the regimen that I'd prescribed myself. I was going to go where the night took me and suffer the consequences later. My biggest threat, my stupid, cloudy mind reasoned, was keeping Ilsa's grabby hands off me without pissing her off.

"Where are you staying, Noah?" James asked.

"In the red-light district," Schuyler said. "All American tourists stay there. Get high. Get some girls, ja?"

"No. I'm at the Sir Albert."

A silence and then, "The Sir Albert? Ooh la la." Schuyler laughed. "Are you a prince? Noah, here, is American royalty. Prince Noah!"

"No, man. I wish. I'm just there for one night," I said, cursing my loose tongue.

New rule: Don't advertise you have money while being blind as a goddamn bat.

"I'm splurging for one night," I said again.

"Sure, sure," Schuyler snickered. "*Just for one night.*"

Inwardly, I cursed myself. I felt them assessing my leather jacket, my watch, my sunglasses—a designer brand Ava bought for me.

Prince Noah? asked the snide commentator who had taken up residence in my mind. *Prepare yourself, Highness. You're about to get royally fucked.*

I listened to them chat in Dutch—even James, the Brit, could speak it—and, sure enough, I could feel the air between us change. It grew colder somehow. Eventually, the gang decided it was time to bail, and I was hustled into Bram's car and wedged in the backseat between Ilsa and James.

“I think it’s time I called it a night,” I said.

“No, my man, we’re going to a party at my place,” Bram said from the driver seat. “Canal views,” he added with a dark laugh. “You will love.”

“I’m sure,” I muttered, trying to think how to get out of this predicament with all my body parts intact. But the pot had slowed me down, and Ilsa was all over me. She had turned sideways to press her breasts against my shoulder while her hand ventured up my leg.

I caught her wrist and held it. “I have a girlfriend,” I said harshly. “This is not going to happen.”

“What is *this*?” Ilsa whined and then laughed. “*This* is nothing but a little fun, ja? A fuck in the truck!”

“No.” I pitched my voice to the front of the car. “Bram. Pull over. I’ll get back on my own.”

He didn’t reply, and Ilsa had nothing more to say to me, apparently, but she had plenty to say in Dutch. The four of them talked all around me, and they weren’t laughing anymore.

You’re a fucking idiot, I told myself, but of course it was too late for that little revelation.

The car stopped, the engine cut out, and two doors opened: the front passenger and the left rear. Schuyler and James exited, leaving Bram behind the wheel and Ilsa beside me.

She straddled me at once and removed my sunglasses to run her hands through my hair. “Ooh, you’re so pretty, Prince Noah,” she cooed. Her hips undulated, grinding against me. “Let’s speak beautiful French together, and then you pay me, ja? For giving you such a good time.”

From the front seat, Bram lit a cigarette. James and Schuyler were outside the car somewhere, standing guard I supposed, wherever the hell we were.

I sighed.

My high had been blown away by the severity of this situation, but these four didn’t know that this wasn’t my first rodeo. I’d been mugged in Queens, after subway surfing, and again in Hell’s Kitchen, where Charlotte lost her violin. Moreover, this journey had worn me down to the quick. I was all out of fucks to give.

Ilsa’s hands were on the fly of my jeans, trying to work down the zipper. I grabbed both her wrists hard enough to make her yelp and tossed her off my lap. I heard her head hit the passenger window as I made a dash for the other door.

“Aiii! Bastard!”

She kicked at me while I fumbled the door open, keeping a tight grip on my cane.

“Bram! James! Hij mi pijn!”

I scrambled out of the cab, heard shuffling feet over concrete, and then a fist connected with my right eye socket. It felt like a sledgehammer and ten times stronger, since I couldn't see it coming. But my apathy of earlier was a weapon now. The pain seemed distant. Meaningless. I brought my cane up and felt it connect with someone's groin to satisfying effect. Schuyler, judging by the little weasel's pained squeak. Good.

I dodged a blow I felt coming and moved left to keep myself from being pinned between my new *friends* and the car. But Bram was on me before I could take a step.

“You touched Ilsa?” he asked, grabbing me and holding me by my jacket lapels.

“He did,” Ilsa shrieked. “His hands were all over me, and when I said he'd have to pay, he knocked my head!”

I couldn't imagine for whose benefit this little charade was for, but the ridiculousness of it made me laugh. “Fucking hell, I didn't mean to hurt you —”

“You think it's funny?” Ilsa's slap struck my cheek—a crashing cymbal of stinging pain that radiated up my face and left it burning.

“Oh, Ilsa.” I chuckled tiredly. “I knew you were a slapper.”

I don't remember much after that.

I put up a good fight, but I was outnumbered and out-sighted. I got a few good ones in on James and Schuyler, but Bram was a boulder rolling down a hill, and I was crushed underneath.

They took both wallets—thief bait and real—my watch, my damn *sunglasses*, my cane, and—worst of all—my bag that had my phone and all my lifelines. Thank God I'd had enough sense to leave my passport and some emergency cash in the hotel.

They left me, curled and bleeding, on a street somewhere. I heard the squeal of tires and then all was quiet. No other cars, near or far. The only sound was the buzz of some overhead streetlight. I smelled brackish water and my own blood, leaking from my nose, mouth, and chin.

For a long while, I just lay on the pavement, my head reeling, the ground spinning under me. I squeezed my eyes shut and felt my consciousness fade

in and out, like a bad radio signal.

“Just go out,” I muttered, and I finally did.

chapter forty-six



“Where to tonight?” Klaus asked as a bunch of us took a walk around Amsterdam the evening of our first day there. Our first cellist looked eager. “We have the whole night off and Amsterdam awaits.”

“Red-light district, *obviously*,” said Jason, waggling his brows.

“We should go to a club,” Annalie said. “Blow off some steam.”

I noticed she was looking at me with a scrutinizing eye. Over the last few weeks, she’d learned to read me like a book, and I was sinking. I trusted in Noah and believed in him, but it had been more than ten days since his last communication, and our separation was starting to wear on me. I could take it so long as there was something waiting at the end of it. Something good. But not hearing his voice reassure me that we were still on track was getting harder and harder.

“I don’t think clubbing is Charlotte’s thing,” Jason said dubiously. “Allow me to suggest, again, the red-light district—”

“I’ll go,” I said suddenly. “I’ll go to a club.”

The others were surprised, but I was so damn tired of being stressed all the time. I poured my feelings into the violin, but some nights I was afraid I’d break some strings on my Cuypers. I needed to cut loose and relax. Maybe things would look better in the morning.

“Great,” Klaus said. “I hear Paradiso is a good one. Or Escape?”

“Escape sounds pretty good to me,” I muttered, but Annalie was shaking her head.

“Escape is always too crowded,” she said. “I read that on Yelp.”

“You *Yelped* a nightclub?” I asked, suppressing a smile.

“You don’t?”

I laughed while Klaus clapped his hands together.

“Paradiso it is.”



If Paradiso was less crowded than Escape, no one put it on Yelp. The club was packed with wall-to-wall bodies dancing under strobe lights and pounding music.

“Shots!” Jason said as soon as we entered the madness. “Ladies, shots?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

Annalie gave me a look. “We have a performance tomorrow.”

“I know, but I’m not a soloist tomorrow and I need this. I need to just stop *thinking* so much.”

She studied me for a moment more, then nodded. “Very well. But I’ll be watching you.”

I smiled gratefully. “That is why I love you.”

She rolled her eyes and hmped which only made me love her more, but I kept it to myself.

Jason, being Jason, ordered four shots of Jägermeister.

“Ugh, this tastes as if someone mixed gasoline and cough syrup,” Klaus said, choking around a laugh.

I agreed, but the liquor burned warmly in my stomach. After a few seconds, it started to take effect.

“It’s perfect,” I said and slammed down my empty shot glass. “One more and then let’s dance.”

The rest of the evening was sort of a blur after that. I lost myself in the crowd, dancing with everyone and no one in particular, only stopping when Annalie dragged me to the bar for a glass of water. Jason slipped me another shot with a wink.

“My hero,” I said and clinked my glass to his.

Annalie narrowed her eyes. “Last one.”

I was going to make a crack about her being my jailer, but I appreciated her too much. And besides, I was definitely done. That last shot seemed to go to the center of the earth, tipping it on its axis. The floor canted under my feet, but I went back into the crowd, determined to dance, sweat, cry, or puke out my fears about Noah. I scanned the faces in the strobing lights, always with that same impossible hope that he would be among them. Of course, he wasn’t.

“He’s not here,” I said under the music where no one could hear me. Then louder. “He’s not *here*.”

“I am here,” said a friendly voice in my ear. A tall man, sweet face with large brown eyes, smiled down at me. “Want to dance?”

I was already dancing like a maniac, but the sudden recklessness took over.

“I sure do,” I said, and so me and the tall stranger danced.

The man bent to put his mouth near my ear. “What is your name?”

“Charlotte,” I said.

“I’m Henry,” he said.

I forced a smile, feeling terrible because to me he’d only ever be a guy who wasn’t Noah.

Someone jostled me from behind. I would’ve fallen, except for the guy/Henry/Not Noah, caught me. I fell against him, and his arms went around me lightly, holding me steady.

For the first time in a long time, I had the feel of a man’s body against mine, his touch, his scent, the pounding of a heart inside his chest...

Wrong, my heart cried. This is all wrong.

And suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. I pushed away from Henry and blindly staggered toward a back exit. I stumbled into a back alley, sucking in deep breaths, tears streaming down my face.

“Hey, are you all right?” Henry asked, joining me. His hand rested lightly on my back.

I shied away from his touch. “Don’t! No, I’m...sorry. I’m fine and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “What do you need? Some water? I can go—”

Annalie busted through the back door. I was grateful for Henry’s sake she didn’t have her crowbar.

“What is this?” she asked, her eyes blazing daggers at the poor guy.

He held up his hand. “I don’t know. She was fine, and then she wasn’t. I just wanted to make sure she’s okay.”

Hunched over, my hands on my knees, I shook my head. “He didn’t do anything wrong. It’s me. It’s just me and...I need to go home.” But home—New York and Noah—seemed so far away. “I need to go to the hotel.”

Annalie took me by the shoulders. “Let’s go.”



Back at the hotel, Annalie walked me to our room.

“Dammit,” she cursed, glancing around. “There’s no water. I’m going to get water. Don’t move.”

“No problem,” I said and face-planted on the bed. Instantly, I fell into a murky, restless sleep and dreamed of Noah.

I dreamed that he stood at the top of a high, rocky cliff. Below, an ocean churned blue waters, capped in white. Jagged rocks, like teeth, jutted from the surface, waiting to eat him alive.

I tried to scream at him to get back, but my voice had no sound. And there were others around him. Joking and laughing. Egging him on. Jonesy and Polly and that horrible Deacon.

I screamed again to stop, but it was too late. Noah began to jump, and instantly, the cliff morphed into a high-rise building in Amsterdam. I watched helplessly as he dove headfirst to the concrete below.

No!

I woke with a gasp and a pounding headache. I was damp with sweat, making my clothes from the night before stick to my skin. The room was empty, Annalie taking her usual early morning walk. I grabbed my phone and jabbed numbers.

“Hello, Charlotte?” Lucien answered. “Are you—”

“Where is he? Is he okay?” I demanded. “You have to tell me something. Anything.”

“Oh, my sweet girl, I’m so sorry. He’s fine, I assure you,” he added quickly, “but—”

“But what?”

“I have sworn to keep silent on Noah’s whereabouts. He is adamant about doing this on his own. To accommodate being a blind man in this world. No matter what it takes. He will push himself to the brink. I’m sure of it.

“I don’t want him at the brink,” I cried. “I just want him. I don’t care if he’s still struggling, I want to be there—”

“I understand, my child. But you know him. He is stubborn, and he is going to see this thing to the end.”

“What thing? What is he doing? Why won’t he talk to me?”

“He can’t,” Lucien said gravely.

“Why?”

“Because, Charlotte, hearing your voice would make Noah abandon everything he’s accomplished and go straight to you.”

I sat back, the fight draining out of me. “He would?” I asked, my voice breaking.

“Of course, my darling. He loves you more than anything in this world. That’s why he will not give up.” Lucien’s tone grew quieter. “He asks that you do the same.”

My eyes fell shut, tears leaking out from under them. “Okay, Lucien. I will.”

“Play my dear,” he said. “Play and let your heart sing. I promise you, it is not going unheard.”

chapter forty-seven



“Hey.”

A woman’s voice. A hand touched my shoulder gently.

“Hey. Ben je oke?”

I woke up fully and pain did too. All over my body. It took a moment to remember what had happened last night, and then the memories—sounds and remembered blows—hissed and prodded at me like a poltergeist.

I sat up slowly. “Where am I?”

“You are on the ground outside my work,” said the woman quietly. She sounded young—about my age—and smelled of shower soap and some earthy-smelling oil. “Were you hit in the head? Your eyes are a little unfocused.”

“I’m blind,” I muttered. “It’s not new.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” I reached for my watch to find the time, but my watch was gone. Everything was gone. I had no money, no phone. Nothing.

Yep. Royally fucked.

“Can I call someone for you?” the woman asked and helped me to stand.

“No. Uh...no, thanks.” I winced. Every part of my body hurt and yet, irony of ironies, no migraine. Go figure.

“You were robbed, yes?” the woman said. “You need the police. And a doctor.”

I waved my hands. “No police. No doctor. I just need to get back to my hotel. Somehow... Where am I again?”

“Outside A-9 Graphika? In Amsterdam Noord.”

From what I remembered, Amsterdam Noord was across the river from the city center and somewhat more industrial. Not as tourist friendly. I gingerly

touched a hand to my swollen lip.

You can say that again.

“You don’t happen to see a cane lying around, do you? Or a bag?”

“No. There is nothing like that.”

I nodded, realizing none of this mattered. Nothing mattered. My lifelines were lost. I was utterly done. I didn’t even bother sending Charlotte a mental apology.

“On second thought, would you mind calling me a cab?” I asked. “I have money at my hotel...”

“No, I have a car. I’ll drive you.” She shifted beside me. “My name is Marit, by the way.”

“Sorry, yeah, I’m Noah,” I said dully. “Thanks for the lift, but don’t you have to work?”

“Not yet. It’s not even six a.m. I always go in early. I have time.”

“Yeah, me too,” I muttered.

My journey was over. I had nothing but time.



Marit had a tiny car that I had to fold myself in half just to sit in, and she drove like a maniac. Or at least it felt like it to my aching face. We drove in silence, though I could practically feel the curiosity radiating off her.

Finally, she said, “You know, when I asked your name, I had the silly hope you’d say it was Matt Murdock.”

“Who?”

She laughed sheepishly. “Matt Murdock is the name of Daredevil. From the comic book?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Oh, it’s an awesome story. He’s blind, like you, but he fights crime in New York City.”

“How does he fight crime if he’s blind?”

“The radioactive chemicals that took his sight gave him super-enhanced senses.”

“Lucky him.”

“So, when I saw you sitting there, blind and all beat up, like after a tangle with the bad guys, my imagination immediately went to Daredevil.” She coughed. “Silly, I know. I just really love comic books. I’m a geek, as you

Americans would say.”

“Is that what you do at your work? Draw comics?” I didn’t particularly care, but talking to Marit took my mind off the night before and all the nights ahead.

“Oh, no. I’m a graphic artist but not for comics. I wish!”

I made a sound that would’ve passed for decent conversation among grunting pigs.

“You want to talk about what happened?” she asked after a minute.

“Not really.”

“Okay,” Marit said gently. “You don’t have to talk.”

“Thank you.” I leaned my head against the cool of the window. Amsterdam sped by on the other side of the glass, and on the other side of my impenetrable dark. Goddamn, but I was sick of it, and it was obvious that I’d never stop being sick of it. I would never be what Charlotte needed me to be.

A screech, and then the car came to a halt.

“We’re here,” Marit said. “I’ll park and walk you to your room.”

“You don’t have to.”

“You don’t have your cane. And your face... Um...”

I touched my bloodied nose. “It’s that bad, eh?”

“It’s not good.”

Marit led me to my suite, where I immediately went for the bed and lay back. My ribs ached, as did my stomach, as if I’d done a thousand crunches. I heard Marit rummage in the bathroom.

“You don’t have to stay,” I said.

“I know,” she called, “but I can’t leave, either. My mother tells me I’m the neatest of her children. My teachers too, in school. I always cleaned up the messes. And you are a mess.”

She pulled up a chair next to the bed. “This might sting.” I winced as she dabbed the cuts and bruises on my face. “Anything broken? Your nose is not. A miracle. How are your ribs?”

“They fucking hurt.”

“Take a deep breath.”

“Hurts more.”

“But no sudden, sharp pain?”

“No.”

“Good.” She dabbed a cut over my right eye. “Ha! I feel like Claire. She’s the nurse who patches Daredevil up after he gets in a brawl.”

“So this guy loses a lot of fights, eh?” I snorted. “Some hero.”

“He usually wins,” Marit said. “He just takes a beating first. It makes the victory all the sweeter.” I heard the chair she was sitting in creak, as if she sat back. “So, tell me, Noah,” she said in an overly cheery tone. “What brings you to Amsterdam?”

I barked a laugh, then groaned at my aching ribs. I gave in and told Marit an abridged version of why I was here.

“You know that’s crazy, right?” she said quietly.

“Was,” I corrected. “Was crazy. It’s over now. My lifelines are gone. I can’t navigate my way to the next city, let alone make it to Charlotte’s show tonight. I’m done.”

“Okay.” Marit’s hand touched my arm. “Who can we call?”

“Lucien Caron,” I said. “He’ll be worried. But I don’t have his number. It was in my phone.”

Marit asked me a dozen questions to help track down Lucien and then sat at the desk and made a dozen phone calls.

“Lucien Caron?” she said finally. “Hello. I am calling for Noah Lake? Yes. A moment.”

I made my way to the desk, and Marit sat me down in the chair that was still warm from her presence. She pressed the receiver into my hand. The anguish in Lucien’s voice was hard to listen to.

“Noah? Are you all right? You didn’t check in last night. I called your phone. I heard only obscenities and laughter, then nothing.”

“Sounds like you spoke to my good buddy, Schuyler,” I said and held my head in my hands, hunched over the desk.

“Charlotte called me, not an hour before that.”

My head shot up. “She called you? What did she say? How did she sound?”

“Sad, my boy. But I told her to hold on because I believe in this endeavor. But after what I heard on your phone...” Lucien’s voice tightened, and I heard him swallow. “Well, I was on the computer to buy a ticket and come find you. What happened?”

I told him, sparing him as much detail of last night’s events as I could.

“I’m so sorry, Noah. I shall book a flight for you this night. And a car to take you to the airport.”

I don’t know if it was Lucien’s voice, or hearing that it was over from another person, or knowing that Charlotte was in pain, but the numbness I’d

been feeling for the last few days started to fall away, piece by piece. My heart ached as if I'd been struck with a mallet. I pressed my lips together, the goddamn tears welling in my eyes at sudden, terrible pain.

"Noah? Are you still there, my boy?"

"I failed, Lucien," I breathed. "I can't keep my promise to Charlotte. Not because of fate or bad luck, but because I keep screwing up." My chest felt so tight, I had to gasp for a breath, to speak while keeping the dam from breaking. "I failed. I failed Charlotte... I failed *us*."

"You did better than anyone could have hoped. The journey itself was too difficult. The fact you made it this far is a miracle. You should be proud."

"Proud? I felt nothing, Lucien," I whispered. "I didn't care what happened to me. I was down so deep...just numb. But now..." I sucked a tremulous breath. "Now that I've fucked it all up, I care again. I care a lot. I don't want to quit."

"Don't," Marit said from beside me. "It's none of my business, I know, but...I can help. Let me help."

I raised my head, hope and possibilities struggling to come back to life. Then I shook my head. "No, you've done enough. I can't ask—"

"You're not asking, I'm offering."

I started to protest, but the overwhelming desire to not fail Charlotte was stronger than my despair. Was it possible I could continue? I'd already been to the brink of failure so many times, it felt like I lived there. I thought of the rest of the tour: Copenhagen, Warsaw, and Prague, then Germany, and finally Austria... Christ, could I make it through Poland or the Czech Republic where the language barrier would be even wider? Every disadvantage weighed a thousand pounds, and I was already so goddamn tired...

"Let me help. I'll take care of everything." Marit rested her hand on my arm and said gently, "If I were Charlotte, I wouldn't want you to miss it."

"God, I hope that's still true."

I won't give up, baby. I promise.

I mentally braced myself for the next few weeks and heaved a steadying breath. "Yeah. Okay. Thank you."

I told Lucien to wire money from my savings so Marit could get me a new phone, and to figure out how to send me new credit cards. He sounded dubious at first, but his desire for me to succeed was just as strong as mine.

"I shall do my best."

"Aren't you going to tell me to be more careful?" I asked dryly. "You

should. Clearly, I need to hear it again.”

“I am not in the habit of blaming victims for the crimes perpetrated against them...” I could hear Lucien smile slyly. “Though I would ask that you choose your friends a little more wisely.”

I listened to Marit bustle around behind me, laying my suit on the bed. “That, I can do. And Lucien?”

“Yes?”

“Tell Charlotte...” I didn’t know how to finish the sentence, but I didn’t have to.

“I will tell Charlotte you are safe so long as you call me each night—and I do mean every night—to tell me that’s still true.”

My throat tightened. “Deal.” I got off the phone with Lucien and swiveled in my chair. “You’re not going to get in trouble for missing work?”

“I never miss work. Ever. I go in early, stay late.” Marit’s voice quieted. “It might be nice to take a day off.”

“Good,” I said. “Then let me take you to dinner too. As a thank you.”

“You’re up for going out to dinner?”

“Rule #2: No holing up in hotels.”

“Okay, well...yes. Dinner would be nice,” she said, and I tracked her moving around the room to gather her purse and keys. “You need a shower—rather urgently—and then a nap. And I have errands to run. I’ll just...okay. Be back soon.”

The door shut and I was suddenly alone with my almost-failure. I had been at the edge—again—and had been hauled back from the fall.

“For the last fucking time,” I muttered as I stepped into the shower. The warm water seemed to wash last night off me, and I felt good. Better. Almost like myself.

How is that possible? You don’t know what ‘yourself’ is.

That was true. The accident had forever altered me. Smashed me up and rearranged all my parts so that I couldn’t sort them out. I was blind. That was the only truth I had, and it had become my identity more than my own name.

And that was a fucking terrible way to live.

I stood in the shower until the water ran cool. Cool like the rainwater I’d felt on Charlotte’s skin that night in New York City when I’d disappeared on her and she’d searched for me in a storm.

“You deserve more than what’s left of me.”

“There’s so much.”

Even then, Charlotte had seen what I couldn't. And right then, under the falling water that felt like rain, I allowed myself to think that maybe she was right.



Marit found an agency with services for the blind. She procured a new white cane and a pair of sunglasses while I napped. I was putting on my suit when she returned, and I heard her suck in a small breath.

“That is a very nice suit, Noah,” she said.

“Thank you, Marit,” I replied. “I’m sure you look very nice too.”

She made a noncommittal sound. “So, this is weird,” she said after a moment.

“What is?”

“Well...it’s not every day that girls like me meet men like you.”

“Blind bastards, lying in parking lots, bleeding all over themselves? Yeah, we’re a rare breed.”

She laughed, but it faded quickly. “Noah, before we go out in public together, I think you should know that I’m not really the type for dinners and concerts. I mean, while I was out, I went home and dressed up. And by ‘dressed up’ I mean I put on black pants instead of jeans and a shirt that doesn’t have a comic book character on it. I need to lose a few kilos, and I have piercings and tattoos all up my arms—”

I stopped and looked toward her. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just...fair warning.”

“Well, thanks for the *warning*,” I said lightly, “but I don’t even know what a kilo is.”

“I just mean, we look about as mismatched as can be, you and I, and I think it’s only fair that you know that. I know this is not a date,” she added seriously. “I’m not putting that pressure on you. You love Charlotte, and I’m not going to sit around wondering why you didn’t call me tomorrow. But you are...very handsome, Noah. And kind. And it’s not every day that a girl like me meets a man who is both and spends the day with him. It’s a little...strange. I’m afraid I’m going to embarrass myself.”

“First of all, Marit, you didn’t *meet* me,” I said, my neck craned to tie my tie. “You found me left for dead in a parking lot. If one of us is going to be

embarrassed in this little scenario, it sure as hell isn't going to be you."

She scoffed a laugh. "Well, since you put it that way..."

"Secondly, you saved my ass this morning. You saved my entire trip. I don't know how to repay you but to buy you dinner and take you to listen to Charlotte. And even that is more of a favor to me. I've been to sixteen concerts in the last month, alone. It'd be nice to share her talent with someone...to have someone appreciate her a little, like I do."

"That sounds lovely," Marit said, and I could hear her smile.

"So...we're good?"

"We're good," she agreed, and I knew that was the truth.

"Is it straight?" I asked, indicating my tie.

"No." She approached, and her fingers tugged and straightened. The earthy smell of whatever oil or perfume she wore was strong but not unpleasant. "There. Come on, Noah Lake. Let's go before we're late to your date with Charlotte."

I reached out and she put the crook of her arm to my fingers. There was more of her to hold, but so fucking what? Marit was an angel of mercy, and she was beautiful.

And it didn't matter what she looked like, anyway. She could have been as gorgeous as Valentina in real life, but she'd never get any closer to my heart. Charlotte owned that particular piece of me. Hell, she owned all of me, heart and soul, but thanks to Marit, instead of heading to the airport in defeat, I was back on that long, dark road to where Charlotte was waiting. Saint Marit, that's what she was and always would be.



We arrived at the Koninklijk Theater Carré and took our seats in the corner, uppermost row.

"My nose is bleeding," Marit joked. "This is where you always sit? So far away?"

I smirked. "I'm not here for the view. And I can't let Charlotte see me."

"Well, I'm going to get a pair of those fancy glasses so I can see *her*. The violin players are all bunched together. What does she look like?"

"Do you have a program?"

"Yes."

"If she's doing a solo tonight, you'll see her," I said and wished I could

borrow Marit's eyes just for the night.

"She's playing the andante to Mozart's Sonata in A for piano and violin." Marit shifted toward me. "Is that a good one?"

I smiled. "You'll see."

The concert began and we didn't speak again until Charlotte took the stage. Then Marit grabbed my arm. "Oh, Noah," she whispered. "She is so very beautiful. I can see from here. She glows."

I nodded and clenched my jaw, thankful I had new sunglasses to conceal my eyes. But when Charlotte began to play, I couldn't hold it back. How close had I come to ruining this? Her music was so achingly beautiful, her talent so rich and vibrant. I felt Marit clutching my arm, sniffing now and then, and the ice in me that had begun to crack back at the hotel shattered completely.

I grabbed for Marit's hand and squeezed, my other hand holding my head as I bent over, wracked by sobs I tried my best to keep quiet. I broke open, broke apart, and let all the rage and pain and bitterness go. It was too hard to hold on to, and I couldn't do it anymore. I thought I was holding on to my old life, but there wasn't anything left of it. Only ugly residue, and that, I finally realized, wasn't worth holding on to.

Everything I thought I knew about what it meant to be a man was stripped away. What remained was what it meant to be a man who loved a woman as much as I did. To be a human being experiencing this life in all its ugliness, its beauty, its pain and hate; good and evil; love and death.

So yeah, I sobbed like a goddamn baby, but I'd never felt more like myself—whatever that was or whatever it was going to be—than at that moment.



After, Marit took me back to the hotel. I tried to get her phone number or email to keep in touch, but she refused.

"You're like a UFO sighting," she said. "You crash-landed at my work, and we had an adventure, but now you have to go back." She laughed shyly. "I could tell people what happened, but no one would believe me."

I gripped my new white cane and felt the reassuring weight of my new phone in my pocket. "Thank you, Marit. I can't say that enough."

"So...remember when I told you it was crazy, what you were doing?"

"Change your mind?"

“No,” she laughed. “But it’s kind of heroic, Noah. I don’t think you see it that way, but maybe you should.”

I smiled. “I think you read too many comic books.”

“Probably,” she said, and I could hear her voice retreating down the hall. “But I love them because, in the end, the hero always gets the girl.”



Through the next few cities, I noticed the change. Copenhagen, Warsaw, Prague... None of it was easy. Not one minute. But the frustrations didn’t weigh me down until they buried me. I got pissed now and then, but the anger didn’t consume me. I let the experiences in, and I took the best of them with me, discarding the rest and starting over fresh with each new day. I talked to people now. I chatted, laughed; had lunches and coffee.

In Prague, a young Swiss couple on their honeymoon walked with me across the Charles Bridge, describing the city’s beauty in both French and English, with the hopes I would see it even more clearly in two languages.

In Warsaw, a little old lady helped *me* cross the street and then took me to her flat for borscht and bread. I spoke not a word of Polish and she not a word of English, but she gabbled at me the whole time. When it came time for me to leave, she kissed me goodbye on both cheeks, and I felt my chest tighten. Apparently, I’d become a huge sap, and I was glad Ava wasn’t there to see me blink my eyes dry or I’d never have heard the end of it.

In Berlin, I asked the concierge at my hotel for a quiet place I could stroll away from the crowds, and he rattled off a list of famous landmarks.

“Wait, say that last one again,” I said.

“Charlottenburg Palace?”

I grinned like an idiot. “Yes, there. I’ll give that one a try.”



The tour was weeks away from ending, but I felt peace swell in my heart, washing away all the bitterness and anger. Still, I didn’t think about meeting Charlotte until the end, in Vienna. I had to make sure this peace wasn’t transitory, that I wouldn’t wake up one morning and feel as angry as I had in Rome, or panicked as in Barcelona, or the horrific nothing of Amsterdam.

I never did.

I managed everything instead of fighting it, and while it was still

incredibly difficult and stressful, I knew I was going to make it.

And then I woke one morning to feel the sunrise streaming through my Munich hotel room. I felt the gold and orange of the sun on my skin. A new day. The tour moved on to Salzburg today and then to Vienna to wrap it up. But I couldn't wait anymore. I didn't need to. The time had come. Tonight, in Salzburg, I would attend Charlotte's show and then after...

I closed my eyes and smiled while the sun warmed my face, rising high and dispelling the night for good.

chapter forty-eight



The tour moved on through Eastern Europe. I felt like I'd had a reset. What Lucien had said soothed me enough to keep going. Whatever Noah was doing had to be infinitely harder than playing music in the most beautiful concert halls in the world.

"Trust," I said, breathing it out like a prayer.

In early August, our violin soloist, Gian Medeiros, got drunk in Munich, fell off the back of a park bench and broke his wrist. We were set to return to Austria the next night, to Salzburg, and perform an entirely Mozart series in honor of his birthplace.

Sabina gathered us together in the Munich Central Station while we waited for our train, and she, along with our conductor, told us that Gian was out for the rest of the tour. Sabina picked me out of the crowd and said, "Charlotte. You will be our soloist for the Concerto, No. 5."

The orchestra, which had become like a second family to me, filled the station with cheers and applause while I sat on the floor, stunned. Joy warred with a deep, deep sorrow that my moment had come and neither my parents nor Noah would be there to hear it.

Our train arrived in Salzburg that morning. Rain splattered the narrow, cobbled streets of the tiny town. Annalie and I perused the shops, many of which sold some sort of Mozart-related kitsch to remind us this was where legend had been born. And every store carried the Mozartkugel chocolate confection in their little red and white tins.

We ate lunch at a charming bistro under the shadow of Hohensalzburg Fortress that sat above the city. The sky looked leaden, and a chill wind whistled through the narrow streets, making me shiver.

"Nervous?" Annalie asked me as we walked back to the hotel.

“No,” I said and smiled ruefully. “Bet you can’t guess who I’m thinking about.”

She slung her arm around my shoulders but didn’t try to cheer me up with empty words. Throughout this tour, she’d become a best friend. Not replacing Melanie—no one could do that. Annalie didn’t need a title. I just added her to the list of people in my life I wanted to know forever.



That night, I wore a black velvet dress with spaghetti straps to allow for arm movement (but a modest neckline), that had sheer black tulle from the knees down. A soloist must stand out from the crowd, so I wore glittering earrings and pulled my hair into a twist to keep it away from my violin.

“Very beautiful,” Annalie told me as I studied myself in the mirror. “Shall I take picture? For your Noah?”

I mustered a smile. She didn’t know Noah was blind because it had never occurred to me—in all these weeks—to tell her.

Because his blindness is only one small part of the man I love.

And I realized then, Noah was seeking that for himself, to define himself apart from his disability. And if he could do that, then maybe it wouldn’t feel like a disability at all.

Oh, my love, I thought. I understand. I really do...



After the short train ride from Munich that morning, I made my way to my Salzburg hotel, shaved, took a shower, dressed. I ordered room service and ate it leisurely, sipping the best coffee I’d ever tasted. I brushed my teeth, gathered my things, and headed out.

The GPS on the new phone Marit found for me in Amsterdam told me where I could buy a new suit. I was sick of the two I’d been wearing all summer. I wanted something new and sharp for Charlotte. Light gray with a vest because I knew she liked vests on me. I let the saleswoman choose the tie. Plum purple, she said, and I thought Charlotte would like that too.

I had the suit sent to the hotel and then continued strolling. Lunch was at a cozy little bistro, also a short walk away. The Salzburg's downtown district was very small. The worry that I might bump into Charlotte flared up, but then I remembered that was perfectly okay. If I didn't find her today, then tonight.

I'm going to be with Charlotte tonight.

Before I headed over to her concert, I bought her flowers at a nearby boutique. A dozen red roses. The clerk put them in my hand, and my not-unpleasant anxiety ratcheted up a notch. Every minute that passed brought me closer to her. The thought made my heart clang madly; anticipation shivered over my skin. In a fit of extreme wishful thinking—or maybe cautious foresight—I tucked a small handful of condoms into my jacket pocket at the last minute.

Hey, you never know.

Lucien called me while I was in the cab on the way to the concert venue.

"Noah, the most astounding news," he said excitedly. "I wandered onto the Vienna Touring Orchestra's webpage. Their show tonight features Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5. Our girl is going to be the soloist."

A laugh gusted out of me, a bubble of happiness, bursting. "Should I tell her you said hello? I'm going to be with her tonight, Lucien. It's done."

"Oh, my dear boy. Is it true?"

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm really fucking good."

Lucien took a moment to compose himself. "I'm so happy for you, Noah. Truly. And for her. And proud of you both."

I cleared my throat and tried to sound cavalier. "Yeah, well here's hoping she doesn't hate my guts."

"It is not possible for Charlotte to hate. She hasn't the capacity."

That was true. My Charlotte was too full of love. But did she have any left for me? Or had the time apart changed her so that she wasn't the same girl. What if we weren't the same together?

Did you wait for me, baby?

At the Mozarteum Concert Hall, my seat was still in the back row, corner. I gave the usher a ten Euro note, the bouquet of roses, and instructions to give it to the soloist after the show.

I clenched the armrests of the chair until my knuckles ached. The program began and Charlotte took the stage; the crowd offered her polite applause. They didn't know her or what she was capable of. Until she began to play.

I listened to her sing with the violin I'd sold my Camaro to buy for her. Had I once thought that a sacrifice? Damn, I'd give it again. I'd give more. Everything. Every breath. Every beat of my heart was for her.

And she gave everything to us, her enraptured audience. I could feel it—the sense of awe around me that said we were experiencing the beginning of something extraordinary.

When it ended, I got up from my seat with the vague idea to make my way down to her, but when I rose, the audience rose too. A thunderous ovation filled the hall. I laid my hand over my chest, feeling it reverberate in my heart.

Soak it in, baby. This is all for you.

I had to let her have the moment. If she were angry or upset with me, my sudden appearance would only ruin it. I made my way up and out, to get some air and regroup. I would go back in once the crowd had gone and find her.

And pray she wants to be found.



The Mozarteum was small but elegant, with dozens of chandeliers hanging from gilded ceilings. A massive pipe organ made up the rear wall and we took our places before it. Or, at least my fellow musicians did. I was now to wait off stage until our conductor, Isaak Steckert, introduced me to the audience. I stared at the playbill with my name on it and tears threatened again.

I'll have to send this to my parents. And Melanie. They'll be so proud.

The concert hall filled up with semi-formally dressed patrons. I peeked from behind the curtain to inspect the faces in the audience as I had every night. I looked for the tall handsome man who wore sunglasses indoors and who carried a white cane to find his seat, but he was never there. And he wasn't there that night either.

The house lights dimmed, stragglers took their seats, and then Herr Steckert took the podium to great applause. Sabina appeared behind me.

"They don't know me," I whispered.

She put her hands on my shoulders. “Pain. Hope. Fire. Love. You play with these tonight, Charlotte Conroy, and they will remember you forever.”

Herr Steckert gestured to me, and I strode onto the stage to polite, reserved applause. Isaak kissed my cheek and whispered, “Break your leg.”

I stifled a laugh and felt a bit better. I took my place, standing before the strings, just as that violinist I had seen on TV when I was a child had done. I was fulfilling my dream, and no one I loved was there to see it.

I decided, as the first strains began behind and around me, that I’d play for all of them, no matter where they were in the world or if they’d left it. I’d let my love for everyone in my life and everyone I’d lost fill me until I had no choice but to channel it from my violin.

I don’t recall any one individual moment. It was all a fantastic dream, an out-of-body experience that I felt as pure emotion. I played Mozart’s music in the city in which he was born with an instrument that itself carried time and history in its grain.

And when it was over, the applause was not reserved or polite but thunderous and came after a short silence in which I could almost hear every audience member catch their breath.

I lowered my violin and let the sound wash over me, saw the beaming faces in the audience smile up at me, and I was astounded and humbled to have created this reaction.

An usher approached with an armful of red roses. He reached up to hand them to me, and the crowd exploded again. I turned to Sabina, thinking they must be from her, or Isaak, or even the rest of the string section. But the usher pointed toward the audience and then I knew.

He’s here.

The applause was still going as I scanned the crowd feverishly, searching for the one face I wanted to see more than any other... And then my heart dropped to my knees, and a gasp escaped me.

Noah Lake stood toward the very back of the house, his white cane in one hand, his other laid over his heart as if it pained him. He wasn’t wearing his glasses and even from the distance between us, I could see the small, aching smile that graced his lips.

And then he turned and walked, alone, up the aisle and out of the hall.

“Noah!” I cried. “*Noah!*” But the applause was only just now starting to die down. I had my hands full. I put the roses on the floor and handed my Cuypers to a surprised Isaak.

“Come here, come here, come here,” I said, waving frantically at the usher in a distinctly inelegant show of arm flapping. The usher helped me down from the stage and I gathered my dress up and tore through the hall, past the applauding crowd.

I reached the near-empty lobby and swept my gaze all around. “Noah!”
No sign.

I raced outside, to a dark and chilly night. The fortress on the hill loomed above the city. I scanned the streets in both directions, searching the faces of the pedestrians strolling under the lamps.

“Noah!”

“Hey, babe.”

I spun around. He leaned against the wall, hands propped on his cane, looking devastating in a light gray suit, vest, and plum-colored tie. A small, tremulous smile graced his lips.

“I’m going to fly at you,” I warned him.

“God, yes,” he said, and I did.

chapter forty-nine



Her body collided with mine, and I caught her up in my arms and lifted her off the ground, holding her so tightly, breathing her in. Oh Christ, my Charlotte. I had imagined this moment a thousand times, but nothing could prepare me for what it felt like to hold her or to listen to her gentle, aching cries as she held me.

She was just as beautiful as I'd remembered. Beautiful in my arms and under my hands and in the fierce beating of her heart pressed to mine.

I loosened my hold on her enough to let her feet touch the ground and then kissed her eyes, her nose, her tear-streaked cheeks, inhaling her and tasting her, until our mouths met in a kiss that seeped into every part of me. I kissed her with everything that I had, thinking the pain of our separation and the hardship of my journey here would rush up to swamp me, but I felt nothing but sheer joy.

And love. Above all, love.

"God, baby," I said brokenly against her cheek.

"I know," she cried softly. "I know, I know..."

We remained there a long time. I held her and she held me, until the concert audience let out and parted around us, and we finally let the real world back in. And with it, the close proximity of our bodies awoke another need in us.

She took us to a hotel a block away. It felt small, smelled old. Historic. Much too historic for our purposes.

"You'll have to pay," Charlotte said at the front desk. "I have nothing. I jumped off the stage to find you before you disappeared again."

"*You jumped off the stage?*" I didn't wait for an answer but tossed my credit card onto the desk and swept Charlotte into my arms again to kiss her

hard, my tongue sweeping every corner of her mouth, wanting to taste all of her *right now*. I missed her to the depths of my soul, but my body had missed her too. Badly.

Up one flight of creaky stairs, a key in a door, and then all I knew was Charlotte. Her skin, her hair, her body pressed to me, the scent of her...all of it, *mine*.

Her hands around my neck pulled me down to kiss her, and the second our mouths met, I literally stumbled at the lust and longing that swept through me. I groaned and kissed Charlotte so hard I feared I'd cut her with my teeth, but she was just as rough. I felt the want in her even before her hands tore at my belt.

"Wait, wait," I breathed. "When I tell you where I've been, what I've been doing, you might not like it," I said, slipping the words out between kisses. My God, she smelled so good, tasted so good. "You may be angry. You may hate me."

"Did you murder someone?" she asked, pushing my jacket off my shoulders.

"No," I breathed and kissed her again, groaning because, Jesus, her hands felt like they were everywhere.

She tore at my vest; buttons popped and clattered to the floor. "Did you cheat on me?"

Charlotte was being playful, but the mere thought of it punched me in the gut like a fist. "Fuck no."

"Then I'll take my chances."

She pulled me close, and I could feel her smile on my lips before we kissed again, ravishing each other's mouths.

"Do you want to go slow?" I asked. My thoughts were breaking apart into nonsense under the onslaught of her touch, but I had to make sure this felt right and good for her. "Charlotte...I love you. I love you but I want you. Hard. Tell me this is okay."

"I want you too. I've *needed* you...so badly," she breathed. "It's okay. It's more than okay." She jerked to a sudden stop with a little cry. "But oh...God, we have nothing..."

"Left jacket pocket," I said.

"You're kidding," she laughed breathlessly, *relieved*.

"What can I say? I'm a fucking boy scout."

She left me to dig out a condom from my jacket, and then we took up right

where we'd left off—a flurry of hard, aching kisses and touches against the wall of that little hotel.

Christ, I still couldn't believe this was real. After so long, not just apart, but suffering for want of her. She strained to meet my mouth with hers so she could kiss me the way only Charlotte could kiss me. I felt her hot little gust of breath first, so sweet, and then her open mouth brushed mine, her tongue flicking and then retreating. I grabbed her hips and thrust her close to me, craning down for more, but she moved back, just out of reach, and then I felt her teeth capture my lower lip. She sucked it, ran the tip of her tongue along it, then let go.

That kiss. I lost my damned mind with that kiss.

I wanted to tear the dress off of her, but she had nothing else to wear. I hauled it up over her hips instead and wrapped an arm around her waist underneath. She was wearing a thong; I could feel the bare flesh under my hand and groaned. I felt for the delicate piece of material at her hip and tore it apart.

“Yes,” Charlotte breathed against my neck, rolling the condom down. “Please, Noah...”

I lifted her legs, and she wrapped them around my hips. “Tightly, baby.”

Her legs squeezed, holding on, holding her up, drawing me to her. Her nails dug into my skin at the back of my neck. Her mouth was as hot and soft and wet as her body as I slid inside her.

My girl. My love. My Charlotte.

We rocked against each other so that I thought the little old hotel might come crashing down around our ears, but even more than the ecstasy of lust, the love I had for her spurred me. It drove me deep inside her, to make her mine—not as a possession but as a completion of me.

My life. She is my life.

“Noah,” she breathed, then screamed, clinging to me as if she'd never let me go.

Thoughts scattered, leaving nothing but sensation. In my dark world, there was softness, heat, broken cries and gasps, and her skin, her hands, her mouth, and the sweet tightness of her body, and the pleasure and love that bound us together, all of it rising to a crescendo and then crashing hard.

The first raging need satiated, I lowered her feet to the floor. Our biting touches dissolved into sweet, deep kisses; a mellowing of the passion into something long and slow and languid. I kissed her so thoroughly, I forgot to

breathe. I had my Charlotte back, and at that moment, I needed nothing else in the world.

Not one damn thing.

chapter fifty



After the throes of ecstasy faded, we got naked and climbed into bed. Face to face. Entwined. I ran my fingers through the silken hair at the back of Noah's head. I felt the ridged scars there, but what were they but testaments to what he'd survived? I loved touching them for that reason alone.

He ran his hands along my shoulders and arms, my cheeks and lips, my neck and breasts, looking at me by touch.

"You were amazing on that stage tonight," Noah said, stroking my cheek. "I've never heard anything so incredible in my life."

"Did you fly in to hear me? How long have you been in Salzburg?"

"I've been in Europe since July."

My head shot up. "*July?* That was nearly a month and a half ago! What have you been doing?"

"Listening to you, Charlotte."

"I don't understand. You followed the tour?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I told you that I needed to make myself worthy of you. I needed to be self-sufficient and learn how to live blind. So that's what I set out to do."

"How?"

He settled himself against the pillows. "Lucien arranged my flights and set me up with hotels in every city, but that was the extent of his help. I took off and did the rest, making my way from city to city, by bus or train, then finding my way to the hotel, then from the hotel to whichever venue you were performing in."

I searched his face. He sounded different. Peaceful, in some intangible way I couldn't quite put my finger on. "I can't believe it. I can't imagine how

difficult that must have been for you, in foreign cities? With language barriers and different customs and...”

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Harder than PT. But I did it, and I never missed a single performance of yours. Not one.”

My jaw worked soundlessly until one question of hundreds fell out. “But I don’t understand. You’ve been in Europe for six weeks and you haven’t tried to find me until tonight?” My joy at seeing him was morphing into confusion. “I’ve been missing you so much and you’ve been here the whole time.”

His arms around me tightened. “I couldn’t tell you, though God knows I wanted to. Hearing you play—even when you were one violin out of a dozen, I swear I could still hear you. It was the best torture.”

I turned on the pillow to look up at the ceiling. “I don’t know what to feel, Noah. Happy? I am happy, so happy to see you, I feel like I’m glowing. But you were so close. All this time, you were right there in front of me, in the audience, and I never knew it. Is that fair? That you knew where I was and what I was doing and I didn’t?”

“I wrote to you so that you wouldn’t worry,” he said. “It was all I could think to do, to try to make it easier on you. Just knowing you were in the same room was torture. But talking to you would break me. I’d have quit instantly.” He shook his head. “It was exhausting, doing this. I just got so tired. So many times, I wanted to give up and ask someone to point me in your direction. Even if you were still on the goddamn stage, I wanted to storm it and grab you and kiss you in front of everyone and never let you go.”

Despite the anguish for me, that inexplicable contentment behind his eyes never wavered.

“But that would have been selfish. It would have been me ruining your performances because I couldn’t stand my struggle anymore. And I had to struggle. I had to keep going, through every frustrating setback, through every wrong turn, every missed bus or train, every stranger I had to ask for help, until I found you. And when I did, I had to sit and listen to you play and know that the concert would end, and I’d have to make my way to the hotel alone, in another strange city, and start all over again the next day and the next, until I knew that I was ready. Until I could do it without rage and bitterness eating me up inside. I had to do this, Charlotte, until I stopped fighting it. Until I just...let go. And I did it for you. And me. And for us.” He shifted, his brows drawn. “Can you forgive me?”

“We’re in bed together, so...” I sniffled a short laugh, then the tears

threatened again. “I just missed you so much. My heart ached, my *bones* ached...”

“I missed you too, baby,” Noah said. “And believe me, I never stopped thinking of how you must feel. But it would have hurt you worse, in the long run, had we kept going as I was. I know this, Charlotte, with the same certainty as I know my own name.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “If it means that we’re together now, then I’m glad you did it. If it brought you peace, then yes, of course I forgive you. Maybe there isn’t anything to forgive anyway.”

“There is. But it’s the last thing I’ll ever ask of you. Thank you, Charlotte. For waiting.”

He kissed me softly and sweetly, but when we pulled away, his eyes swept over me with such a strange, heartbreaking longing.

I stroked his cheek. “What is it?”

“A last wish I’m afraid won’t ever fade. I’ve made peace with my blindness, but if I could see just once more—just one thing in this world—it would be you. I would only need a second. One second, and I would hold the image of you in my heart forever.”

I kissed him softly, basking in the love between us. I marveled that he was here with me after what felt like years apart, saying these things to me—things I knew he’d never say to anyone else. Only I ever saw this gentle side of him. My joy defeated every lingering shred of regret, and I thought I knew a way I might be able to grant him his wish.

“You don’t need to see what I look like, looking at you. I can show you what you do to me, Noah. I’ll show you...”

Still lying and facing each other, I slipped my fingers into his silken hair at the base of his neck, holding him close. With my other, I took his hand and put his fingertips to my lips.

“Can you feel my breath? How uneven and fluttery it is?”

He nodded, and his eyes sought mine, missing, as they always did, but not empty, oh no. His beautiful hazel eyes were full of thoughts. I loved how they came so close to finding mine but missed, because that was him. That was who he was, and I loved him with every particle that was me.

“You steal my breath away, Noah, and what you’re feeling is me, trying to catch it back. But I never can. Not when you’re this close to me.”

Noah swallowed; I watched his Adam’s apple bob. I resisted the overwhelming urge to kiss him and moved just far enough to keep talking,

our mouths brushing as I spoke.

I moved his hand lower, to my chest, over my heart. “Do you feel my heart pounding? Can you feel how it slams against my ribs? It does that constantly. Whenever you walk into a room, or when I see you, or hear your voice. It crashes so hard I’m afraid...” My voice tapered to a whisper. “I’m afraid it’s going to break.”

“Charlotte...”

I moved his hand lower, to my stomach. “Butterflies fluttering. Can you feel them? It’s the most pleasant anxiety...trying to navigate being with you, wondering if we might touch or kiss or argue, or just sit and talk. Either way, no matter what, when I’m with you, they’re there too.”

He nodded, his expression pained but full of longing too.

“I love you, Noah. With my heart and my soul and this body. With every part of me. I love you so much you don’t have to see it. You can feel it.” I swallowed hard and moved his hand lower and pressed his long fingers between my legs. “Do you feel it?” I breathed, brushed my lips against his. “Do you feel what you do to me?”

“Yes,” he hissed. “God, yes.” He sought to kiss me, and I gave him only a little taste, then pulled away again.

I pushed him onto his back and sat up, straddled him, and his hands clutched my hips, holding me still as his breath came in harsh gasps, drawing the lines of his muscles in even sharper definition.

I took him in hand and stroked him gently, but he was hard and ready again. Slowly, I guided him, watched my body take all of him. A little whimper of want escaped me at the exquisite pressure of him inside me.

Noah groaned, tilting his head back in the purest expression of ecstasy I’d ever seen, and gripped me hard, his fingers digging into my flesh. I rolled my hips slowly, torturously slowly, and bent over him. I brushed my lips against his with feather-light licks until he uttered a feral growl of frustration. He tangled one fist in my hair and crushed my mouth to his, and I felt a surge of heat race through me at the rawness of his kiss.

When he broke for air, I sat up, my hands on his chest, my back arched, taking him in and out of me in deliberate, languid movements until he obliterated my slow pace with his own bucking hips. Then I writhed. I lost myself, and when Noah sat up, I immediately moved to wrap my legs around his waist.

I’d never been this close to another man. His skin was flush with mine;

there was no air, no space between us. I was bound to him in every way as we moved in tandem that was at once rough and lustful and yet more intimate and tender than anything I could have imagined.

His hands clutched me, lifted me onto his thrusts. I rolled my hips forward each time, taking him so deep inside me I wanted to cry.

When my climax came, it ripped through me until I was nearly dizzy. I heard my voice scream his name and then I fell against him, my head on his shoulder, ecstasy crashing over me and through me and leaving me drained.

But his need was still burning hot, and he took my face in his hands and kissed me as if I had drowned and needed resuscitating. And it worked because his tongue in my mouth, demanding and desperate, started everything over again. I became as hungry for him as I had been moments before.

I kissed him back, tilting my head to deepen that kiss, savoring the taste of him as he bucked beneath me, thrusting up as I came down. But it wasn't enough. He wrapped his arms around me and rolled me onto my back, and I cried out at the beautiful sensation of him sliding even deeper into me than I'd thought possible.

Like this, he let go, his gorgeous body pistoning against mine, so perfectly rough and hard. My body was still throbbing from before, and the pleasure began to build in me all over again.

"Are you close?" Noah managed. "Yes, I can feel that you are. You're right there..."

I couldn't speak because he was right. Another orgasm rocketed through me a split second later, and he groaned as if it were his release. It was what he'd been waiting for; he'd held back for me and now had let go, shuddering against me as his own climax surged through him and left him heavy and sated.

"I don't ever want to be apart again," I said, even before we'd caught our breath.

He shook his head. "I don't either. But if we were, I know I'd find my way back to you. Always."

And I knew then why he'd left. To make his words true. To create a partnership between us where there was nothing left in our way.

Love, real love, wasn't empty, grasping hands or lies that felt like truths. And it wasn't perfect or neat or always easy. It was a rising sun on a new day.

It was endless possibility.

epilogue one



November 1, 2015

My birthday. Charlotte leads me up the winding, leaf-choked path, the same that I walked alone four years ago. My hand is on her arm, but she walks slowly. It's dark for her. Not yet dawn. I can feel her muscles tense under my fingers. She's nervous in these strange surroundings, but she doesn't stop. She's brave, my Charlotte.

We walk to the peak, and I feel the open air. It's hot and sticky, even though the sun has yet to rise. But it will, and she will be ready when it does.

I sit on the stony ground, my knees drawn up, while Charlotte crouches beside me. I hear the *click* of her violin case and my chest tightens in anticipation.

And love.

God, I love her. I love Charlotte with every fiber of my being. I love her so much that the thought of going one more day without asking her to be my wife seems ridiculous; there's a small box tucked into my luggage back at the hotel. I know we're young, but as a wise man once told me, certainty is its own kind of peace. And I can ask her now because the anger and hate and raging sense of injustice have all been laid to rest. They will never rise up again to hurt her. I did what I set out to do and made myself someone who could be her partner in all things. I've left all the bitterness behind.

My life is very different from the one I'd led before. When I was first told that I would be blind forever, my mind concocted a list of things I would never see or do again. Now, I see beauty in other ways: I hear it in Charlotte's laugh, her voice, her music. I smell it in a burned match, in ground coffee, at a barbecue at her parents' house or mine. I feel it when I touch Charlotte, when I hold her and make love to her; when I dance with

her, her head tucked under my chin, so perfectly...

I feel it in the Braille I'm painstakingly learning as I type my book, my *memoir*. Is there a more pretentious word? I doubt it, but that's what it is. A memoir of my accident and everything that's come after. Of struggling across Europe on my own and of traveling the world with Charlotte as she plays to sold-out houses in gilded concert halls. Of our life together that is fuller and richer than anything I'd known before the accident.

Yuri wants my book, and I may give it to him, but right now I don't care. It doesn't even have a title yet, but it has a dedication. To Charlotte. Of course, to Charlotte. Without her, I'm hunched in a musty room, listening to *other* people's books and dying a little bit inside every day. I'd like to believe I might have found my own way out of that pain and grief, but I don't want to think about it. I don't need to. I don't have to curse and scream and shake my angry fist at the big empty sky. Not anymore.

I have found my hope, my gradations of darkness. I don't jump out of airplanes anymore, but I still fly. I feel the rush of adrenaline through my veins when my love for Charlotte overwhelms me. And I feel it now as she touches my hand.

"It's almost time. Are you ready?"

I nod. I close my eyes, waiting, and with a small intake of breath, Charlotte begins to play.

Her violin sings a low but intense note, and she holds it, makes it simmer. In the black backdrop of my universe comes a faint glow, like an ember that shimmers on the cusp of a horizon. Her note rises, a soft vibrato, then holds again, and I see the light spread. I see it.

Charlotte's violin paints the slow spill of light over the green forest, burnishing it with copper. I see the white, winding river coiling below, glowing where the light touches it. I see ruins revealed as the light creeps over them. Her violin holds a smooth, low note and then it bursts—her bow flurries over the strings—and I see the sun break free in a corona of fiery red and glowing yellow. My chest tightens and my heart aches with a pain so deep I can hardly breathe.

Charlotte plays the dawn, every rising note a brush stroke over a living painting. The notes flare and explode like fireworks around me, a riot of sound and light, and I feel tears sting my useless eyes. I see the dawn and know, with agonizing finality, that this is the only way I will ever see it again. Whatever was left of my old pain and bitterness is blown to dust

forever.

The last note floats in the air as the sun's light rises enough that the night is dispelled for the day, and I cover my eyes with my hand, my shoulders shuddering. I feel Charlotte's arms around me. I raise my hand and find her heart-shaped face, her soft cheek and full lips.

"I saw it, Charlotte," I whisper. "I saw it all."

I feel her nod, and she releases a ragged breath, and I draw toward that sound, to the mouth that made it, and kiss her, because she has given me everything.

I am blind but I'm no longer lost in the dark. The future with Charlotte is vast and bright, and over that horizon—*our* horizon—I can see to forever.

epilogue two



Spring 2019

I walked down the corridors of NYU's Liberal Arts college building, though *waddled* is probably more accurate. I looked—and felt—like I'd swallowed a bowling ball. *I'm too short to be this pregnant*, I thought. And I still had twelve weeks to go. The mere idea that I was going to get even bigger was too exhausting to contemplate.

I stopped at the bench outside Noah's office and gratefully lowered myself onto it. A clock on the wood-paneled wall opposite said I had ten minutes until his class got out. I eased a sigh, my hand running absently over my rounded belly. The baby stirred and I smiled. I smiled wider. I hadn't stopped smiling all day, and I itched to take out the smallish box that lay snug in my bag, to look at its contents for the hundredth time that day. But I left it alone and closed my eyes, just for a minute...

And promptly dozed off.

I awoke with a jolt as the hall filled with the echoing voices and footsteps of dozens of students. Amid the crowd, I saw Noah, holding the arm of a colleague and coming my way, sunglasses on, white cane tapping from side to side.

My heart clanged madly just from the sight of my gorgeous husband. I silently thanked the NYU dress code that even guest instructors were required to wear a suit. Today, Noah wore light gray—my favorite on him—and a cobalt tie with gold paisley print. He looked devastating, and I could tell by the stolen glances from some of the female students that I wasn't alone in that estimation.

The professor who guided him—Harry Albright, if I remembered correctly—saw me, and smiled brightly beneath a salt-and-pepper mustache. He spoke

a few words to Noah, informing him I was here, I guessed. The way Noah's face lit up was like a jolt of pure happiness straight to my heart.

"We've arrived at your office," Harry Albright said as they approached, "where your wife awaits, as promised. Charlotte, you look radiant."

"Thank you, Harry. I don't feel radiant. I feel like a walrus."

"A walrus? Yesterday it was a manatee." Noah let go of Harry's arm and reached out his hand to me. "Pace yourself, baby. We still have three months to go and you're going to run out of bloated sea animals to compare yourself to."

"Oh, aren't you hilarious," I said as Noah planted a soft kiss on my cheek, his hand going at once to my stomach. He always greeted us both at the same time.

"I can say that," Noah told Harry, "because it's utter horseshit. She's gorgeous and that's a fact."

"Indeed she is," Harry said with a twinkle in his eye. "And Charlotte, are you welcoming a boy or a girl?"

"Girl," Noah said automatically, infusing that one syllable with fierce pride and love. "We're having a girl."

Harry laughed. "Of course you are, Mr. Lake! You tell me and the rest of the department approximately sixteen times a day." He turned and winked at me. "First-time proud father syndrome. Textbook."

"Don't you have an appointment, Harry?" Noah inquired, a small smile twitching his lips.

"Indeed. Charlotte, so good to see you, and congratulations again on your...what was it? Ah yes, a girl."

With a wink for me, Harry rejoined the current of students flowing down the hallway. Some were likely Noah's own students who took his Comparative Literature course: Writing Memory. He was a guest professor for the year after having written a successful memoir based on his journey from the accident that stole his vision to his trek across Europe. I think he liked teaching more than he realized. I think he liked it enough to make it a career. For a little while, anyway. I couldn't imagine he'd stick to one path for too long; he had too much wanderlust in him. We both did. We'd been traveling for the last year almost nonstop for my career, until a little pink plus sign on a pregnancy test six months ago put the brakes on that wanderlust.

"If we have to stop," Noah said when I told him the news, "then this is the best possible reason."

Now, he kissed me again, beaming like the proud father Harry described him to be. “This is a nice surprise. What are you doing here, babe?” His smile faltered. “Are you okay? The baby’s okay...?”

“Everyone’s perfectly fine,” I said gently.

I never laughed off his worry. It was hard enough, I thought, to be an expectant parent. Even harder when you had to travel that uncertain road in the dark.

Noah’s concerned frown lifted back into a smile, his hand gentle on my stomach over my flowered dress. The baby kicked or rolled or did whatever baby gymnasts do: punching my ribs and stomping my bladder at the same time.

“She’s awake,” Noah said quietly, a soft, sweet smile on his face I’m sure no one ever saw but me.

“You can say that again,” I laughed, wincing. “She hasn’t stopped moving all day. I was thinking you and I could take a walk, get her settled down. You’re done for the day, right?”

“I am,” Noah said. “Let me grab my stuff and we’re outta here.”

He unlocked the door behind me, and I watched him, my own fierce pride burning in my heart, as he made his way around his office with ease. It was dim—he never bothered with lights unless he had students. He gathered his Braille keyboard and laptop and stuffed them into his bag along with the latest book he was reading: a wide, thick novel printed in Braille. He’d studied hard at the Helen Keller Foundation and in nine months was opening real books again, and I know it was like a whole new world had opened up to him. I’d never been so proud.

We stepped back into the hall that was quieter now, though not by much. A student passed, gave my swollen belly a second take, and shouted, “Ooh! Way to go, Mr. Lake!”

I laughed while Noah pretended to be irritated, when I could see he was proud too.



I was fine with taking the subway, but Noah wouldn’t hear of it. He didn’t like the crowds or the idea of someone bumping into me or harassing me—and him not being able to prevent it. His protectiveness was sweet but intense too. After the mugging where I’d lost my violin, and then Deacon in the

elevator all those years ago, Noah had made a vow to keep me safe as best he could. Maybe I was supposed to feel affronted by that—Melanie or Ava might have thought so—but I just felt loved. And cherished. And safe. I always felt safe with Noah.

We took a cab to what was now our townhouse.

A wedding gift from Noah's parents. Our wedding had been a beautiful event in Bozeman, Montana, in a tiny little chapel overlooking the Gallatin Valley. Small and simple—but elegant too—with just our closest family and friends. It was perfect, and I thought I couldn't be any happier.

When we returned to New York, my new father-in-law pressed a key and a deed into Noah's hand and told us the townhouse was ours now, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. Then my joy overflowed, and I knew exactly why. The townhouse was where my life restarted. Where my *heart* restarted—brought back to life by Noah's resuscitative kiss. I couldn't imagine staying in New York City and not living there.

I thought Noah would feel strange or uncomfortable, given all of those long, solitary months he'd spent holed upstairs. But he told me he was glad. With me there, he said, it felt different. It felt like home. Any lingering demons were cast out when we redecorated to better suit his blindness and our tastes, and then we spent the two weeks of our at-home honeymoon christening the hell out of every room in the house.

That helped a lot too.

Now, I waited in the foyer on the first floor as Noah changed out of his suit and into his usual athletic pants and T-shirt. I looked toward what had been my room when I was an employee. It was now the guest room. The guest room on the third floor was now the baby's room.

The baby's room.

I smiled and hefted my bag that held the small box I'd been given today. I kept the bag on my left side, which was awkward to me, but I didn't want Noah to feel it and wonder why I'd brought it along on our walk. He'd know soon enough.

He came down the stairs two at a time, and I just...watched.

He was so tall. So damn tall and sexy; he never failed to take my breath away, even after all this time, drinking him in every day.

I'd hoped I'd always feel this way.

I knew I always would.

Noah felt my gaze on him. As usual. "Got something in my teeth?"

“No. It’s just...you.”

He grinned crookedly and bent down to kiss me. And not a light, shallow peck, either. A deep, intense kiss that I felt in my lower belly that still burned for him, baby on board or not. Noah never kissed me like I was a delicate, fragile pregnant woman. Never.

“Where are we headed?” he asked, unfolding his cane. “Just a walk? Don’t you need to rest up for your recording session tomorrow?”

“I canceled it,” I said, leading him out in the beautiful New York City spring twilight. “Or postponed it, I should say. I warned them that might be the case. Paganini’s Caprice is insane, and I just can’t get the movement I need.” I glanced fondly at my belly. “Just one of many schedule interruptions or changes this little bugger is going to impose on us.”

Noah made a noncommittal sound, his expression darkening. I knew he was thinking about all the other things a baby requires and of his deep-rooted fear that he wouldn’t be able to provide them. Or worse, that his blindness would hurt her somehow or put her in danger. I couldn’t insult his intelligence and deny we had challenges, but I also hadn’t the faintest doubt he’d be nothing short of wonderful with our baby.

We crossed the always-busy Columbus Avenue and then started up the short path to what I considered ‘our bench.’ I tucked my bag on my left side and let out a gusty sigh of relief to be off my feet.

“I remember this bench,” Noah said, stretching out and setting his cane aside. He turned my direction. “Feeling nostalgic?”

“Something like that,” I said, biting back a smile. “Do you remember what happened here?”

His face softened. “As if I could forget. This is where I looked at you for the first time.”

“Yes. And you told me that you couldn’t see anything. But that wasn’t true, was it?”

“No,” he replied. “I saw you. You were so beautiful. I hadn’t expected that...or what I felt, seeing you. I didn’t expect that either.”

“Oh? You felt something for me? Even then?” I teased lightly. “I seem to recall a very decisive, ‘I can’t see shit with my hands.’”

“I may have been prone to exaggeration,” he said with a cough.

“I thought so.” I snuggled up against him, and he put his arm around me. “But you said you hadn’t expected to feel what you did. And what was that, may I ask all these years later?”

Noah turned his sightless gaze forward for a moment, as if trying to put his thoughts to words.

“You’re radiant, Charlotte. They said that about you on our wedding day and now again that you’re pregnant, but you’ve always been radiant. And the first time I saw that beauty under my hands, I felt how I feel when opening a brand-new book. Do you know how that is? Where you only need to read the first few pages and you’re already thinking, ‘This might be a good one. One of the best ones. One of the rare finds that stays with you forever.’” A soft smile found his lips. “That’s how I felt, but I was far too bottled up and ready to explode to ever say something like that.”

“Oh,” I breathed, my heart pounding as if we were on a first date instead of married three years and expecting a child. “Oh, Noah.” I sniffed and brushed away tears.

Thanks to my hormones I cried at the drop of a hat, but these tears weren’t hormonal. I didn’t expect Noah to keep sweeping me off my feet, but somehow, he always managed to do it.

He faced me and took his sunglasses off, his hazel eyes sweeping over me. I didn’t say a word but leaned close to my husband and let him find me with his lips. He kissed me slowly, a deep pull of his mouth on mine, before breaking off gently to brush a stray hair from my cheek.

I caught and held his hand. “What do I look like now?”

He touched my eyes, my cheeks, my lips, gently feeling the contours of my face.

“You look...happy,” he whispered.

“Yes,” I breathed, “that’s exactly what I am. I love you, and I’m so happy with you. And...I have something for you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I bit my lip, excitement for my surprise ballooning in my chest. “Before your accident, did you ever see one of those 3D ultrasounds they can do now? Instead of grainy black and white, you can really see the contours and details of the baby’s face. It’s amazing.”

Noah nodded. “I think I remember seeing something like that. A long time ago,” he said dully. “Did you want one? We can search around for a place that does them.”

He sounded casual but his fingers drummed the back of the bench, and my heart ached a little. It hurt him that he couldn’t see his baby growing inside me. At our regular ultrasound appointment, Noah had clutched my hand and

asked the tech over and over, “How does she look?” He was concerned for the baby’s health first and foremost, but I knew too, he felt blocked from the special moment. He couldn’t see what the tech, my doctor, and I could all see—his baby in my womb, wiggling and kicking, her heart beating fast and strong. It broke my heart.

Which is why, earlier today, I’d gone back for another.

“Well, I already found a place that does that, and I had a new ultrasound done.”

“And she’s okay, right?” he asked, automatically tense with worry. “Everything looks good?”

“Yes, honey,” I said soothingly. “She’s perfect. And beautiful. The pictures were quite stunning. So vivid. And the 3D prints...” I reached into my bag and pulled out the square white box and opened it. I took out the cast—a square of plaster—and pressed it to Noah’s hand. My voice fell to a whisper. “It’s amazing what they can do with technology these days.”

“What...?”

I watched, my heart in my throat, as he trailed his long fingers over the cast, investigating. He stopped at the center with a small gasp, and his hand began to tremble. He found the curve of a tiny, chubby cheek, then a dimpled little chin, and two eyes squeezed shut tight.

“Is that...?” He cleared his throat and tried again. “Is that my baby?”

My eyes blurred with tears to see his. I leaned close, kissed his ear, his cheek. “That’s your baby.”

He moved his fingertips over her again and again. “I can see her. This is her. Our baby...”

He sat very still for a moment, but for his fingers that looked at his daughter because his eyes could not. A strangled sound erupted from deep in his chest, and he bent over his knees, one hand covering his eyes, the other holding the 3D print. I held his shoulders as they shook and snuggled close to kiss his neck, my tears falling on his shirt.

“God, Charlotte,” he said hoarsely and then pulled me close, his lips brushing against my hair. “Thank—”

“No.” I shook my head, cutting him off before he could thank me for what was already his. “She is our baby, Noah. Yours and mine. We made her together. This...” I touched the print. “This is just what you deserve. As her father. And I know you are going to be an amazing father.”

He nodded, wiped his eyes on the crook of his sleeve, chagrined at his loss

of control. “I’ll do my best.”

His best. This from a man who spent six weeks traveling across Europe blind for me. For us. Noah’s *best* meant his heart and soul, blood and guts, sweat and tears, and my heart was filled with so much love for him, I could hardly contain it.

“She looks just like you,” Noah said, still looking at the baby.

“Mmm, she has your chin, and God, do I hope she has your eyes.”

“My eyes,” Noah murmured.

He didn’t finish his thought and I didn’t ask. Noah pulled me to him, holding the 3D print tight in one hand—as if he’d never put it down—and resting his other on my stomach. We listened to New York all around us and felt our baby move beneath our hands.

It felt like it had always been this way, he and I, together. Amazing to think there’d been a time when we weren’t. We traveled so far to get here—across continents and great stretches of the black unknown.

I thought of the angry, bitter man who’d holed himself up in one room, listening to someone else read, and the heartbroken young woman who’d just needed a decent job and a little bit of peace. We’d both been smashed up by life and rearranged until neither of us knew ourselves. But somehow, we’d found each other, helped each other put our broken pieces back together to make something new and whole. And even more than that. I rubbed my rounded belly and smiled. We’d started with a maybe, and that maybe turned into a miracle.

The last caramel-colored light began to slip away, and we rose from our bench. Noah’s hand found the crook of my arm without having to reach, and I sighed to feel his strong grip there. Everything was where it was supposed to be.

“Come on, baby,” Noah said, bending to kiss me. “Let’s go home.”

the end

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Emma Scott is a *USA Today* and *Wall St. Journal* best-selling author whose books have been translated in six languages and featured in *Buzzfeed*, *Huffington Post*, *New York Daily News* and *USA Today's Happy Ever After*. She writes emotional, character-driven romances in which art and love intertwine to heal and love always wins. If you enjoy emotionally charged stories that rip your heart out (and put it back together again) with diverse characters and kind-hearted heroes, you will enjoy her novels.

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