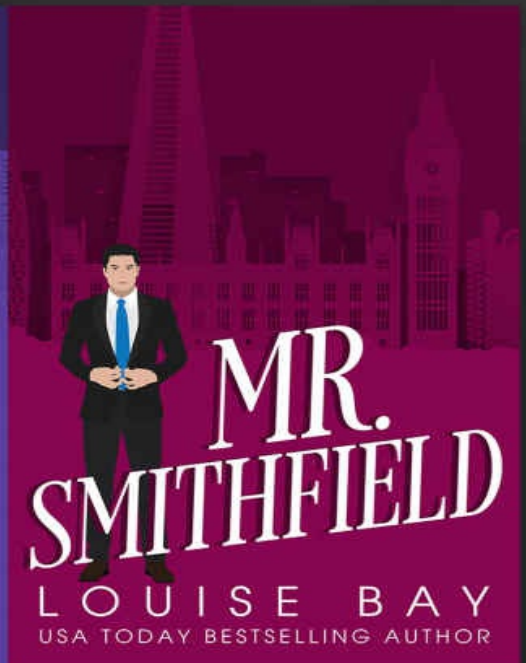
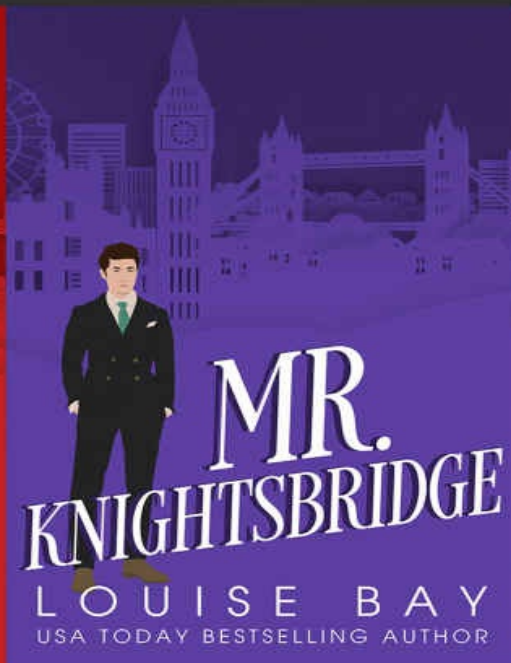
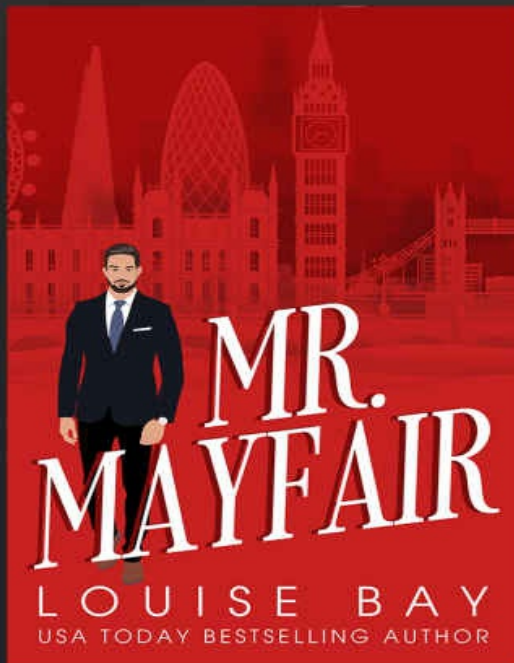


THE MISTER SERIES COLLECTION



PART ONE

LOUISE BAY
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE MISTER SERIES COLLECTION

PART ONE: MR. MAYFAIR, MR. KNIGHTSBRIDGE, MR.
SMITHFIELD

LOUISE BAY

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MR. MAYFAIR

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CHAPTER ONE

Beck

“Kevin Bacon is full of shit,” I said as I thwacked the small, black rubber ball with my racket.

Dexter lurched away as the ball ricocheted toward his bollocks. “What did he ever do to you?”

“The six degrees of separation thing—it’s bullshit.”

“What?” Dexter asked, panting. I was kicking his arse, and I knew that had to hurt his delicate ego. No doubt he’d chalk up his losing to that skiing injury he still complained about. As far as I was concerned anyone who skied deserved every injury they got—hurtling downhill with metal flippers on your feet could end only one way.

“You know, the idea that everyone on the planet is just six people removed. So, a friend of a friend of—”

“You can’t blame that on Kevin Bacon. It’s not like he invented it,” Dexter said before serving.

“Okay then, if you’re going to be pedantic, Frigyes Karinthy is full of shit.”

“I can’t tell if you’re swearing at me or speaking Ukrainian.”

“Hungarian,” I replied, wiping my forehead with my sleeve. I measured exercise not on calories burned or time spent in the gym but on the amount I sweated. Someone needed to develop a machine to measure perspiration—I’d pay good money for it. As far as I was concerned it was effort that always earned the best results. “He developed the bullshit theory. I looked it up on Wikipedia.”

“Fuck,” he spat as the ball hit the plaster below the red line, giving me the victory I’d expected since we got onto the court. Dexter only lost at squash when he had business trouble, so I wasn’t going to crow about my win.

“Yeah, I get it. What’s the problem?”

I bent and scooped up the out-of-play ball as it trickled toward me. “The theory is flawed. I have dredged every single one of my contacts and I can’t get an introduction to Henry Dawnay.”

“You’re still trying to get a meeting with that old billionaire?” Dexter grinned, as if my failure in business was going to make up for his shitty performance on the squash court. “You might have to give it up.”

“Henry Dawnay is not just some old billionaire. He’s *the* old billionaire standing between me and nine-point-four million quid. And I’m not about to give up on that kind of money. I’ve plowed every contact I have and come up empty. I thought one of you lot would have some kind of connection to him. What’s the point in having rich, successful friends if they’re no use to me?”

“Us lot? You mean your five closest friends who’d walk through fire for you?”

He knew I was joking as sure as I knew United were going to win the league. The fact that the guys I’d forged bonds with as a teenager were rich and successful was simply circumstance. Their jobs weren’t important. They were the best men I knew outside my own dad. And I’d walk through fire for them just as I knew they would for me. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t complain about the fact that none of them had been able to score me a meeting with Henry Dawnay, even if it did make me sound like the moody git Dexter always accused me of being.

I rolled my eyes and nodded toward the changing rooms. I needed a shower and then I needed a plan. “I don’t need anyone to walk through fire for me. I need someone to introduce me to the man who owns the property standing between me and ten million quid.”

“You said nine point four.”

“Have I told you how annoying you are?”

“A couple of times,” Dexter said, pushing through the door to the changing room. “Look, if you can’t get an intro from someone you know, why don’t you track him down, bump into him, and introduce yourself.”

I fixed him with a thanks-for-the-advice-mum look. “I did. Last month in the lobby of the Dorchester. He shook my hand and swooped right out without stopping to get my name.”

Dexter winced, and he was right to. It'd been embarrassing. I'd felt like a nine-year-old boy meeting Cristiano Ronaldo.

I opened my locker door and pulled out my phone to check my messages. Two more missed calls from Danielle. *Shit*. Another thing I had to deal with. "I've managed to get access to his calendar so—"

"How the hell have you managed that?"

"Don't ask. You need plausible deniability so you don't end up in prison." From what I understood, I'd broken several British laws and a couple of international ones by getting that information. I hoped it was worth it.

"Well, I hope you and Joshua end up in jail."

I ignored his assumption that another member of our brothers-in-arms, Joshua, was involved. It was an obvious assumption—Joshua liked to hack into government agencies to unwind. The rest of us played squash. "I'm well connected—some would say powerful in real estate circles. I've got money and resources. For Christ's sake, I know the brand of loo paper this guy uses. But apparently, it's not enough to get a meeting." Things would be very different if my birth certificate had carried my biological father's name.

"You need to calm down and figure it the fuck out."

"Great advice," I mumbled as I scrolled through my emails. One was from Joshua with Henry's itinerary and schedule for the next couple of months. I slumped onto the bench and opened the attachment, hoping to find he'd finally arranged a lunch or a meeting with someone I knew.

But no. Nothing. Although there was an entire week blocked out. Perhaps he was going on holiday?

"This is the guy who you want to buy the building in Mayfair from, right?"

"Yeah, I own every other piece of property in the row except that one—the most run-down of the lot of them, and he's done nothing with it. It's standing empty and prime for redevelopment. It's prime for *me* redeveloping it." It was a building I'd been obsessed with since I could remember.

"Look, worst case, you just work around it."

I shook my head. "I don't work around things. I take a wrecking ball to them." I'd crunched the numbers. I wouldn't make a profit if I didn't have Henry's building. And I didn't take losses. And anyway, it wasn't just the money.

It was the building my mother lived in when she found out she was

pregnant with me.

It was the building my mother was evicted from as soon as her boyfriend, the owner of the building and my biological father, found out she was pregnant.

When he died, it had been inherited by a distant cousin, and since my mother told me the story when I was a teenager, I'd been laser-focused on buying that building. Maybe I thought if I owned it—owned what I should have inherited—wrongs would be righted.

Then I could tear it down and start again.

I'd rewrite history.

I studied the document Joshua had sent. Why had Henry blocked out an entire week? The man didn't take holidays. I looked closer. The only reference in the entire week was M&K. I typed it into the search engine on my phone. What could M&K stand for? As I scrolled through the results, I couldn't see how a furniture shop in Wigan or an American DJ could be relevant. Henry wasn't just old money, he was titled—an earl or something, although he didn't seem to use it. I was pretty sure he wasn't shopping in Wigan or entertaining DJs.

I switched screens, and just as I was about to call Joshua to try to get more information, another email flashed up with an attachment. When I opened it, the dates of the M&K week were the first thing I saw. It was a glossy, electronic wedding invitation. Apparently Joshua had been just as curious as I had. A wedding that lasted an entire week? Did these people and their guests not have jobs? M stood for Matthew and K for Karen. The bride and groom. I plugged their names into Google. They were no one I knew. But there was no surprise there. They looked like the type to have met on a croquet field—Matthew was all sports jackets and straw boaters. I didn't know how old-Etonians and people with inherited wealth looked different from most normal human beings, but they did. It must be the floppy hair or the air of entitlement they wore.

A society wedding would be a perfect place to approach Henry. He'd be relaxed and in a good mood as he spent time with his people.

But his people weren't my people.

My money was as new as the dawn and that left me on the outside of the wedding party, peering inside, at the end of unreturned phone calls and unable to meet with Henry Dawnay.

“Speaking of wrecking balls, how's Danielle? Managed to destroy that

relationship yet?” Dexter asked, pulling me out of my Henry obsession.

I glanced up from my phone. “What? She’s fine.” I wasn’t sure she was exactly fine. I’d pissed her off. Again. The last conversation we had over dinner, she’d started to talk about taking things to a deeper level. But I liked the shallows—dinner a couple of times a week followed by a sleepover. I didn’t have time for anything else. The rest of the time I was working—figuring out the next deal, scoping out new opportunities, firefighting issues on current sites. It didn’t leave time for much else in my life other than for my five closest friends. As much as it might make me a dick, women were important in the generic sense. But a particular woman wasn’t. So the last few months it had been Danielle. Before that it had been Juliet and by the end of the summer, it was likely to be someone else. But I should return Danielle’s calls. I’d been busy and this Henry thing was getting to me.

“When’s the last time you took her to dinner? Or even had a conversation with her outside the bedroom?”

“Jesus, are you my therapist now?” Guilt prickled beneath my skin, and I kept my eyes on my phone. I’d cancelled dinner this Saturday. Again. She’d been pissed off, so I’d given her some space. But it was Thursday. *Shit*. I should have called her back by now. If I confessed to Dexter, he’d tell me I was a dick. But it wasn’t like I planned it that way. I was just wrapped up in everything else I had going on, and somehow Danielle had fallen off the bottom of my call sheet. I switched screens and dialed my messages to check her tone of voice and see if I was still in the dog box.

I deleted the three “Call me back” voicemails. The fourth escalated into “Where are you?” The fifth another “Call me back.” She sounded calmer, more relaxed. Perfect. Just as I’d hoped. But the sixth voicemail was one I hadn’t been expecting. Or maybe it was. I listened as she dumped me—her tone resigned, her words cutting.

“You okay?” Dexter asked, studying my expression.

I ended the call. “Yeah. I’m a selfish, piece-of-shit workaholic. And Danielle Fisher’s ex-boyfriend.”

For the second time this morning, I got a well-deserved wince from Dexter.

I shrugged—as if it couldn’t be helped. As if it wasn’t entirely my fault. “I should have called her back sooner.”

Dexter nodded as he fixed a towel around his waist. “Yeah, you should have. But at the same time, if she was the right woman for you, you wouldn’t

forget to ring her. Or avoid her calls. You'd want to speak to her."

"And what the fuck do you know about dating the right woman?"

"I know," he said.

"But it's not Stacey," I said, referring to the woman he was currently sharing a bed with.

"Stacey's not . . . Just because I fucked up with the right woman doesn't mean you have to. Learn from my mistakes."

I rolled my eyes and went back to the email from Joshua. "I'll be sure to mention to Stacey she's in an interim role next time I see her."

"Don't be a dick."

"You first," I replied. I was being a dick. Danielle had sounded kinda resigned, like I'd lived down to her expectations, which stung. It was the tone my form teacher had used when I'd told her I had no intention of going to university. My grades had been good, but I wasn't interested in more studying. I didn't belong in that world. I wanted to be out in the world earning money. I doubt she'd use that tone with me if I ran into her now. She'd thought I was being lazy except it was the exact opposite. University was good for people like Henry and whoever this Matthew and Karen were—I had better things to do. I needed to earn my fortune.

But no matter how rich I got, I still didn't mix in the circles that Henry Dawnay did.

Well, that needed to change. I had to figure out a way to score an invite to the society wedding of the year.

CHAPTER TWO

Beck

I traced my finger down the guest list for a second time. I must have missed something. *Someone*.

“I checked it three times, sir,” my assistant, Roy, said from the other side of my desk. “I even searched against contacts of your contacts.”

By the time I was out of the shower and back at my desk, Joshua had sent me the guest list from the wedding Henry was attending, and I’d been determined to find my way in. The groom’s father was well known in the City—a partner in one of the oldest investment banks in London. I knew the type—hated it when clubs in London were forced to let women in, longed for the days when no one expected you back in the office after lunch. I should be grateful—they were the men who left meat on the bone that I came along and gobbled off. The bride’s father was a landowner, so he didn’t do a lot except drive about in a Land Rover dressed in tweed. If I just knew someone who would be going. Then I could get them to speak to Henry at the wedding and talk me up, explain how I was good for my word and easy to trust—maybe even mention how I had a business proposition for him. I’d have to be careful who it was. Dexter and I goaded each other, but if he was going to that wedding, Henry would think I was his fairy godmother by the time Dexter was done—any of the six of us would do the same for each other. We were brothers in all but name. But anyone else? I wasn’t sure I’d trust someone outside our circle with something so important. It would be better if I was a guest at the wedding myself. Then Henry would be a captive audience and I was sure I could convince him to sign on the dotted line.

“And you’re sure that I don’t know *anyone*?” I might not have been to the right schools or grown up in the right circles, but I’d been successful for years. I was earning more money than most of London put together, and I dealt with lawyers and people in business all day, every day. But I didn’t know a single person who would be at this three-hundred-fifty guest wedding.

“As sure as I can be. I’ve cross-referenced against your contacts and your LinkedIn page. And I checked the last five years’ Christmas card lists to see if I’d missed anyone.”

It wasn’t so surprising. We might all be British and living in the same city, but I still existed on a different planet to these people.

“I don’t suppose there are any single women on the list?” There must be someone going without a boyfriend. I was single. So I’d track them down, seduce them, and be available as a plus one for weddings and bar mitzvahs. No, that was a shitty plan. I needed to be sure I was getting into this wedding—I wasn’t going to leave it to chance. I wanted some kind of guarantee or contract or something.

“The ones invited with an un-named plus one are at the bottom of the list,” Roy said. I turned the page to find one male name and three female names.

“Do you have their ages?” Or photographs.

“No, sir. I can find that out for you though.”

I needed to know exactly who these three people were.

Candice Gould

Suzie Dougherty

Stella London

Three single women—it had to be my way in. As invitees to M&K’s wedding, they had something I needed more than oxygen. I might not be able to guarantee a plus one by seducing them, but everyone wanted *something*. And I had considerable means at my disposal. I just needed to figure out what they wanted and then do a swap—a plus one for a pony or a week on a yacht or whatever it was people who didn’t work wanted in life. I just needed to track them down and make them an offer they wouldn’t want to refuse.

One of these women was the key to the Dawnay building.

CHAPTER THREE

Stella

Another day, another dollar, so the phrase goes. But for me another day meant another twelve hours at my crappy office with the crappiest boss who ever lived. Placing people I didn't know into jobs they didn't want was the worst. It might have only been two months into the role, but I'd never get used to being a recruitment consultant.

My mobile buzzed on my desk beside me and I glanced over my shoulder toward my boss's empty office. She hated people taking personal calls. If breathing took time out of the day, she'd ban that too.

It was Florence. She never called me at work. Taking my life in my hands, I swiped to accept the call. "Hey," I whispered.

"Are you in front of your computer?" she asked.

"Of course I am. I'm chained to it, what—"

"I'm five minutes away. Whatever you do, don't check your emails. Get your coat and meet me downstairs."

Florence must be crazy. I was constantly checking my emails. "I'm staring at my inbox, Florence."

"I mean your personal emails. Promise me. Log off and meet me downstairs or I'm going to march into your office and haul you out."

"It's only just gone six. I can't just leave. What's the problem?" It sounded serious. "Are you and Gordy okay?" She and Gordy were the perfect couple. If there was trouble in paradise, then anything was possible.

"I've just turned into Monmouth Street. Have you got your jacket on?"

Oh God. She didn't say that they were okay. Florence needed me. And

she trumped the wrath of my boss. “I’m coming,” I said, wedging the phone between my shoulder and my chin as I logged out.

I pulled my jacket off the back of my chair and headed to the exit, ignoring my boss’s assistant’s pointed look at the clock as she saw me leave.

I saw Florence as soon as I stepped out of the lift. She was facing me from the other side of the glass doors of the office, her shoulders slumped, her forehead furrowed, and her face as pale as a corpse. It was clear something catastrophic had happened.

I was going to kill Gordy.

“I’m so sorry, Florence,” I said, and I opened my arms and pulled her into a hug.

She held me so tight, I struggled to breathe. She must be devastated. We all thought Gordy was one of the good guys.

“I wanted you to hear this from me,” Florence said as she pulled away and snuck her arm around my shoulder.

“Of course. I’m here for you,” I replied as I grabbed her hand. “I’ll help you bury the body if you want me to.”

She frowned as if she was surprised by my offer, but how could she be? There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for Florence. For either of my two best friends.

We crossed the street and found an outside table at the bar opposite my office on Monmouth Street. One of the few positives about my job was that it was based in the West End and surrounded by bars and restaurants. “We’re going to need wine,” I said.

We were going to need a shovel. If she didn’t kill Gordy, I would.

We ordered a bottle of wine and took a seat. “So you saw?” Florence said. “You seem very calm.”

“Saw what?” I asked. “Oh,” I said, pulling out my phone. “You said there was something in my personal email.”

“You didn’t see?” Florence asked.

“What?”

She pulled my phone from my grasp and grabbed my hands. “What body are you helping me bury?” she asked.

“Gordy’s, of course. Tell me what he’s done.”

She shook her head. “It’s not Gordy. It’s Matt.”

My stomach dropped straight through the seat of my chair and I froze. If Florence had raced over here from where she worked in the City at six on a

Wednesday, it couldn't be good news. Had he been in an accident? Had his dad died?

"He's getting married," she said, squeezing my hands.

I pulled away from her as I tried to understand what she was saying. "Of course he's not getting married. We've only been apart two months." I didn't like to say we'd split up because it wasn't an accurate description of what was happening. We were just apart right now. It was just a temporary thing. He was just freaked out that all our friends were getting married and people kept asking us when we were next. He was just doing that guy thing where, just before they pop the question, they have a man meltdown. Just look at Prince William and Kate Middleton. They had a three-month break before William proposed.

"I'm so sorry, Stella."

Florence looked up at me, her eyes filled with tears, and my heart began to gallop. She was serious. "What do you mean? Who to? How do you know?"

"The invitation was delivered to Gordy's office. And then there was the email follow-up with the schedule. Never mind."

I tried to swallow but my throat was too tight. I reached for the glass of wine that Florence was hastily pouring. "I don't get it. There must be some mistake." How could Matt be getting married? He hadn't proposed to me, and we'd been going out for seven years. We'd been living together for six. It wasn't possible. Florence must have it wrong.

Florence shook her head. "It gets worse. I really don't know how to say this, but he's marrying Karen."

I shivered as my body turned cold.

I couldn't speak.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't think.

Florence slid a white card in front of me.

I traced the embossed writing with my fingertip as my stomach churned slowly and relentlessly, like it was mixing concrete. It was the invitation I would have picked out for my own wedding—thick white card, a thin gold surround, and an elegant black font. Simple. Classic. Refined.

Apparently stealing the love of my life wasn't enough. My best friend had to have my taste in wedding invitations, too.

"Karen and Matt?" I searched Florence's face, looking for answers. "My

Matt? My Karen?”

Florence tilted her head to the side. “For some reason, they’ve invited you. I had no idea they were even a thing. Neither did Gordy.”

They sent me an invitation? I suppose I was the common denominator between them. “How long have they . . .?” Was this the real reason Matt left me? His excuses when he left seemed so lacking, looking back—

I’m not sure we were meant to be together forever.

We don’t want the same things in life.

I’d assumed he was just getting jittery as we approached the time for weddings and babies.

Apparently, I was wrong.

“Karen swears it’s since you two split up but . . .”

“You spoke to her?” Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t had an actual conversation with Karen or an in-person catch-up for . . . Well, I couldn’t remember how long. We messaged each other. All the time. Most days. But I hadn’t seen her or spoken to her in weeks.

“Called her as soon as Gordy called me when he got the invite. It was delivered to his office. Which was weird. It wasn’t like I wasn’t going to find out.”

I was only taking in half of the words that Florence was speaking. “What did she say?”

“Just that . . .” Florence paused and drew breath. “She and Matt had realized they had feelings for each other and it was serious, and she didn’t really say anything more. As soon as I mentioned you, she made up some excuse about another call and rang off.”

So my boyfriend was getting married. Ex-boyfriend. Potaytoes Potahtoes. The man I’d shared a bed with for seven years up until two months ago was getting married. On any other day, that would have been the worst thing that could have possibly happened. But to my best friend?

Why?

“Is she pregnant?”

Florence sat back in her chair. “You think that’s why?”

Why was any of this happening?

Why was Matt getting married to someone else when he was supposed to be marrying me?

Why was my best friend getting married and hadn’t told me?

Why were they marrying each other?

“I’m not sure any explanation would really be an answer,” I said. “But if they’d shagged and she’d got knocked up that might be some kind of logical reason for a quick wedding.” It was certainly easier to understand than my best friend catching feelings for my boyfriend because that led to questions—how long had they had feelings for each other? Had Matt always wanted Karen when he was with me? Had they been having an affair? For a few months? Years? Since the beginning of our relationship?

“I don’t understand why she didn’t tell me,” I said. “It wasn’t like I wouldn’t find out. She was going to let me find out by opening my invitation.”

“I don’t have an answer to that, other than she’s a total bitch.”

That would have to do. For now. “I guess that’s why she invited me. To announce the news. Because she was too much of a traitorous coward to tell me to my face that she’d stolen my boyfriend.”

“Do you think they were having an affair while you two were still living together?”

“That’s at the top of my list of questions I have for them both.” Had I seen any signs? Since we’d moved to London, Matt had worked late a lot. But we’d come down from Manchester because he was offered his dream job. Of course he was going to put body and soul into it.

When had he had time for an affair?

We were at the stage where I bought Matt’s underpants and he reminded me that I’d not called my brother for three weeks.

We were a team.

We were in love.

We were going to spend the rest of our lives together.

Or so I’d thought.

I should be crying, but for some reason the tears hadn’t arrived. Perhaps I didn’t believe it was true. Perhaps the fizzle of anger I was beginning to feel had dried them out.

Karen had been a part of my life since the day we’d both started school. I always felt slightly unkempt next to her. Even then. At five, her knee-high white socks never fell down, wrinkling at the ankles like mine did. At thirteen she never suffered with acne and wrestled with cover-up, and in our twenties, I’d never seen her with a single clump of mascara or eyeliner that was smudged.

Karen had known Matt since before we were a couple. She’d come up to

visit me in Manchester, during our first term at university, twirling in, making the boys drool and swapping make-up tips with the girls in my block. She'd been struggling to fit in at Exeter, which made no sense to me. All my friends loved her.

When Matt pulled me onto the dance floor during the summer ball, told me I brought out the best in him, and he liked my boobs, I was thrilled Karen had already met him so she could help me overanalyze every part of our relationship.

Seven years later, Karen knew Matt almost as well as I did.

"Maybe you should go to the wedding and when they do that bit about impediments, you can stand up and ask that question," Florence suggested. "But obviously, you can't go."

"Of course, I can't go," I replied. Despite the invitation, I was almost certainly the last person Karen wanted at her wedding. It wasn't as if seeing my ex-boyfriend—the man I'd thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with—marrying my ex-best friend was top of my list of things to do this summer.

"Are you going to go?" I loved Florence like a sister, and if Karen was capable of sleeping with my boyfriend, what could she do to Florence?

"Of course not," she replied.

"But Gordy will want to go. And he won't want to go without you. If more time had passed and I was married or at least dating someone, I'd definitely go." If nothing else, I'd love to see Karen's face when she got my RSVP.

"There was a schedule that came with the invitation," Florence said.

I frowned. I'd been so focused on the white card that looked so much like the one I would have chosen, I'd forgotten about the email.

"It's like a week-long thing up in Scotland."

I slumped back in my chair, grateful that my jacket covered the mole-hill sized goosebumps that popped up all over my arms. "His uncle's castle?" I asked.

Florence nodded and the dull churning in my stomach kicked up a gear like an idling car put into drive.

"That's where he always said he wanted to get married." We'd visited last summer and hiked, ridden horses, slept under the stars. It had been amazing. Magical even.

"He's a ginormous wanker," Florence said.

Matt Gordon was having the life he and I had always planned—with someone else.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stella

I stared into the glass of wine Florence had put in front of me. She'd found an excuse to be passing by my office every day since she'd told me about Matt and Karen, which meant I wasn't drinking alone.

The same bar. A fresh glass of wine.

The last three weeks had been like being stuck in a fog where I couldn't see anything, think about anything other than Karen and Matt. It was the fog of betrayal.

I'd been going into the office, but I didn't remember doing anything other than logging on at the beginning of the day and logging off at the end of the day.

I still didn't have the answers to any of the endless questions I had.

"You two should go and then you can report back on how awful it is and how tasteless her dress is," I said. Poor Florence. Doubtless she was bored of my endless rumination about what had happened. I *wanted* to snap out of it. To think about something else. But I was just stuck in this awful no-man's-land where I tortured myself with a thousand imagined scenes of Matt and Karen over and over.

Creeping around behind my back.

Laughing about how stupid I was for not realizing it was her he loved. Not me.

Hunched over a calendar trying to find the perfect Saturday to get married.

Putting together a wedding list.

Choosing wedding invitations.

Kissing.

Fucking.

I grabbed my glass of wine and gulped down a mouthful, hoping it would dull my imagination.

“Maybe you should go with a hired hot, sexy stud—like in that film,” Florence said. “The one with the woman from *Will and Grace*.”

“*The Wedding Date*?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Seriously. There must be an agency in London. You could even pretend you’re engaged. That way you get to ruin Karen’s big day by shaming her. First for stealing your boyfriend and second for inviting you.”

“What did they put in that wine?” I asked. Florence was an accountant and always dreaming up alternate, more exciting realities for herself. “You know I couldn’t do that.”

“But you should. Karen’s stolen your boyfriend and you don’t want to embarrass her? You need to start putting yourself first. You’re always so focused on everyone else; you need to put your needs at the top of the list.”

“I’m pretty sure Dermot Mulroney isn’t for hire, and that film didn’t take social media into account. People would just look up a hired boyfriend. Find out he charges by the hour, and I’ll look like a total idiot. So really, I *am* thinking about myself.”

“Yeah, maybe. He needs to be some hotshot international businessman or Hollywood actor or—”

“At least know how to wear a suit,” I said.

“Speaking of,” Florence said, staring over my shoulder.

I turned and saw what Florence was fixated on. Or more accurately, who. He wasn’t her usual type. Tall, yes, but Florence usually went for blonds. Thick, dark hair, olive skin, and the square jaw was more *my* type. In theory, anyway.

In practice . . . Well, Matt hadn’t been short exactly, but we were the same height when I wore heels. He was handsome—to me anyway. But he wasn’t the kind of guy you’d particularly notice.

But *this* guy wasn’t a man anyone could ignore.

He caught me staring and grinned. Instinctively, I smiled back. I turned to Florence as the man swept past our table and up the stone steps flanked with bay trees and into the bar.

“You need to be dating someone like that and take *him* to the wedding,” Florence said.

“That guy is either married or gay. And if by some miracle he’s neither, then he’s a psychopath. Men are a no-go zone for me. I don’t trust myself. If I’ve been wrong about the man I’ve been sharing a bed with for the last seven years, then I’m no doubt wrong about a lot of other stuff and everything to do with people with penises.”

“Ladies.” A waiter approached our table with an ice bucket and two champagne glasses.

“We didn’t order this,” I said, eyeing the bottle of Dom and wishing we had.

“It’s from the gentleman at the bar,” he replied, nodding toward the window.

Turning, I locked eyes with the dark-haired stranger who had knocked me out of my wallowing for just a few seconds.

“We can’t accept this,” I said as the waiter poured the champagne into glasses. Something about the way my smile had come so easily made me uneasy. If he could coax a smile from me with the mood I was in, he definitely couldn’t be trusted.

“Of course we can,” Florence said, raising her full glass at the stranger.

I rolled my eyes and took a sip, determined not to look at him again. “So, you think I should ignore the invitation or RSVP no?”

“I think you should RSVP with a letter bomb or say nothing at all,” Florence replied.

“It would be nice if I had an exciting reason to say no, other than the obvious,” I said.

“Just don’t reply. Or make up a reason. Say you’re in the Maldives for work.”

“Yeah, no one’s going to believe I flew to the Maldives for work. I’m a recruitment consultant, not a supermodel.” The only travel I’d done since I started two months ago was to our head office in Wiltshire, and I wasn’t sure a day trip to Swindon was going to make anyone jealous.

“I guess. But at least you can talk about your promotion.”

“Again, head of professional services at a recruitment consultancy isn’t going to get anyone’s attention.” My quick promotion had been welcome, but it hadn’t filled my heart or satisfied my soul. It had paid the mortgage.

“Have you totally given up on the interior design thing?”

Florence's question *should* have had an easy answer. When Matt had moved out, I'd been building up my business, but I wasn't making any money and I had bills to pay, so I'd had to be sensible and take the first job that came along. I still wasn't convinced it had been the right thing to do, but I'd clung to the flat we'd shared, insisting I stay in it, so he'd signed it over to me—mortgage and all. At the back of my mind, I'd thought he'd come back—come home to me. "Recruitment provides a steady income I need to pay the mortgage."

"I can't believe you gave up your business and moved to London for him, then he turned around and did this to you."

"I didn't move to London *for* him." That made me sound weak, and I might have been cheated on and betrayed, but I *refused* to become a victim.

"You'd still be in Manchester if he hadn't had that job opportunity."

"I know, but we were a couple, a team, and it was his dream job." My interior design business had been thriving. I'd started getting repeat business, and every job I got led to another. Matt's job offer had been his dream—and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "He was the man I was going to spend the rest of my life with. I wanted him to have the job he always wanted."

"So you put him first, like you always do."

"I chose our relationship—I chose the dream of a future together. I thought I'd be able to build an interior design business in London." The first few months had been spent settling in and establishing contacts. But when Matt had left me, I'd had no clients to speak of and a mortgage to pay. I'd done the only thing I could do—applied for everything I could find whether or not it was design related.

"But you hate recruitment. You said it was just temporary, and that you'd do it while you were building your client list."

"Yeah, but then life happens." Recruitment was long hours. Since I started the job, I didn't feel like my life was my own. My boss seemed to think she owned me. Last Wednesday she'd called me at ten-thirty at night. I'd been in bed with my iPad, watching *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, hoping to stumble across a spell to turn my life around. She didn't even mention the time, as if it was totally reasonable to call and ask whether the interviews for one of our big clients had gone well. "The only way I could go back to interior design would be if I landed a single client who could keep me busy for, say, six months. That way, I'd have guaranteed money *and* an up-to-date portfolio that would lead to more work."

“Can’t you get a job at an interior design business? At least you’d be doing what you loved.”

“There just aren’t many jobs and when they do come up, the pay is terrible because it’s full of trust-fund kids. They don’t need the money.”

“Excuse me.” The very deep, male voice made the soles of my feet vibrate and my skin pebble with goosebumps.

I looked up into the sunshine and found the hot suit who had bought us champagne standing by our table. My smile overtook me as if elbowing my brain, which knew better, out of the way. “Erm, thank you for the champagne,” I mumbled.

“I couldn’t help but notice you as I passed by, and I wanted to get your attention.”

I didn’t say that he’d managed that just by walking by. “It’s a welcome treat after a shitty day,” I replied. He smiled, and for a split second it was as if a ten-foot wall had appeared, surrounding us, blocking out the rest of the world, leaving just the two of us staring at each other.

“I’m sorry to hear that you’ve had a bad day, but I’m pleased I could improve it,” he said, flashing me a smile that I felt in my knees. His broad shoulders, the warmth that bubbled beneath my skin when he spoke, a cupid’s bow so sharply drawn I’d like to follow its curve with my tongue all said the same thing—this guy was all man.

“Please, join us,” Florence said, and I wanted to kill her. She knew I was now sworn to a life of celibacy. I didn’t need Sex-God Suit waving temptation in my face. Plus I was wearing a splash of the miso soup I’d had for lunch—more proof I wasn’t ready to flirt. Date. *Interact* with men.

“You two have fun,” I said, bending to pick up my bag. “I’m going to head off.”

I knew Florence was scowling at me without even looking at her. But I didn’t care. Okay, so men didn’t hit on me all the time, but today wasn’t the day. I wanted to go home, get into my pajamas, watch *Made in Chelsea*, and eat my body weight in frozen yogurt.

As I stood, Hot Suit put his hand on my shoulder.

“Five minutes of your time? I have a proposal for you, Stella.”

I froze, a chill running down my spine as I tried to figure out how the hell he knew my name.

CHAPTER FIVE

Beck

“How do you know my name?” she asked, flashing me a suspicious look.

“May I join you? I’ll explain.” She frowned but didn’t say no, so I pulled a chair from a neighboring table and took a seat. Stella London was the only single woman going to this wedding. The other two possible names were elderly aunts: one who was completely bedbound, the other based in Florida and no longer able to fly. Both were clearly invited just to be polite.

Stella was my last chance. I had to make this work.

I’d headed to Stella’s office to try to meet her. The situation was too complicated to explain in an email—I’d end up sounding like I was one of those Nigerian lawyers promising you a cool hundred mil if you just sent him three hundred quid for admin. I’d decided the best thing to do was to turn up at her office and ask for a meeting—it was a business proposition I was suggesting, after all. As I passed her in the street, she’d looked familiar and beautiful, but I thought nothing more than that as I’d headed into the bar to go to the loo before heading up to her office. While I had my dick in my hand, I’d realized who she was. I wasn’t about to pass up an opportunity to approach her. There was too much at stake.

“I understand you’re a recruitment consultant,” I said. “And an ambitious one from what I can tell. You’ve been promoted since you joined Foster and Associates, and you’ve only been with them a couple of months.” I paused. I needed to slow down. Take my time. I couldn’t blow this.

I sat back and regarded her. The social media photographs I’d found didn’t do her justice. Her hair was longer and fell in soft, blonde waves to her

shoulders and what I'd thought were blue eyes were almost purple—and entirely distracting. She had full lips that bore no trace of make-up, and a beauty spot on her left cheekbone that a fifties Hollywood bombshell would have been proud of.

She looked at me and frowned. “Why do you know how long I've been in my job? Never mind, I need to be going.”

“I know this is a little odd.” I sat forward. “Just give me a couple of minutes to explain. I'm here to make you a business proposition. One that I believe you'll find very interesting.”

I'd done my research on this woman as I always did when entering into a new business relationship. The worst thing in development was to be surprised after work started. It was the easiest way to overspend. Much easier to spend the effort up front—understand what things were going to cost you and put it into your budget.

From my research, I'd seen that Stella had progressed quickly in her job since coming to London. She'd had a career change, but she was clearly ambitious and driven. She'd given an interview in a trade magazine last month talking about how much she loved the firm she worked for and how she hoped to be partner. I needed to make sure she said yes to my proposal, so it made sense that I would offer her something she really wanted—a further step up, a chance to realize her ambitions. I didn't have time to waste negotiating. I needed Stella to agree.

I was going to make her an offer she couldn't refuse.

“I'm a real estate developer, and I'm about to start a new project. I thought you might want to work on recruiting the team.”

“You want to use Foster and Associates?” Instead of looking excited, she looked confused. It was the same look Joshua had gotten when I'd asked him if he was going to Vegas for Gabriel's stag party—as if my question didn't make sense.

“I think we'd be a great fit. I'll need to recruit over a hundred people, and I could take the proposition to the partners in your firm and make my business contingent on you getting junior partnership.” She can't have ever had that many appointments just fall into her lap. No question of negotiating the fee or it being a non-exclusive contract—Stella had the business. Plus working for Wilde Developments would be a feather in her cap. We were a brand people talked about.

“Why would you do that?”

“Lots of reasons. Like I said, I think we’d work well together and from what I hear, you’re good at your job.”

She rolled her eyes as if I were some lecherous old weasel who had just asked her to come upstairs and see his etchings rather than someone who was offering her a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I’d expected her to be a little more enthusiastic. “Then I suggest you call the office. I don’t deal with real estate.”

Perhaps she’d misheard me. There’s no way she’d be so dismissive if she’d heard me properly. “I’m offering to help you make partner.”

She burst out laughing. Was this girl drunk? This was not going how I’d planned. “As if I care.”

I fisted my hands as my palms started to sweat. *Fuck*. I’d thought that Stella London was career driven and ambitious. Had I got it wrong?

“You don’t want to be partner?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Why do you care? Who are you?”

“I need a great recruitment consultant,” I said, my brain whirring, trying to get ahead of this conversation.

“Well, I’m not one.” She exhaled and turned to her friend. “I’m not cut out for it.”

If she didn’t care about recruitment then she could just name her price. I was an idiot; I should have had a backup plan. From the article I’d read, I’d clearly made assumptions I shouldn’t have. “I need your help, Stella.” How had I ended up in a place where the goal I’d been working toward my entire life was dependent on whether a stranger wanted a promotion? If this was any other real estate deal, I would have walked away months ago. But I couldn’t give up on this one.

“Seriously, anyone in the office would be glad of the work. Call Sheila. She’s in charge of real estate recruitment.”

Any recruitment consultant wasn’t what I needed. I had to level with her or I was going to lose her. “Yeah, but she doesn’t have what I need.”

She turned toward me. “Which is what? I’m not sleeping with you because you have a staffing crisis.”

I couldn’t help myself—I laughed. “No, that’s not what I mean. I want to talk to you about Matthew and Karen’s wedding.”

She turned the color of freshly fallen snow. “What about it?”

“I was hoping I could go as your guest.”

“Well, you’re fresh out of luck. Because there’s no way I’ll be there and

even if I was—you're a perfect stranger."

I was jinxed when it came to this deal. "I just need you to hear me out. Give me five minutes."

She glanced at her friend. "You're right. I'm not good at putting myself first. I should leave, right?"

Her friend shrugged. "You can always walk away when you've heard him out."

Stella sighed and collapsed back on her chair. "Okay, then be straight with me. Who the hell are you, how do you know me, and what on planet Earth do you want?"

She was clearly out of patience. I normally found that when my back was against the wall, straightforward honesty was the way to go.

"I'm Beck Wilde. I'm a real estate developer. A man called Henry Dawnay holds my future in his hands. He owns a building that I need to buy."

When I was doing up bedsits in Hackney, before Hackney was popular, exhausted from twenty-hour days and filthy from pulling up floorboards and knocking down walls, every now and then I'd take the tube to Bond Street and wander around Mayfair in the middle of the night to stare at the Dawnay building. It had become an obsession.

I wanted that building. I wanted to buy it so I could demolish it. Rebuild it from the ground up so it was new and better. I wanted to conquer it. Conquer my past.

I would stop at nothing to buy that property.

But Stella London was my last hope.

"Karen's godfather?" she asked.

I had to hold myself back from pinning her to the chair and asking her whether she had met him. This could work out even better than I'd hoped. "You know him?"

"A bit. He was always around for her birthdays, and we went to his place in the Bahamas when we were seventeen, but I don't see why you need to go to a wedding to buy a building. How do you know me and what—"

"On planet Earth do I want?" I finished for her. "I've been trying and failing to get a meeting with Henry for months. That wedding will provide an opportunity to speak to him, to convince him to sell his Mayfair property."

"I don't get what that's got to do with me."

"I did my research. I know you were invited—I want to go as your plus one."

She laughed. “Yeah, well, like I said, I’m not going, so you need to find someone else.”

I hadn’t counted on her refusing the invitation just like I hadn’t expected her to laugh in my face when I offered to help make her partner. I never fucked up like this. Every sign I got was telling me to walk away from this deal. But I couldn’t. This building was a symbol of bad luck for my family. It just made me more committed to buying it and making it mine. “I would make it worth your while.” She could have the entire nine-point-four million in profit I was projected to make for all I cared. Well maybe not the entire profit.

“Like I said, I’m not going to the wedding and I don’t care about getting Foster and Associates new work.” She stood again. “And this time, I’m really leaving. Florence, I’ll call you later, and man with the Dom—Beck, whatever—thanks for the champagne.”

Christ, I was losing her. Maybe I’d come on too strong. I should give her space. Try again on a different day when she’d had time to think about it. I pulled out a business card. “You don’t care about getting Foster and Associates new business,” I said. “I get it. But consider what it is you do want. Even if it’s just a check. I need to get into that wedding.”

“A check? No amount of money could convince me to celebrate the marriage of Matt and Karen.”

Why couldn’t I catch a break, have a stroke of good luck? It was like someone was deliberately trying to sabotage this project. I was used to my hard work paying off. I’d never put so much time and effort into securing a property and yet I was stuck—making no progress. It was as if the development was punching me invisibly and in slow motion over and over.

“If not a check, maybe I can do you a favor,” I said. “I know a lot of people. If you wanted to move jobs, I might be able to help. Or maybe you want a holiday of a lifetime. Have a think.”

“I’m not interested,” Stella said. “Going to that wedding would be like a holiday in hell. Worse.”

“Stella,” her friend said. “Take his business card.”

Stella shot her friend a look that could kill. “I’m not going to that wedding. I don’t care about getting a shitty promotion. Or a holiday. Nothing is worth enduring that for.”

“I know. But there are things you do care about,” her friend said. “You don’t lose anything by taking the guy’s business card. That way if you think

of something you want that's worth going to that wedding, you can call him."

I wanted to write Stella's friend a check right there.

She grabbed my business card out of my hand like a child resignedly eating its carrots. "This day is out of control. I need it to be over."

I knew that feeling.

CHAPTER SIX

Stella

“Think about it as if he’s the genie.” Florence’s voice crackled out from the speakerphone as I finished up brushing my teeth.

I took a sip of water from my glass, rinsed my mouth, and spat it out. “Have you been drinking?”

“I’m serious. Hot Suit’s the genie.”

“What? And I’m the lamp? Well, he’s not getting inside me.”

“No, you crazy pervert. You’re Aladdin.”

I rolled my eyes. “And he’s going to grant me three wishes?”

“Exactly. He said to think about what you want. You might not be going for partnership at your recruitment consultancy, but maybe he can help you get a different job.”

“Have you forgotten the price the genie’s asking me to pay? You can’t think that it’s a good idea for me to go to that wedding. I’d rather stab myself through the hand with a rusty knife over and over.”

What was Florence thinking? She didn’t even want to go to the wedding. A wedding was about celebrating two people in love, not watching two people who had lied and betrayed you in the worst way possible start their lives together.

“Of course, going to the wedding would be horrific,” Florence said.

“Well, we both agree on that.”

“But . . .”

What was she thinking with her *buts*? There were no acceptable *buts* in this situation. There was no way I was going to that wedding.

“You really want your business back. Your life back. Right?”

“Of course.” I wanted to rewind to back when Matt loved me, and we were happy together. But I didn’t know when that had been. Had he and Karen been sneaking around behind my back while we were in Manchester? Was the reason we’d come to London so they could be together? I took another swig of water.

“If Beck can give you that, then maybe a few days at the wedding would be worth it.”

Had Karen got to her? Had someone convinced Florence that what Karen and Matt had done wasn’t so bad? “Beck can’t rewind time. He can’t stop Matt and Karen getting married.”

“If he can’t undo your past, he might be able to make your future better.”

I couldn’t think about the future. I was still stuck in the fog, trying to figure out which way was up. The two months before the invitations arrived, I’d gone about my business, thinking that ultimately Matt would come back to me. I hadn’t actually thought we were done for good. I hadn’t started planning for life without him.

“I know it would be awful,” Florence continued. “But think of it this way—they sent you that invitation because they were cowards, because they wanted to hurt you. Who knows? But, if you were to go? It’s the last thing they’re expecting. You take some control back. You’d make them feel really uncomfortable.”

“Making them feel uncomfortable isn’t worth making myself miserable.”

“Agreed. But it’s more than making them feel uncomfortable. It’s about putting yourself first for once.” As I went to interrupt her, she continued. “Just hear me out. If, in theory, this guy, Beck, could give you something that would make going to this wedding worth it, then you should do it. Agreed?”

Florence was like a dog with a bone. I didn’t understand why she wouldn’t drop this. “There isn’t anything I could want from Beck. Nothing would be worth going to that wedding for.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” she said. “He says he’s a property developer, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “He wants to buy some property that Henry Dawnay owns in Mayfair.” I grabbed the latest issue of *Elle Decoration* from my bedside table. I’d let Florence keep talking—she clearly needed to get this out of her system—but there was no way I was going to that wedding.

“Right. So, I’ve been looking him up. Because, what else is there to do on

the bus but research strangers on your phone? I've been known to nab shots of people who look interesting when they get on and run them through facial recognition software."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope. Knowing more about someone than they know about me is powerful. Anyway, Google Wilde Developments."

There was no point arguing. I was just going to have to placate Florence. I pulled my laptop from the end of the bed and did as she asked.

"First, everything he said seems to be true. He's in real estate and has made a lot of money developing boutique, high-end residential units in central London. Can you see them?"

As I brought up the sleek, image-heavy website, my heart began to flutter as if it were being brought back to life. The projects displayed were breathtaking. Spacious, airy, with incredible views. The finishes used were expensive—Italian marble, Murano glass, and beautiful porcelain tiles. As a designer, I'd love to work with this kind of budget. And I loved the unusual spaces that had been carved out of the old buildings. Modern classic was my personal style, not that anyone would know if they came to my home, despite me being an interior designer. Matt had been very particular with our flat. When I was in the business, my portfolio had been much more traditional because that was what my clients had wanted. The stuff Wilde Developments was doing was much more what I liked to work with. "I wonder who his designer is," I said, scrolling through the pages. "They have great taste."

"So do you," Florence said.

"With a budget like this, there's a lot I could do." I missed transforming spaces from shabby and unloved to fresh and exciting. I felt like a fairy godmother, making people's lives a little better by improving their homes—providing a space they loved they could retreat to when they needed comfort or show-off when they wanted to impress friends. The way I saw it, I was like a doctor or a therapist—I produced medicine for the soul.

"That's exactly my point. You can ask Beck to give you that opportunity."

"What? A check so I can redesign my flat? No way—I'm not taking money from a stranger in return for a date."

"No!" she yelled. "He's going to redevelop the Mayfair property, right?"

"Right." Had I missed something?

"So, tell him you want to be the lead designer on the development."

I snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. I haven’t worked in six months. I have no portfolio. And I’ve never done anything on this scale. Or in this style.”

“Use your portfolio from your Manchester business,” Florence said.

“The clients want a very different look in Manchester—it’s not as cutting edge and the clients aren’t international. And I never did any new build stuff. You can do a lot more with a blank canvas.”

“Well it doesn’t matter anyway, because you don’t have to interview. You know you can do it. Can’t you? That would be worth going up to Scotland for.”

Florence was being ridiculous. I couldn’t just demand a job from a stranger. He’d laugh in my face. I couldn’t even convince my boyfriend that I was good at my job. What hope did I have that I could convince a high-end real estate developer? “Well, of course I could do it, but I have no proof to offer him. There’s no way—” Designing the interiors of one of these buildings was stuff my dreams were made of. All I had on my CV recently was recruitment. Even when I had been interior designing, I’d never taken on a project like the ones Wilde Developments did. I wouldn’t impress Beck with the interior spaces I’d done in Manchester.

“Beck said to consider what it is you want. And you keep telling me you hate your job. Sounds like a perfect solution.”

“What, resort to blackmail?”

“It’s not blackmail—it’s a business deal. He’s got something you want—you’ve got something he wants. It’s an exchange.”

“You could say the same thing about a prostitute and her client.”

“I’m not saying sleep with the guy—although I’m sure it will be tempting as all hell. He asked you to name your price to take you to a wedding. A job like that would be worth a week of pain, wouldn’t it? This is a chance to get your career back, your life back. Is a lifetime’s happiness worth a week watching your shit-for-brains ex marry a girl you thought was a friend?”

A job for a company like Wilde Developments would last for months and build my portfolio so I could go back to doing what I loved.

“In theory. But I’m not sure I’m capable of witnessing Karen and Matt together, of watching them get married.” The words stuck in my throat. Karen had known I’d wanted Matt to propose. I’d talked to her about it. She’d offered her advice, told me to give him an ultimatum. Were they together then? Had her advice been designed to break us apart rather than move us forward? Every conversation I’d ever had with her had a shadow

cast over it. I'd thought she'd bury a body for me. But, now I knew that mine was the body she wanted to bury—so she could marry my boyfriend.

“Do you think it's actually physically possible for me to go to that wedding? I think I'd throw up constantly or start uncontrollably screaming through the speeches or something. I don't trust myself not to do something terrible.”

“If you go, I'll come with you,” Florence said. “As moral support. And you never know, you might gain strength from knowing that you were using their wedding to get what you wanted. It's an opportunity for you to take the power back. It's the chance for closure.”

Powerlessness . . . Yes, that was a good description of what I'd felt over the last few weeks. My future had been snatched from me and I could do nothing about it.

I hated Karen. And I hated that I hated her. I didn't want to be someone filled with bitterness and hate. I wanted to move on. I wanted that closure Florence promised.

Something to aim for would give me a focus rather than constantly ruminating over the two people I didn't want to think about at all.

“And if you needed more icing on the cake, you get to go to the wedding with the hottest guy I've ever seen. People will assume you're a couple—in fact you can make him Dermot Mulroney. Get him to pretend to be your boyfriend—you'll be winning at life.”

Florence made it sound like the deal was done. “So, you want me to convince Beck to make me the lead designer on a multi-billion-pound property development *and* pretend to be my boyfriend, and at the end of the week, I'll have closure and be over my ex bff and ex-boyfriend betraying me?” Florence's positivity was endearing but she was clearly drunk or crazy.

“Are you telling me you'd still refuse to go to the wedding if Genie-Beck made that deal?”

Of course, there was no way I could refuse the deal Florence was describing. She was right, I'd been making decisions and compromises as one half of a couple for a long time. I'd put Matt and my relationship before anything. But Matt and I weren't in a relationship anymore. We weren't just on a break. I was on my own. And I had to start thinking about my future. The recruitment consultancy job was going to be a temporary measure that turned permanent if I didn't take decisive action.

Was it possible that Beck Wilde was my winning lottery ticket? My dose

of medicine that would help me heal, help me get over the way Matt and Karen had betrayed me, and hand me a career-making job opportunity at the same time? “There’s no way he’d agree.”

“You won’t know if you don’t ask. What have you got to lose?”

It felt as if I’d already lost everything I’d ever had—my career, my relationship—but going to the wedding just might take my pride.

And it might just give me it back.

All I had to do was convince Beck I had the ability to take on a project like his with no track record, no proof whatsoever, then show up to the wedding of my ex-boyfriend and ex-best friend.

Should be easy, right?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beck

Normally, I was all about finding creative solutions to impossible problems. That was what real estate development was all about, but *normal* was not the situation I was in.

A shit-storm—that was the situation I was currently in.

“Look, Beck, I’ve done as much as I can. Your time is up.” Craig’s voice rang out from the speakerphone on my shiny glass desk.

Chills ran down my body. There had to be more I could do. I couldn’t just walk away from the Mayfair project. I spun my chair to the side, so I got a view of St Paul’s dome towering above me. The sight through the windows was a reminder to me of how far I’d come. “It’s not as simple as putting it behind me. The market’s changed. No one can hold property for a few months without developing it and come out with a profit.”

I’d lose ten million pounds.

At least.

And if it was *just* ten million pounds, it would be easier to walk away. But this development offered me more than money could buy.

Craig wasn’t the one who’d have to swallow the loss and he certainly wasn’t going to lose sleep over me walking away from a lifetime’s ambition.

“So, you’ll make a loss. It’s a sunk cost. Move on.”

I shook my head. That wasn’t going to happen. I hadn’t given up on Henry. If I could just get five minutes, I was sure I could convince him to sell.

“I know it’s not what you want to hear, but the bank can’t extend terms

anymore. We're going to have to pull the funding. You'll get an official notice by courier later today setting out that you have thirty days to either start works, or we'll step in and put the property on the market if you still refuse to."

I sat back in my chair, running a finger around the collar of my shirt, as if trying to loosen the noose I felt tightening around my throat. The words had been said. Craig had dressed it up but effectively I'd be in default of my loan if I didn't make progress within the month. I'd lose money, my dream, and my reputation was going to take a kicking.

I was down for the count. I had to stumble to my feet somehow—find the energy from somewhere.

There was no way I could let the bank step in. If the development failed, there would be whispers in the industry about whether I'd lost my edge. It might even put off future lenders funding other projects. I couldn't go backward. I'd come a long way from developing one-off flats in the East End.

Stella *bloody* London.

I'd thought she'd be the answer to everything. But I hadn't given up on her.

I had to think creatively. But at the moment I was out of ideas, my brain was blank, and hope was the only thing left.

"I'm not going to default," I told Craig. "I'll have the signatures on the Dawnay building, believe me."

"I hope so, but like I said, you get thirty days to get that transfer to happen or we take steps to recover the loan."

A knock on my office door interrupted my quick comeback. "I'll keep you updated," I said, and turned to see the door open and the receptionist enter. "I have to go, my next meeting's arrived." I didn't have a meeting for a couple of hours, but there was no point in rehashing old ground with Craig. I understood him loud and clear. He'd lowered the sword of Damocles a couple of centimeters more.

"Sorry to interrupt, sir," Gina said, "but I have a Stella London in reception who insists that you'll want to see her."

The pressure around my ribs abated a little, allowing me to take a breath and register the grin that was nudging at the corners of my mouth.

Just when I thought my arse was about to hit the floor, lady luck smiled on me and brought me Stella London. There was only one reason she'd be

here—to make a deal.

Right about now, I'd say yes to anything she wanted to get me into that wedding.

I asked Gina to bring her in, then dragged my fingers through my hair.

Stella entered the room, her blonde hair swept back from her face, her red skirt clinging to her perfect hourglass figure. The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention as if about to be inspected by a sergeant major. Perhaps it was because she'd been sitting when I'd met her, but I hadn't remembered her as being quite so attractive.

"Thanks for coming in," I said. "Can I offer you something to drink? Tea, coffee?"

"I'll take a sparkling water. No ice."

I glanced at Gina who nodded and shut the door on her way out.

"It's nice to see you again." Attractive women were always nice to see, but I was hoping I was going to like what she had to say even better than I liked looking at her. And I liked looking at her a lot.

"Now I've done some research about you so I'm not so much on the back foot," she said.

If she'd looked me up, she must be interested in whether I could be trusted. And that meant she was definitely interested in making a deal. Now she knew I wasn't a charlatan or a conman, we could get on with business. "Please, have a seat," I said, indicating the chair opposite my desk. "And you must tell me what you found out."

She glanced around my office as she sat. "A lot." She narrowed her eyes at me as I took a seat opposite her. "Some good things. Some . . ." She blushed, clearly not wanting to tell me what she was thinking, which made me want to know all the more. "Lots of things."

"Tell me," I said, and I couldn't help but grin. Christ, the blush began to spread down her neck, and I wanted to pull open the buttons of her blouse and trace it down as far as it went.

"Never mind," she snapped. Her sharp words made my cock twitch, and I cleared my throat, trying to focus my attention on the business she was here to do. "But I do know that you need an introduction to Henry, which I can provide you with."

"So, I'll accompany you to the wedding?" My heart knocked on my ribs as if it were trying to get my attention. Was it that easy? "For the entire week," I added. I had thirty days, and by the time the wedding rolled around,

I'd have a week left. I'd need all the time I could get with Henry. It wasn't just a question of convincing him to do the deal in principle. I needed his signature on the paperwork.

"If you agree to my terms."

She just had to name them. There was nothing I wouldn't do to go to this wedding. After that call with Craig, I had no time to lose. It was like I was standing, looking at the summit of Everest just a few steps away, and being told I couldn't make it. I hadn't come all this way just to walk away from achieving everything I ever wanted.

"Go on," I said, trying not to look too eager to hear what she had to say.

"You've been holding the Mayfair properties next to Henry's a while now and it must be costing you a lot of money."

I wanted her to get to the point. She wasn't telling me anything I didn't know.

"What are your terms, Stella?"

"I've had a look at your work." She paused as if deciding what to say next. "I want to be the designer on the building—kitchens, bathrooms, floors, joinery, finishes, then I'll decorate and dress an apartment for public viewings." She crossed her long legs in front of her, and I had to fight to keep focused on what she was saying.

I let her words sink in and tried to reorder them in my brain in a way that made sense. "You're a recruitment consultant," I said, trying to think back to the research I'd had done on her. She'd moved to London about six months ago from Manchester and started at the recruitment firm. Had she had a background in design? Surely she didn't think anyone off the street could become a designer overnight.

"I trained in interior design," she said. "Had my own business up until six months ago. This kind of project is right up my street."

Her gaze flitted from my shoulder to my hand and then out of the window. She was lying about something. I just wasn't sure which bit. I remember that she'd had her own business in a completely unrelated field when she'd been in Manchester. I must have been so fixated on being able to give work to the recruitment consultancy that I'd skimmed over the fact that it was an interior design business. *Shit*, I was so hungry for a win, I was missing details. "I have someone for that project already." How serious was she about this? Could I persuade her just to take a check? That would be a lot easier.

She pushed out her chair and went to stand as if the conversation was over, but there was no way I'd let her leave. "Talk to me about your experience. You're in recruitment now, why do you want to go back?"

"I changed jobs because of a personal situation, but designing is what I want to do," she said. "I love great design but more than that, I like to create homes that people love to live in—places people can imagine themselves. Places people raise a family, celebrate their successes, and recover from their failures. It's my passion, my calling if you like, and I'm really good at it." She cleared her throat as if she were nervous. "You asked me for my terms—I'm telling you what they are."

At least she was prepared to make a deal. "Do you have a portfolio that I can look at?" Rather than just dismiss her conditions, hopefully I could point out, as charmingly as possible, why her suggestion was ludicrous, and I could get her to accept something else—something I was able to give her.

"This isn't a job interview. If you don't want to go to this wedding, then fine." She stood and had her hand on my office door handle by the time I got to her.

"Stella, come on. Let's discuss this," I said, inhaling a strain of rose petals. I brushed up against the silk of her blouse. I was entirely too close to her, and I took a step back. I put my hands in my pockets, stopping myself from pushing her hair off her face so I could see those eyes better. "You can understand that the kind of properties I work on require a designer with a track record working at the cutting edge of design. I'm just trying to protect us both."

"Sounds to me like you want to have your cake and eat it, too. You asked me to name my terms."

I needed to think fast. I wasn't a man who liked being held at gunpoint but that was what Stella was doing. But the alternative was the bank blowing my brains out. I had to get to Henry. I'd do whatever it took. Maybe she could work alongside the designer I already had on board for the project.

"I know this isn't an interview," I said. "But humor me." She held my gaze and didn't flounce out, so I continued. "Say I agreed to have you work on the Mayfair project. What's your vision?"

She sighed but began to speak. "I'd say you're trying to appeal to wealthy people who have their main home in the country and just want a *pied-à-terre* or childless singles and couples. And you're selling to an international market—we'd have to consider that. I think the style of your last development in

Fitzrovia works well, but potential buyers are going to expect a little more luxury, more exclusivity with the same classic style. I'd suggest we have each unit have something unique about it. That's not unusual in these high-end developments but most of them go modern—I suggest we go vintage. We could use antique glass in the bedrooms, inset some reclaimed marble into one of the walls in the bathroom with glass shelving in front. A theatre close to my office is being refurbished. We could buy the stage off them, restore it, and use it as the floors in a master bedroom. Or I can source light fixtures from stately homes. We don't want to overdo anything—just one or two things in each apartment that no one else has that has a history that we can use as part of the story of what's so appealing about the flat. It's beautiful. But it's marketing.”

I liked her ideas. And she understood I was aiming to sell the apartments, not just make them look pretty. I took a deep breath. She had me by the balls. If I said no, I'd say goodbye to my best chance of getting the Dawnay building. “I've got to have the right to pull you from the development if things aren't working out.” Maybe I could get her to take me to the wedding and then renegotiate—give her a one-off flat to design and then use my normal designer on the Mayfair project. Worst-case scenario, I'd just have to gut the place after she was done.

She pulled out her folio case from where it was tucked under her arm and produced some paperwork. “You can fire me if I miss the deadlines set out in the project plan or if I overspend by more than seven percent. It's set out there in clause ten.”

I flicked through the contract for services she'd handed me.

“It's all standard stuff,” she said. “Just sign on the last page.”

Without a contract, I had options. If I signed, I was out of negotiating power. I had no choice other than to sign and worry about it later. “You better be good,” I said, pulling my pen from my inside pocket and leaning the contract on the back of the door.

“I'm better than good. Oh, and just one more thing.”

I dotted the “i” in Wilde and glanced up, waiting to hear what she was going to say—she probably wanted input on layouts or a profit share.

“You have to pretend you're my boyfriend—serious-about-to-propose-completely-in love-with-me boyfriend.”

I grinned. Was she asking me on a date? “At the wedding?” I asked.

“Yes, at the engagement party and while we're in Scotland and any other

event that comes up.”

I leaned against the door and took her in. “How many events are there?”

Again, her gaze flitted from my shoulder to the dome of St Paul’s cathedral behind me. “I don’t know. There’s the wedding and engagement party as far as I know.”

This must be her way of asking me out. “If you want to make this a real date, you just had to say. You’re an attractive woman, and—”

She sighed. “Don’t be an asshole. I don’t need a boyfriend. I just need to *look* like I have a boyfriend.” She snatched the signed contract from me and stuffed it into her bag. “It’s strictly a business deal. Just like this.” She waved the paperwork in front of me. “I just need it to be believable. That’s all.”

It was obviously important to her, but I didn’t get it. “So you want us to pretend when we’re in public but not when we’re alone?”

She tipped her head to the side. “I’m not asking you to be my gigolo, Beck. Everything would be for show.” She rolled her eyes as if I was just the stupidest man she’d ever met. Stella London was a new experience for me. I was used to women flirting. Smiling. Playing with their hair when they spoke to me—not being exasperated like I was an annoying little brother.

“But why?” I got the feeling I was an extra in a daytime soap and hadn’t received all the script.

“Does it matter? It’s part of my terms. Agree or don’t go. It’s as simple as that.”

I wasn’t complaining. It was weird but not a deal-breaker. I just was curious about why she’d make it a condition. “Okay. I’ll make-believe to be your boyfriend.” I wasn’t much of a real boyfriend, but who knew, maybe if I faked it, I’d be better at my next relationship.

“Then you’ve got a deal. Engagement party’s this Saturday.” She turned toward the door. “Pick me up at seven.” Stella headed out of my office.

“Hang on, I need your address. And your number.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out. You tracked me down at my favorite bar, after all.” The door slammed shut on me feeling like I might be on the losing end of this deal.

This woman was going to give me a run for my money. But, for ten million quid, my future business and the chance to right the wrongs of my past, I’d put up with it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stella

This was what a brave face looked like, I told myself as I looked in the mirror. For once, I'd managed to put on false eyelashes without looking like a hooker. And the tinted moisturizer I'd bought on sale was living up to its promise to even out my skin tone. I hoped it would cover up the hives I was bound to break into any moment at the thought of being within a ten-foot radius of Matt and Karen. Couldn't they have eloped to Tasmania or something?

"Are you sure you don't want me to pick you up? It's on my way," Florence said.

"No, Beck is coming over." I glanced at the time. He was due any minute. He'd emailed me exactly two hours after I'd left his office earlier in the week telling me he'd found my email, mobile phone, and home address. He'd probably had it already but making him work for it—and him figuring it out—felt good. With Matt I'd always been the one to pick the restaurant, make sure his suit was dry cleaned, and the cab was booked. And look where it had gotten me.

Florence sighed. "It was a genius idea of making him your boyfriend for wedding season, even if I do say so myself."

"*Pretend* boyfriend. But yeah. It makes the idea of tonight and the wedding slightly less horrifying."

"It solves a lot of problems for you. I mean you get to go to the wedding, pretend you've moved on—"

"Hey, I have moved on. I'm planning for my future. I didn't even have a

glass of wine last night.” It wasn’t that the fog had lifted, but since I’d been to Beck’s offices, I just had slightly better visibility.

A pause at the other end of the line made me think she didn’t believe me. But it wasn’t like I wanted Matt back. Okay maybe I missed him, or at least missed who I’d thought he was. But no one forgot a betrayal like that.

“Have you heard from Karen since you RSVP’d for you and Beck?” she asked.

“Nope. Just the automatic reply. Have you?”

I could almost hear the grin at the other end of the phone. “Yeah, she called me yesterday. Tell me you’re looking white-hot tonight. What are you wearing?”

I stared at myself in the mirror. Hot wasn’t how I’d describe myself, but I hadn’t had a breakout and my hair hadn’t done that thing where it went limp and stuck to my face—the body-building shampoo had done its job—so it could have been worse. “That black, sequined tuxedo jacket and the black trousers with a white cami.”

“Ditch the cami. Just wear the jacket.”

“You mean just wear my bra? Don’t be ridiculous. I’m doing my best *not* to look like a hooker despite my eyelashes’ desire to have me change profession.”

“No bra. That jacket has buttons. And if you go to the retailer’s website, they show it being worn without anything underneath it.”

I didn’t have much boobage, it was true, but what I had, I didn’t want the world to see.

“You have that tit tape, right? Get busy and get rid of the cami.”

My buzzer sounded and I jumped before the churning in my stomach returned. This was really happening. If I thought about it too much, I wouldn’t answer my door and I’d dive under my bed with a bottle of wine and *Elle Decoration*. “Gotta go. Beck’s here. And by the way—call him Beck when you see him, not Hot Suit.”

Henry wouldn’t be at the party tonight and Beck knew that, so he was only coming to the party for me—to fulfill his end of our agreement. Part of me had worried that he’d back out—find another way of getting what he wanted—and I’d be left with egg on my face. Again. Trying to explain why I hadn’t turned up to the wedding I’d said yes to.

I ran down the stairs barefoot to collect him. His silhouette filled the stained-glass panels in the door—I’d forgotten how tall he was.

“Hey,” I said as I swung open the door and smiled. He might be obligated to come tonight, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t be nice about it, right?

“Miss London,” he said and handed me a small bunch of flowers.

“Sweet peas?” I wouldn’t have expected flowers from a real boyfriend, let alone blooms so unusual. “Come up,” I said as I started up the stairs.

“My mother’s favorite.”

“You didn’t have to bring flowers.” I turned left into the kitchen and pulled a vase down from the cupboard. “The fake boyfriend thing is for other people. I’m really not desperate for male company. But thank you.”

He stood in the doorway to the kitchen that Matt used to say was too small for two when I suggested we cook together. “I like to be good at things. And it pains me to say that I’m not a good boyfriend.”

I grinned. “It’s not a shock. I’ve yet to meet a man who is.” It was strange to see another guy in my flat. There’d been no one since Matt. But it wasn’t uncomfortable having Beck in my space. Perhaps because we weren’t dating—I wasn’t comparing him to Matt. I wasn’t worried if the lighting was flattering or whether he was going to see my flesh-colored control underwear. I didn’t care what he thought of me.

I took the vase of flowers and shooed him out of the room. “Have a seat, I’ll be out in a minute. Don’t touch anything.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” he said, raising his palms and backing toward the sofa.

I studied him, trying to figure out if he was serious. “You think I come across as someone who tells everyone what to do?” Matt used to complain about me being bossy, but Florence and Karen used to tell me he was being a dick. Did Karen believe it when she said it, or was she trying to cover up her real feelings? Had she always loved Matt or was it something that had grown between them? A metallic taste burned in my mouth and I swallowed, trying to make it disappear.

Beck’s chuckle halted my anxiety’s momentum. His laugh was unexpected and warmed the tips of my fingers like a welcoming fire on a cold day. It was confident rather than cocky. He dipped his eyes down to his shoes and then back up to hold my gaze. “I think you come across as a woman who knows what she wants and won’t let anything stand in her way of getting it.”

If I had any chance at having another successful relationship, I probably needed to learn to be less bossy. Florence would disagree. But it was her job to build me up, so her opinion didn’t count.

“It’s not a bad thing,” he said, frowning. “You look pissed off. Don’t be. I like it. It’s hot. It’s like you’re my female equivalent.”

“And like the narcissist you are, you find yourself hot?” I laughed and my stomach shifted like the heavy, stone door of an Egyptian tomb that hadn’t been opened for a thousand years. How did this complete stranger make me feel so bloody comfortable?

“Nothing wrong with healthy self-confidence,” he replied.

There was no doubt that Beck had self-confidence in spades. Maybe if I hung out with him for a bit, some of it would rub off.

“Give me two minutes and we’ll get going.” As I headed to my bedroom, I called out from down the hall. “I just need to decide on my outfit. I can’t figure out if I need a top under my jacket.”

“Or what?”

I pulled off my silk cami and slipped on the jacket, buttoning the two buttons. “Or what, what?” I called through to the sitting room.

“A top or what else?”

“Just my bra,” I replied and headed back into my sitting room. “What do you think?” I asked, as I peered down at my cleavage. It seemed a little too much from this angle.

“Definitely just your bra,” Beck said and when I looked up, I found him staring at my cleavage, too.

“You see? I can’t wear this. My boobs are out.” I didn’t want to look as if I was trying too hard, and I didn’t want Matt to think I was slutty. He’d always been really particular about how I dressed, and although at first I’d seen it as controlling, after meeting his family, I understood that he was trying to stop his mother from complaining. I might hate Matt, but I didn’t want him to look at me and say, “Thank God it’s not her I asked to marry me.” I wanted to wear something that made him regret what he’d done.

“They’re not *totally* out,” Beck said. “They’re just giving me a little wave.”

I pulled my hands up to my chest. “They’re not waving to you or anyone else.”

“Winking then.”

“Holy crap,” I said, turning and heading back to my bedroom. “My breasts don’t wink!”

“Well, if you were my girlfriend, I’d be very happy to take you out with winking breasts.”

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. "I need to advise you not to say that to a woman. *Ever.*" I'd just met this guy and already we were talking about my boobs. I guess we *were* in a serious relationship.

"Good tip," he called out. "But seriously, you look hot—better than with the top, which was a little . . . old."

Old wasn't what I was going for.

"This way, you're sexy," he said. "Your outfit, I mean."

I scooped up my evening bag and called out, "Let's go." He met me at the front door. "I think we're going to crush this fake relationship thing if we can talk about my boobs so casually. Before the end of the night, we'll be peeing with the bathroom door open."

He held the door open and I dipped under his arm to make my way out. "We probably should swap a few details about each other, or at the least get our story straight on how we met, how long we've been dating and stuff."

I paused halfway down the stairs as a rush of ice kissed the base of my spine and shivered up to my neck. "Shit. We're completely unprepared. I mean, I don't even know where you grew up or what your middle name is."

I was planning to go in and lie to everyone about how this Beck guy was the love of my life, and I didn't know what he liked to do on Sunday mornings. Was he a gym guy or a lie-in-and-read-the-papers kind of man?

It was going to be completely obvious that we'd just met.

I was about to be completely humiliated.

I pulled the door shut and locked up. Perhaps I should ask him to leave, call this entire thing off. It was a ridiculous idea. Bloody Florence. Only she could have talked me into this.

"Kent and Robert," he said, holding his arm out for a passing cab.

"I don't think we should do this," I said, my feet fixed firmly to the pavement as Beck held the cab door open for me. "It's insane. People are going to think I'm a lunatic when they find out I'm pretending we're dating."

"Get in the cab, Stella."

"I mean it. I'm a terrible liar at the best of times. But I'm not prepared for this."

"We can talk about it on the way."

Maybe it was the way he was so calm, but I did as he said and got into the cab, telling the driver where to head.

"I suggest we say we met at work. It's easier to stay as close to the truth as possible. You pitched some design work to me, got the job, and I asked

you out.”

He was either an excellent liar or he’d done this before. “Do you have a lot of experience at this kind of thing?”

“Having a fake girlfriend?” He raised his eyebrows as if I’d just asked him if he’d ever considered keeping a llama as a pet.

“You know, lying.”

“Everyone lies,” he said. “But I’ve never had a fake girlfriend, no.”

“Oh my God. Do you have a real one?” Of course he had a girlfriend. This guy made the Hemsworth brothers look like they lost out in the gene pool lottery. “She can’t like this idea.” My heart clattered about in my ribcage, waking my pulse and making my hands sweaty. “What if someone knows her—”

“Seriously, Stella, you need to calm down or you’re going to bring on a stroke. I’m not dating anyone.”

“You’re not? How come?” Beck was handsome, wealthy. He should have had a string of women hanging on his every word.

“If I remember correctly from the voicemail my ex-girlfriend left me last week, it’s because I’m a selfish, workaholic asshole—no, that’s not right. I’m a piece of shit. Not an asshole.”

I winced. I had asked. “Were you together long?”

He chuckled again, running his knuckles along his jawline. “A few months. I’m not nursing a broken heart; don’t worry about it.”

For a second, I forgot about the party, about Karen and Matt, and wanted to ask Beck exactly how long they’d been together, whether he’d been faithful, or if they’d lived together, but somehow I stopped myself.

“Perhaps we should skip tonight,” I said. “Do some homework—study each other—then go to the wedding prepared. It’s only two weeks away but by then I should at least know if you like tofu or hang gliding.”

“It’s a mutually exclusive choice?” he asked, grinning.

I couldn’t help but smile back. “Please, God, don’t tell me you like tofu.” I sighed dramatically. “I’m not sure I could have a fake relationship with a bean curd lover.”

Pride lapped at the edges of my insides as he chuckled. Creating that laugh felt like it deserved some kind of award or a badge, at least.

“You’re safe. We’ll be fine tonight. We’ll just have to try to not get separated for too long, then you won’t get asked questions about me and vice versa.”

I admired his optimism. Something was bound to go catastrophically wrong. Even though I didn't want to because I didn't want someone else to feel sorry for me, I had to tell him about Matt. It wasn't as if he was just another guest at the party. He was the groom. This was his party. People would assume Beck knew my history with Matt. I braced myself for that sideways tip of the head followed by either the I'm-so-sorry face or the sharp intake of breath, shocked face. "You should probably know that I used to date the groom," I said.

He turned to me as the cab stopped and the streetlight highlighted the contours of his face, emphasizing his sharp jaw. Men were so lucky—they could just roll out of bed, stick on a suit and look completely fuckable. I'd spent the best part of two and a half hours trying my best to look sexy without straying into slutty territory.

"You did? For how long?" he asked.

I sighed and checked out of the front window to see if the lights had changed. "A long time. We met at university." Things hadn't been great between us for a while, I'd known that, but I'd thought we were in it for the long haul. All couples go through bad patches.

"And you're still friendly enough to be invited to the wedding? How evolved of you."

I shrugged, trying to ignore the weight of his stare pressing into my skin. "We have a lot of mutual friends. It's easier if we're civil."

"Do you like his fiancée?"

I'd expected him to ask me when we split up. My relationship with Karen raised more questions than it answered. "You know, same friendship circle."

"Really?" he asked, as we pulled up in front of the Berkeley hotel.

If he thought it was weird that I was still friends with my ex, what would he think if he knew Karen had been my best friend since primary school right up until the point where she stole the love of my life? "Really," I replied as I opened the car door.

Before my feet hit the ground, somehow, Beck had sped around to my side of the car and offered his hand as I stepped out.

"Do we hate him? Or do we like him? Just so I'm prepared."

Hating Matt would be easier. All I could focus on was why and what if things had been different. What if we hadn't moved to London? What if I'd pushed him to get married years ago?

"We don't care enough to hate him. He's history, and I'm so much

happier with you because you're richer and your dick is gigantic.”

“Well, that's true on both counts,” he said, guiding me toward the entrance, his hand at the small of my back.

Despite the fact that I was walking into one of the most difficult situations in my life, I couldn't help but smile at Beck's arm around my waist. But he was still a complete stranger to me. I didn't see how it was possible for us to get through an evening of pretending to be deeply in love when I knew close to nothing about him. We were bound to be caught out, and if my former best friend marrying my ex-boyfriend wasn't humiliating enough, I'd be exposed as desperate enough to have blackmailed someone into pretending they were in love with me. If ever I needed a miracle, it was now.

CHAPTER NINE

Stella

“Have I got lipstick on my teeth?” I asked, bearing my mouth at him as we made it into the lobby of the Berkeley. Karen was always so perfectly turned out—even first thing in the morning, with a hangover, she was a coat of mascara and a pair of heels away from hosting a charity lunch. Whereas I always had loo paper stuck to my heel or had a button ping off just before the most crucial career moment. Tonight, I wanted to look like I had it together. I wanted people to see me and think Matt was an idiot for letting me go rather than think that the situation was messy but understandable given it was an obvious choice between Karen and me.

This evening I didn’t want to feel like the jilted ex.

I wanted to feel pretty. And glamorous. And sexy.

I wanted to feel like a woman that men didn’t cheat on. That men married.

Beck slid his hand into mine and my stomach tilted like a giddy ten-year-old in her mother’s heels, and for a moment I forgot that I was about to come face-to-face with Matt and Karen. It had been a while since a man had touched me like a lover. Looking back, I couldn’t remember the last time Matt had held my hand. And Beck was ridiculously handsome. The kind of good looking that made me look away because it was just too much.

“You look fucking gorgeous,” he whispered. “Now let’s go see your friends.”

I gazed at him as he led us down the long corridor. Had he meant that, or was he just trying to halt my rising anxiety about this evening in its tracks?

Because he wrote the book on gorgeous.

He was walking with intent, but I hadn't seen any signs to the ballroom. "Do you know where you're going?"

"The email you sent me said the ballroom. It's right along here."

"You've been here before?" Were these kinds of parties in five-star hotels what he was used to? Did he enjoy them? What kind of wine did he drink?

So many questions.

"Yeah, a few times. You know, charity dinners. Industry drinks."

"I really don't know anything about you." Tonight had disaster written all over it. We'd just have to show our faces and then make a speedy exit.

Beck squeezed my hand as my friend Jo came toward us, her eyes sliding from me to Beck and then back to me, slightly wider than they were before.

"I'm so pleased you came," she said and pulled me in for a hug. "You're an amazing human being."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what I was thinking."

"You're here, that's what counts. And you look completely amazing." She stepped back to examine me. "What a super sexy look."

"It's not really me, is it?"

"It's completely you. It's understated, elegant, and confidently sexy just like you are."

My anxiety stepped down a couple of notches and my shoulders relaxed. Jo turned to Beck. "I'm Jo Frammer."

God, between my panic about not knowing enough about Beck, my apprehension about my outfit, and my anxiety about seeing Karen and Matt, I'd completely forgotten to make introductions. I needed to focus.

"Beck Wilde," he said, dipping to kiss Jo on both cheeks.

"It's wonderful to meet you. I want to hear all about you two," she said, turning and leading us into the party. "Someone's been keeping secrets. Tell me everything immediately. How long has this been going on?"

I'd factored in lying to Karen and Matt, but I hadn't really thought about the fact I'd have to lie to my friends—people I loved—about Beck. Jo didn't deserve me lying to her, even though she'd be completely understanding and sweet if she found out.

I was a horrible person. There was no way I was going to be able to pull this off. I glanced over my shoulder, wondering if it was too late to fake a vomiting bug. But that would be a lie, too—I was surrounded by them.

"Depends on if you mean when we first met or when we started dating."

Our first social dinner was a couple of months ago?” Beck turned to me for confirmation. I just nodded.

“Wow, you have been playing your cards close to your chest,” Jo responded. “I’ve not seen anything on Facebook or Insta.”

Shit. Social media. I hadn’t thought about documenting anything on there, but before I could say anything, Beck interjected. “Yeah, I don’t do social media. Unless it’s business-related.”

“Oh I see,” Jo replied. “I’ve heard about people like you, but I thought you were like the Loch Ness monster or a yeti—just a myth.”

“Don’t have Instagram, yet I’m still breathing,” he said. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“Rather than being amazing, it just means you’re old,” I replied.

“Or far more interested in being with you than online.” He fixed me with those deep, green eyes and those walls that appeared when we first met were back—locking everyone else out, leaving just Beck and me, alone, staring at each other as if we’d known each other a thousand lifetimes and didn’t need words to communicate.

Jo cleared her throat, bringing us back to the moment. “The party’s in here,” she said, nodding toward double doors.

I glanced around the ballroom as we entered. A cacophony of sparkling lights, pastel colors, and the strains of a string quartet surrounded us, and my breath caught in my throat. It was beautiful. A huge arrangement of lilacs and summer flowers hung from the ceiling, drooping down over the central bar designed out of mirrors and glass. More flowers hung around the sides of the room, bringing the outside in and filling the space with a light, floral scent.

This wasn’t Matt’s choice. His family would have opted for something far more traditional at the family home. No, this was Karen all over—expensive but tasteful. I guessed it was good Matt had learned to compromise. He’d always been so stubborn when we’d been together, but why hadn’t he learned to compromise for me?

Chatter, clinking glasses, and laughter swept through the space. I was probably the only person in this room who wasn’t happy for Karen and Matt. The only person who, when it was said that they were perfectly suited, agreed, but only because they were both cheating, disloyal, despicable people.

“Are Florence and Gordy here?” I asked. If Beck and I got talking to them, it might save us from having to make conversation with people who

asked too many questions.

“I haven’t seen them yet,” Jo replied.

We settled at a ridiculously thin, tall table that people were supposed to stand around and rest their drinks on. “Stay here, and I’ll go and get some drinks,” Beck said.

He was going to leave me? I’d thought his suggestion of making sure we were together most of the night was a good one. What happened if he bumped into someone and told them a thousand things about our relationship that I had no idea about? Or if Matt and Karen appeared and Beck wasn’t by my side to make me seem less of the bitter ex-girlfriend than I felt.

As I surveyed the room, looking for Florence and Gordy, Karen walked straight into my eyeline as she came toward our table. My vision blurred slightly, and I held onto the edge of the table to steady myself. Jesus, she could have at least let me settle in and find my sea legs.

This was the woman who’d stolen my boyfriend, my lover, my friend.

Or the woman my boyfriend had left me for.

I wasn’t sure which was worse.

I tried to look at her like a stranger would—what was it about her that made him throw away seven years?

Was she prettier, funnier, better in bed?

Did he just love her more?

She squealed as she got closer. “I’m so pleased you’re here,” she said, pulling me into a hug as if nothing had happened.

I’d tried to prepare myself for this moment, but I hadn’t come up with a game plan. I could be so nice that I was clearly being sarcastic. I could be cool but distant. I could ignore her, or I could tell her what I thought of her. Except the last option probably would have our invitation revoked so that wasn’t really an option. I’d decided to do just what felt right in the moment, but I found myself paralyzed with anger, fear, and a lack of understanding.

“I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it,” Karen said. “I know you RSVP’d and everything but honestly, I expected you to come down with stomach flu or something.”

I put on my best fake smile. She was saying she expected me to lie. I guess she was judging me by her own standards. “My stomach is just fine.” Not only did she have a complete lack of remorse, she also couldn’t even be nice to me. She’d stolen my boyfriend and now she was acting as if he was hers all along. Maybe he had been.

Perhaps she was embarrassed and hoping that we'd all forget about it. Because that was so easy to do when you'd lost the love of your life to your best friend.

She laughed and glanced at my cleavage. "Well, I'm so pleased it is. And did you bring your . . . date or whatever?"

"Oh, she certainly did," Jo replied for me. "He's over there by the bar. The tall, good-looking one."

I couldn't help but grin at Jo's description as we all looked to the bar. There was no doubt Beck was tall. And good looking. A description that didn't do him justice. He was one of those men that commanded a double take when you passed him on the street. He was pretty enough to look like a male model but the way he carried off that suit—or any of the suits I'd seen him in—gave him power.

The three of us were staring as he started back, carrying an ice bucket and glasses. I locked eyes with him and the tightness in my jaw disappeared. There was something about him that made it feel like I'd known him forever. He grinned and it seemed so genuine that I felt it from deep in my bones to the tips of my fingers.

"Oh wow, that's the look of love," Jo said from beside me.

If only she knew.

"Ladies," he said as he placed the ice bucket on the table.

"This is Karen," I said, remembering my manners this time. "She's the bride-to-be."

I wasn't sure why, but he didn't kiss Karen like he had Jo. Instead he offered her his hand. "Beck Wilde. Nice to meet you."

"Dom Perignon?" Jo asked as she twisted the bottle around to reveal the label.

"Yes, I got them to go and get us a bottle." He began to pour the alcohol into the glasses. "It's kind of our drink."

"Your drink?" Karen asked.

"We had it on our first date," Beck replied. "I was trying to impress this beautiful woman." He handed me a glass and placed a kiss on my cheek. Christ, this guy was good at faking it. "Not an easy thing to do," he continued. "But hopefully I've won her over."

"How did you two meet?" Karen asked.

"Work," I mumbled and took a sip of my drink.

"Oh," she said. "You're a recruitment consultant?"

Beck chuckled. “No. I’d be terrible at that job. You have to be nice to all your clients and all the candidates. Stella is doing the design on one of my buildings.”

“Really?” Karen and Jo both asked in unison.

“I thought you’d given up on the interior designer thing?” Karen asked, her mouth a little pinched.

Thing? It wasn’t a thing or a hobby. I’d loved the job. I’d missed it. “Nope. I’ve just been doing bits on the side.”

“Which is insane,” Beck said. “You really need to be making the most of your talent.” He slipped his hand around my waist and pulled me toward him. The heat of his body coated me like armor, his hand holding me firmly in place as if it were a shield.

“You would say that,” I replied, trying to continue our charade. He was so freaking good at this, I needed to step up.

“I say it because it’s true,” he said and turned to Karen and Jo. “You know how modest Stella is. She never believes how good she is at anything.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off him as he slid his hand up my back. For a second, I could almost believe he meant it.

My insides began to melt like ice cream in the sun.

But of course, he didn’t mean it. It was all just for show.

“I knew I was going to have to ask her out the moment we met, but Stella took some convincing.”

I glanced at Karen and Jo to see if they were buying this. Both of them were focused on Beck, as if he were conjuring up white rabbits out of the ice bucket. If how he was being tonight was any indication of how he was with his girlfriends, I didn’t understand how he was still single. He was funny, confident, attentive, and generous.

“You wore me down,” I replied.

He grinned as if we were sharing an inside joke that no one else knew about. “You drive a hard bargain.”

I laughed genuinely. I had to add good company to the list of great things about Beck. “Gotta make you work for it.”

“Well, Stella, he seems perfect and completely head over heels with you,” Karen said. “Are you sure you didn’t pay him to be here?” My stomach flipped as if I’d just been caught trying on my mother’s make-up. She grinned as if she were joking, but I knew Karen better than that. It might have taken me twenty years, but I finally had the measure of her. I also knew that

if she had a suspicion that Beck and my relationship wasn't genuine, she wasn't going to be easily distracted.

"It's so lovely to finally meet you, Karen," Beck said. "Stella has said so many wonderful things about you. We're both very excited to come to Scotland. I love the place."

I slid my arm around his waist. God, this guy made this faking it thing seem so easy.

Karen's mouth twitched. "Yes, well *Matt* and I are very pleased you could come."

She emphasized the name of my ex-boyfriend like she wanted it to hurt. Like maybe I'd forgotten that she was marrying him. As if I ever could? Had she always been like this? So cold, so heartless? Such a bitch?

"Hey," Florence said as she arrived at our table.

"Florence!" Beck said and kissed her. "Let me go and get you a glass." Beck stalked back to the bar, and I couldn't help but watch him. He had a cute arse. Was I going to discover something I didn't like about him? Hopefully. The last thing I needed was to develop some kind of crush on Beck. We were a business partnership. And I couldn't trust myself to find a good guy. Eventually, when I was ready to start dating again, in twenty years or so, I'd just let Florence handle it. She could pick me a boyfriend. She had far more sense and would never end up with a guy who thought so little of her that he cheated on her or ran off with her best friend.

Florence rolled her eyes as she turned the bottle in the ice bucket, revealing the label. "Dom Perignon again? Doesn't it get old being with such a hot, rich, charming guy?"

I laughed. Perhaps a week in Scotland with Beck wouldn't be so bad. "No one's perfect." Although Beck Wilde might be the perfect fake boyfriend. This guy was sharp. He picked up on things so quickly and ad-libbed like it was his job. No wonder he wasn't worried about tonight. *I* was almost convinced we were dating.

"Exactly," Karen said. "I'm sure there are loads of things about him that drive you nuts, right?"

Beck had said to stay as close to the truth as possible. "Honestly, I've not found anything so far," I replied.

"So, when did you meet him, Florence?" Karen asked.

"When they first met," she replied.

My heart stopped dead and it felt as if Karen's cheating hands were

pressing down on my chest, about to break my rib cage. I hadn't briefed Florence on the story of us first meeting—she was bound to give something away that showed us up to be faking our relationship.

I wasn't prepared at all.

I interrupted. "I trust Florence's judgement, so I made sure they met before I agreed to go on a date."

Karen smiled, a small, fake smile. "Really. How nice."

Phew, I'd gotten away with it.

"Well, you two seem perfect for each other," Jo said. "It's good to see you with someone who appreciates how wonderful you are." Jo wouldn't have meant it to be a pointed insult at Matt, not with Karen standing there, but Karen's frown told me she took it as one.

"Yes," Karen said. "It's important to show a man the best side of you."

"I'm not sure that works for me," I replied. "You have to take the good with the bad. You don't have to like every single bit of someone, but hiding stuff doesn't work, either."

Honesty was important to me in a relationship. Even more so now. I never hid anything when I was going out with Matt. Perhaps that's why it had worked between him and Karen and it hadn't with us. Maybe men only liked to see the good, sexy, funny side. Maybe the sides that got irritated at work, liked to wear old, worn t-shirts in bed and no make-up on the weekend were reserved for the terminally single. If that was true, I'd end up alone for the rest of my life. Beck and I were an act—for public consumption—but I couldn't keep it up for long. Not with someone I lived with and loved. It wasn't who I was.

Beck came back to the table with two extra glasses. "Gordy will be here soon, right?" How had he remembered Florence's boyfriend's name? No wonder he'd told me not to worry.

"Yeah, he just went to put our coats in the cloakroom. Thanks, Beck. You gotta stop it with the champagne or I'm going to get used to it."

"You know Gordy?" Karen asked.

"I've only heard about him through these two," he said, lifting his chin toward Florence and me.

"You're going to get on brilliantly," Florence said.

"We have to get that dinner in the diary for next week. And we'll go to that restaurant I was telling you about," he said as he turned to me. "Where they serve the best oysters."

No! Things were going so well.

My mouth went dry and I tried to swallow so I could say something and rescue the situation. Anyone who'd known me for longer than twenty-four hours knew I hated shellfish.

"Why would you take Stella to somewhere they served great oysters?" Karen asked, her smile much more genuine now. She'd caught us out.

Karen's eyes were fixed on me even though she'd asked the question of Beck. She wanted to gloat.

Who was this woman? This girl I'd shared secrets with, dreams, fears—I had a huge history with her. Yet, she'd betrayed me as if I were nothing to her. Like my life, my happiness was meaningless to her.

I took a breath. There was no point in trying to deal with her with honesty and openness. She didn't respond to those things. Perhaps lies were the only thing she understood. "Beck's messing around," I said, pulling back my shoulders, ready for a fight. "He knows I hate shellfish."

Beck chuckled next to me. "I keep hoping I can change her mind. It really is the worst thing about you, Stella."

Karen tilted her head to one side. "It's weird. You didn't seem like you were kidding."

"I guess you don't know me very well." Beck shrugged. He was good. But I doubted he was good enough to throw Karen off the scent.

Karen was like a sniffer dog and there was no way she was that easily placated.

We needed to be more prepared. Karen would now be looking for other things that didn't add up between me and Beck. And the only thing more humiliating than your boyfriend running off with your best friend was being found out to be bringing a fake boyfriend to the wedding.

There was no way we were going to pull this charade off for a week in Scotland unless we were a thousand times more prepared.

CHAPTER TEN

Beck

Most people hate going into the office on Sundays, but I wasn't most people. I wandered through the empty desks of Wilde Developments and headed to my office at the back of the building.

I loved weekend working. The phones were quiet, and I didn't have a constant stream of people trailing into my office asking for opinions or signatures. I could get things done. And now that I was weeks away from getting Henry to sign over the Mayfair property, there was plenty to do. I had to work on the tender document for the architects, go through the blueprints that Joshua had managed to get me of Henry's building, which were much more comprehensive than the plans I'd had previously, and finally, I needed to figure out what I was going to do about the designer. I'd said yes to Stella, given her the benefit of the doubt, but seeing her flat last night brought my concerns back. Nothing about it had screamed luxury, high-end, or cutting-edge design.

I closed my office door as my mobile began to ring.

"Stella," I said. "I was just thinking about you."

Silence and then, "There's no way I can go to that wedding with you. This was a ridiculous idea."

Frustration twisted around my gut. There was no way I was going to let her change her mind. There was too much at stake. "What are you talking about?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even. I wanted to shout at her but knew it would be counterproductive.

"I just got off the phone with Florence. Karen called her, asked loads of

questions about you and me, said something didn't seem right between the two of us—"

This woman might be beautiful but she was totally paranoid. "I'm sure Karen will be focused on her wedding and not us when we're up in Scotland."

She sighed as if *I* just wasn't getting it. "You don't know Karen very well. She's focused on trying to make me look bad."

I thought these women were friends? I didn't want to dive down that particular rabbit hole. All I cared about was that Stella was invited to Karen's wedding. That was all that mattered. "You're not going to look bad."

"We were nearly caught out last night. I barely managed to carry off our charade for an evening. I can't keep it up for a week."

I threw my keys down on my desk and perched on the edge, facing the city. "Look, it was your idea to pretend that we were together." It was a stupid idea. Why couldn't we just go as friends?

"I know. And I totally accept that it was a terrible idea and that I'm an idiot. This isn't your fault. I'm just saying I can't do it again. There's no way I'll pull it off. Let's just agree that it's not going to work, and I'll cancel—say that I have a hernia operation or something."

I was going to have to talk her round. She wasn't backing out on me.

"Why do you even care? Worst-case scenario, people figure out we're not dating. It's not the end of the world." I didn't know Stella well enough to know how to change her mind, but I was going to have to try. "You laughed in my face when I offered you work for the recruitment agency but when you stormed into my office demanding that I make you designer on the development, you were laser-focused and determined. It's clearly something you want to do, otherwise you could have just asked me for a check. Are you content to just walk away?" I tried to sound calm and logical, but the realization of a long-time dream hung in the balance. I'd get over losing the money. Probably. But not the opportunity of developing *this* block in Mayfair—I wasn't going to let it go.

"Better to walk away than face complete humiliation in front of everyone I know. I refuse to stay at the center of this scandal. I don't know your birthday or what side of the bed you sleep on. It was insane to think I could carry this off."

So that was the problem. She felt unprepared and out of control. Well, I could fix that. I picked up my keys and stood. "Where are you?"

“In my sitting room, why?”

“I’m coming over and we’re going to prep,” I said as I pulled open my office door and headed out the way I’d just come a few minutes ago.

“Prep?” she asked.

“I bet you were one of those girls who did nothing but study at university. And you probably mocked up some kind of design for my Mayfair building before you came to see me to offer me the deal. Am I right?”

“Erm, that’s why you go to university. To study.”

“Wrong.” I bounded down the stairs two at a time. “Most people go to university to party. But okay, you’re a studier. A planner. I can work with that. We just need to study and plan for this wedding. I’ll be over in fifteen minutes.”

“No! You can’t just come over—I’m in my PJs.”

“That’s good. I need to learn how long it takes for you to have a shower and get ready. It will all help.”

“Help what?”

I pushed open the glass doors to the outside and pressed on my car fob. “I told you that the key to telling lies was to stick as closely to the truth as possible. We’re going to get to know each other. That way, when we get to Scotland, you won’t need to lie, and neither will I. We’ll both have plenty to say that’s the truth.” I slid into the driver’s seat of my sports car that I only used on weekends and started the engine. I’d had it over a year and every time I got behind the wheel, the car still made me grin like a beautiful woman laid out on my bed in nothing but underwear.

“That’s a terrible idea. We have two weeks. We can’t pack a serious relationship into a day.”

“So it might take two,” I said, pulling out and heading in the direction of Stella’s flat. If I could keep her talking, I’d be there before she could make any rash decisions.

“You can’t just assume that I have two days to spend studying with you. I have things to do. Places to go. People to see.”

“Right. And we can study at the same time. It will be good for me to tag along with you. I can see what you get up to. Learn your quirks—”

“I don’t have quirks.”

I grinned and imagined her little frown and pursed lips. “We all have quirks. That’s what makes us interesting.”

I took her silence as a good sign. “We’ll spend some time together and

before you know it, we'll know each other well enough to breeze through the week in Scotland."

"There's no way—"

"Hey, I saw how much you wanted this design job. Has that just disappeared? Isn't it worth a little effort? If you do a good job on a Wilde Developments project in Mayfair? Well, you won't be a recruitment consultant anymore."

I put my foot on the accelerator. I'd almost convinced her—I could tell from the way her arguments were waning. "I'm just a few minutes away and then we can start."

"But what about you? I'll need to know what you do at the weekend."

"Well, I was in the office when you called, but let's spend today and tomorrow—and the two weeks before the wedding—like a couple. That way, it will be second nature to us when we get to Scotland. We won't need to pretend. You'll get your career back on track and I'll get Henry to sell me his building. Everyone's happy." I didn't tell her that I spent most weekends working, and that for me, dating didn't involve much more than dinner and sex. But whatever. It was three weeks out of my life in exchange for ten million pounds and victory over my demons.

"I guess we can see how today goes and then reassess," she said.

I kept quiet to avoid inadvertently talking her out of giving this a shot. "You better get here quickly before I change my mind," she said.

"I'm five minutes away."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Stella

The door buzzer made me jump. That couldn't be Beck, could it? I still had my mobile in my hand—we'd barely hung up more than a few minutes ago. I should have changed.

I glanced down at my pajamas—there was a hole in the knee, and the elastic waistband had grown baggy so they slid to my hips. There were a lot of upsides to being single. One of them was wearing your favorite stuff around the house because no one was there to criticize or make comments about how his mother was perfectly groomed at all times.

Beck always looked like he'd just stepped off a Milan runway, and I was sure his real girlfriends didn't own PJs.

But I wasn't his real girlfriend, so what did I care what I looked like? I buzzed him up and left the door on the latch. Should I have given him a key by two months? No, that was a little much.

"Have you ever lived with a woman?" I called as I heard him come through the door. Had he seen women other than when they were perfectly made up, hair blow-dried, with their best underwear on?

"Well, hello to you too, Stella. And no. Never lived with a woman." He appeared in the doorway to my kitchen just like he had when he'd come to pick me up last night. Already he looked at home, but Beck was the kind of guy who was probably comfortable wherever he was.

"Have you ever given a woman a key to your flat?" Beck was right—I wanted this design job. I wanted to stop this circle of disappointment I'd been in since I'd found out about Matt and Karen. But we were going to have to up

our game. Especially after my phone call with Florence. “You want coffee?” We were going to have to pack in a lot in a very short amount of time. Scotland was only a few weeks away.

“No to the key question. Although I’ve had it suggested to me a couple of times. And water if you have it. Tap is fine.”

“You don’t drink coffee?”

He shook his head and I took a deep breath. We had a lot to cover. “You need to tell me these things. Not drinking coffee is a big deal.”

“It is?”

“Of course, it is. Do you drink tea?”

“Nope. Can’t bear the taste. Coffee either. And anyway, I don’t like to be high on caffeine.”

“Caffeine gets you high?” It was possible that Beck was one of those oh-so-dull men who didn’t know how to enjoy himself. There had to be a catch.

“Not high, but it can amp up your mood. I don’t drink much alcohol either.”

“Whoa. Really? Not at all? Are you an alcoholic? Do you take drugs?” I had ten million questions. This was never going to work.

He chuckled. “No, not an alcoholic and I don’t take drugs.”

“I thought you said you went to university for a good time. Can’t have been that great for you if you didn’t drink or do drugs—not that I did drugs, but I drank my fair share.”

“I didn’t go to university.”

I stopped, my teabag balanced on my spoon, and turned to look at him to see if he was serious. “You didn’t? How come?” In my circle of friends, everyone went to university.

He shrugged. “Wasn’t my thing. I wanted to be out making money.”

“Well, you’ve clearly done that.”

“Exactly. I had my eye on the prize.”

“And your parents didn’t mind?”

He rolled his eyes. “No. Neither of my parents went.”

I’d made assumptions about Beck that I hadn’t even realized. I’d thought he’d come from a privileged upper-middle-class background, just like my friends and I had. But he was changing the picture I had unknowingly built up of him.

“You got into real estate straight away?” I asked. Did he have Russian backers or family money or something? Perhaps his business was a front for

mob money laundering. Did London even have the mob?

“Sort of. Worked a lot of different jobs, saved a little money, took out a loan to buy a flat in Hackney, flipped it. Did it again. And again. You know.”

But I didn’t know. My friends were lawyers and doctors or helped run the family business. Flipping flats in Hackney was not part of my world. “So from a flat in Hackney to a development in Mayfair?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked me in the eye. “Apparently.”

“Your parents must be proud,” I said, hoping to coax out of him more about his background.

“I guess. Not really thought about it.”

“You close to them?”

He laughed. “You’re going to need a notepad and pen. Get in the shower and then we can get on with whatever you had planned for the day while we talk.”

I’d planned to spend the day cross-legged on my sofa, working on design ideas for his development, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. He didn’t need to see my haphazard process.

“Okay, you can talk to me through the bathroom door. We don’t have time to waste,” I said, heading to my bedroom, my tea in hand.

“We’re going to be fine, you know.” He toed off his shoes and sat on my bed as if we’d known each other for years as I closed the bathroom door. It was weird, having a conversation with a stranger in my flat while I was getting naked. He could be an axe murderer or at the very least a pervert. Although I didn’t get a pervert vibe from him. He was too confident, too sure of himself.

“It’s not like we’re being quizzed by someone *trying* to catch you out,” he said.

“I told you, Karen smells a rat. She’ll absolutely be trying to catch us out.”

“But why? I thought you said you were friends.”

“We’ve drifted apart more recently,” I replied. “She’s said to Florence that she thinks something doesn’t add up between us.”

“Why does she care? Because your ex is the groom? Wasn’t it over between you years ago?”

I stepped into the shower, grateful Beck couldn’t see my expression and I could keep things breezy. “You know how gossipy people are,” I said, raising

my voice so he could hear my answer and sidestepping the question. “We were together for a long time.” I wouldn’t tell a new boyfriend all the ins and outs of an old relationship right away, would I? If I had to go to that wedding, then I wanted it to be with the one person who didn’t think I was a fool—who didn’t know I’d spent years with a man who’d tossed me away and replaced me within weeks with my best friend.

I’d been humiliated enough. I needed a break from the shame, some kind of safe harbor.

“Were you engaged?” he asked, his deep voice carrying through the closed door.

I screwed my eyes shut, letting the water cascade over my face, hoping that dull ache in the pit of my stomach could be washed away. This was why I didn’t want to go to the wedding. Ninety-six-point-four percent of the time, I was entirely fine as long as I didn’t think about Matt and what he and Karen had done. But if I went to Scotland there’d be no escape from the two of them for an entire week. “Not officially,” I said. “But we’d talked about it. I assumed it would happen at some point.” I’d thought we were working toward our future together. I’d got that very wrong.

“You lived together?”

“Yeah. In this flat.”

Silence from the other side of the door. Good, the Matt conversation was over, and we could move on to more important stuff.

“Did you decorate this place?” he asked.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I understand what you need in your development. I get the styles are different.” Most of this flat had been Matt’s choices, not mine. “What about you? Why do you think you’ve never lived with a woman?”

More silence but eventually he said, “I like my own space. Enjoy coming home, putting on the news, opening a beer, and sitting on my sofa in my boxers.”

That sounded like the boy equivalent of PJs, ice cream, and a re-watch of *Bridget Jones’ Diary*.

“And you can’t do that with a woman?” I finished rinsing out my hair and turned off the shower.

“I never have. I just like silence sometimes. I don’t want to have to talk all the time. I don’t want to have to hear about what happened in her day or remember that she took her cat to the vet or whatever.”

“Wow. Harsh,” I replied as I dried off and slipped on my favorite robe. It was white with pink flamingos all over it. I’d washed and worn it so often a small hole had appeared under the arm, but it was the most comfortable thing I owned, and I loved it.

Matt hated it.

“Harsh? That I like my own company?” he asked as I opened the door. He was laid back on my bed, one arm tucked behind his head, his long legs crossed at the ankle. My stomach tilted at the sight of him. He might drive a hard bargain, be overconfident, bordering on annoying, but there was no getting away from that sharp jaw and perfect body. The way his shirt fit him just perfectly, the way his trousers hinted at his clearly muscular thighs—it was almost obscene. I glanced away, trying to focus.

“I suppose it makes sense if you’ve never been in love, which you obviously haven’t.”

A grin spread over his face like a sunrise. “Obviously?”

I turned away and sat in front of my dressing table, looking at him in the mirror behind me. “Yes, it’s clear to me for two reasons. First, you wouldn’t think hearing about her day was a chore—you’d want to know about her cat.”

“I really don’t like cats,” he said.

“Maybe not, but if her cat is important to her and she’s important to you, then you’d want to know what happened at the vet.” Something about the way he looked at me told me he wasn’t buying it. But what did I care? “For the record, this is a cat-free zone.”

“Thank God. What’s the second reason?” he asked, sitting up.

“We all get days where we want to sit around and decompress after work. People in love understand that they can do that together.”

He hooked his legs over my bed and began to examine what was on my bedside table. “Is that what it was like with you and Matt?”

I paused as I watched him pick up the silver elephant trinket box that I’d bought on a trip to India with Matt after graduation. Matt’s parents hadn’t approved of a gap year. But we had a gap six weeks. We’d been so happy, as if we’d been limbering up for a marathon or in the wings of a theatre before the first show—we were full of excitement and nervousness, hope and expectation. I’d thought we’d be together forever.

A lot had happened since then.

“Maybe. In the beginning, when things were good.”

“That’s the other thing I don’t get about couples. They always seem to

stick it out when it's clear to everyone around them that neither of them is happy and they both need to move on. Why the hell is that?"

I uncurled the towel on my head and picked up my hairbrush. "I suppose one or both of them is hoping it will get better. Wishing it could go back to how things used to be. It's hard to walk away when you've invested so much time and effort into someone."

"But it's a sunk cost. That time and effort is gone—spent. No point wasting more resources on a project that's not going anywhere."

"Jeez. Relationships aren't a balance sheet. Feelings are involved. Or are you just a cold-hearted businessman who's all about the cold, hard cash?"

Holding the book I was currently reading—*The Goldfinch*—he turned to stare at me. In actual fact, it was the book I was *trying* to read—what I was actually reading was the latest Nora Roberts. I'd gotten into the habit of having one paperback by my bedside that Matt would approve of and the one I was reading on my Kindle where he couldn't comment on the number of brain cells I was losing by reading it. I suppose I had no one to pretend to anymore.

"Maybe I am. Perhaps I'm just not capable of being in a relationship."

"Who was your last girlfriend?"

"Danielle. She was a pharmacist. Gorgeous girl."

I wasn't about to admit it, but I'd assumed he'd be dating models or ballerinas. Where the hell did men find ballerinas? Every ex-boyfriend Florence ever had left her for a ballerina. "What did you like about her?" I asked.

"She was busy."

I burst into laughter. "You liked that she was busy?"

He shrugged. "I mean, she was pretty. Great body. Her hair was . . . glossy. What do you want me to say?"

I bit down on my bottom lip, willing myself not to laugh again. This guy was totally clueless. "Why was the first thing that popped into your head that she was busy? Because you didn't have to see her much?"

He tossed my copy of *The Goldfinch* on the bed and wandered over to my wardrobe. "No, I don't think so. I just liked that she had her own life, her own friends. She wasn't too needy. Although, I think I might have assumed she needed less attention from me than she actually did."

"So, your ideal woman doesn't need anything from you? You don't have to pay attention to her, hear about her day, concern yourself with what's

important to her, just as long as she's around for a shag at your convenience? Is that about the size of it?"

"You're making me sound like a dick," he said, pulling out a pink hoodie that I really should donate or at least fold away in a drawer as I never wore it.

"I'm just replaying what I heard."

"You're saying I'm a dick."

"I'm not saying that." But I wasn't *not* saying that either. Make-up done, I stood up and pulled out some jeans and a top from the chest under the window. "You need to leave, go poke about in my kitchen or something while I change."

He fixed me with a serious expression. "I really should see you naked if we're doing our research properly."

Heat rose up my body and thundered into my cheeks and I shivered. It had been a long time since I'd felt those first whispers of attraction to someone.

I glanced up at him and he grinned and then slipped out of the room.

Beck was Matt's opposite. Matt had never been afraid of commitment. He'd always envisaged his life with a wife and children. I wasn't sure if it was because we'd met so young, but neither of us had needed to get used to coupledness. We'd wanted to be together, wanted to hear about each other's day.

Trying to get Beck to act like a man in love—a man more like Matt—was going to require some work.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Beck

Figuring out women had never been a priority for me. But this was business, and although I wasn't good at relationships, I was good at business. I'd done a little digging and found examples of Stella's design work—she clearly had the training she said she did and although her clients were a little different to mine, it was still obvious she'd injected some individuality into each project. But then her flat was stuffed to the brim with a hotchpotch of old stuff that didn't seem to belong together.

“Are we heading over to your place now?” she asked. “So I can root through your stuff and make silent judgements?”

I laughed. She was irreverent and funny but somehow managed to hit the nail on the head. “We're not going back to mine, but I'm happy for your judgement of me to be completely out in the open,” I said, clicking down on my key fob, the lights of the Lamborghini flashing as the doors unlocked.

She groaned. “Really? *This* is your car?”

“Is that a problem?” I asked, opening the door for her and then rounding the bonnet before getting in the drivers' side.

“It's just a little . . . obvious,” she said as I sat.

“And what you mean by obvious is new money.” I didn't exactly snap but at the same time, I wished I hadn't mentioned it. Joshua and Dexter were always ribbing me about this car. But I liked it. What was the point in having money unless you enjoyed yourself a little with it?

“I suppose—not that there's anything wrong with that.”

“Fast cars are fun. If that's obvious, I'll take it.” I pulled out into almost-

stationary traffic. If we weren't in central London, I could show her just how fun cars like this could be. My money might not have been given to me by my father, but it was as good as the inherited stuff.

"I never got the car thing, but each to their own. So where are we going if not back to your place?"

"I don't know. What do you like to do at the weekend?"

She let out a breath, which I'd figured out she did to give herself more time to answer. "I usually end up working, or I'm so knackered from work that I lie in bed, waiting for death." She grinned at me.

She was funny. Like one of the guys. "Level with me about the recruitment consultancy thing. Why are you in a job you clearly don't like when you used to do something you're obviously passionate about?"

She leaned forward and began to fiddle with the air-con. "That's not part of the introductory course. It's the advanced curriculum. And anyway, you've heard a lot about me, and you've been in my flat twice now. I don't know if you live in a tumble-down bedsit in Croydon or a Georgian townhouse in Belgravia."

I laughed, happy to move on from talk of her job, even though I was curious about how she'd ended up where she had. I was confident I'd get her to tell me sooner or later. "I live in Mayfair, of course."

"Of course," she mumbled. "Mr. Mayfair. How could I forget?"

"So, when you're not lying in bed, waiting for death, what do you like to do in London?"

"Eat?" she offered as if it was more of a question than an answer. "Especially at the weekend. Take the papers, settle into lunch. With a strictly no-talking policy."

"Well, we can do food but I'm banning papers. We need to talk or I'm going to have to deal with you having a meltdown because you don't feel prepared enough."

"It's like you've known me a thousand years already. But seriously, maybe we should just accept that this situation is impossible, shake hands, and move on with our lives. If Karen figures out we're not really dating . . . I think I'd have to emigrate to avoid the shame."

"There will be no emigrating. And no giving up. We have a deal." I didn't understand why she needed to have a boyfriend for this wedding in the first place, but if it meant she'd take me then I was up for it. "Do I have to remind you that you really want to be the designer on my new building—when are

you going to get an opportunity like that again?" I didn't mention the antique chest in her bedroom that didn't seem to go with anything, or the weird Chesterfield sofa in her living room that looked like it belonged in some stuffy, men-only, private members lunch club. Perhaps they were hand-me-downs and she couldn't afford anything else. I tried to focus on the work she'd previously done and ignore the fear that any talent she had for interior design was purely in her imagination. I'd cross that particular bridge when I came to it.

"And another thing. You lie in bed at the weekends waiting for death." I chuckled at the over-dramatic description of her mood. "This will shake things up a little, make life a little more interesting. Give you a new challenge."

"And if I fail . . ." She trailed off. The hopelessness in her eyes suggested there was more to her story than what she'd told me.

"Do me a favor?" I asked. She had to stop thinking she was being forced to do this. It was her choice.

"Another one?"

"Funny," I said, pulling out of the traffic and turning left off Marylebone Road. "It's not a favor if you're getting something in return. It's a bargain. Give it these next two weeks. We'll hang out. Learn about each other and then if you don't feel prepared, we won't go to the wedding. You can feign illness or something. Stay positive. Keep your goal in mind. We've got this."

I glanced over to find her staring out of the window, drawing a small circle with her fingertip on the glass. "You're right. I've stopped believing that things can go right for me."

The sadness in her voice sent a chill across the surface of my skin, as if I'd been blasted with cold air.

"I've been told before that I change women's lives. So, get ready."

She turned to me and grinned. "You're so cheesy."

Her smile chased away the chill. "So, do we have a deal?"

"Yes." She nodded resolutely. "I'll stop whining, and we'll both do our best over the next few weeks."

I was going to make sure the woman knew more about me than my mother and my five best friends put together. There was no way I was letting Stella London or Henry Dawnay slip through my fingers.

“Now where?” Stella asked as we got back to the car after a long, late lunch that had seemed to pass in a flash.

I checked my watch. It was after six. How had all those hours passed without me noticing? What I really wanted to do was drop her off at her flat and head to the pub. That was what I did on Sunday nights. “You don’t need to prepare for tomorrow?” I asked over the roof of the car before getting in and starting the engine.

“Prepare for what?” Stella asked. “Another thrilling week in recruitment? No, it’s been a bit quieter recently. No doubt I’ll walk into the office tomorrow and get hit with a tidal wave of phone calls and emails.” We drove in silence for a few minutes. “So, what do you normally do on a Sunday night?”

“Work. Hang out with friends.”

“And what about women? Even if Danielle saw the light, surely, for a man like you, sex is on the agenda?”

What did she mean, a man like me? I wasn’t a type. I didn’t fit in a box. “Not on a Sunday,” I replied.

“For religious reasons?” she asked. I turned to see if she was serious and found a wide, warm smile that she didn’t wear often enough.

I decided to double back on myself and head toward my flat. She wanted to be prepared? And she could banter like one of the guys? I was going to take her to the pub with me. “Yeah, I’m a regular Benedictine monk.”

“I didn’t get that vibe from you.”

“Weird that. Sunday nights are about chewing the fat and drinking beer with my oldest friends.”

“I thought you didn’t drink.”

“They drink. I nurse a pint of lemonade,” I replied.

“Well, you know what I’m going to suggest.”

“I’m way ahead of you. We’ll drop the car and we’ll be there to get the first round in.”

“Are jeans okay?” She looked down at what she was wearing. “And this shirt is old.”

“I swear, none of these guys will notice what you’re wearing.”

“Nice. No wonder women aren’t part of your Sunday nights if you’re full of compliments like that.”

“I’m not saying they won’t notice *you*. Just that your clothes aren’t what they’ll pick up on. First will be your smile. Then, no doubt they’ll check out your arse, boobs, legs. But they won’t focus on your shirt being *so very last season*.”

“I don’t know whether to laugh or punch you.” She giggled and playfully punched me in the arm, and I feigned injury.

“Don’t hate the player. Hate the game.” I chuckled at myself as Stella rolled her eyes. “What? You told me I was cheesy. I’m just proving you right. You should be happy.”

“You think men just break women down into body parts?” she asked as I pulled into my garage.

It was one of those questions that was impossible to answer. I’d either come off looking like a total dick or a *complete* and total dick. I had to reframe the question. “The first thing we notice is a woman’s physical appearance. That’s just a fact. But that’s not the only thing we care about. And you can’t tell me it’s not the same for a woman.” I switched off the engine. “I like attention from women. I don’t mind if they see me and like what they’re looking at. It’s human nature to be attracted to the physical.”

We got out of the car and headed to the exit. Yes, we would be early, but there was no point in going up to my flat. I wasn’t sure I was ready for Stella to be in my space.

“So you’re saying I should prepare myself to be objectified by your friends.”

“No more than any other woman walking into the bar. At least they won’t be focused on your shirt.” I held my hand out as the lift opened at the lobby.

All six of us had women in our lives at various points, some more seriously than others, but only one of us was married. It wasn’t that women were banned from our weekly trips to the pub, it was just that none had ever showed up, so I wasn’t quite sure how bringing Stella along would go down.

Joshua and Dexter knew that Stella was taking me to the wedding so I could speak to Henry. But I’d have to fill the others in so no one got the wrong end of the stick and thought things were so serious I couldn’t be away from her for an evening. It would be so out of character they’d think I’d caught some kind of weird disease. I couldn’t imagine ever feeling that close to a woman. The perfect relationship for me was a woman I saw twice a week

for dinner and a sleepover. The idea of sharing a bed *every* night was enough to make my skin itch and my palms sweat.

“And I don’t have to drink beer, right? Because if fitting in means drinking beer then I’m happy to stick out. I hate it.”

“You don’t have to but if you want to fit in . . .” I said in mock warning. “I’m drinking lemonade, remember.”

I opened the door to the exit of the building, and she stopped in her tracks. “We’re not going up to your flat?”

“No reason to. We can go straight there. It’s just on the corner.”

She eyed me suspiciously but walked through the plate glass doors. “Summer in London is the best,” she said.

“When it’s sunny,” I said, heading right out of my building. The six of us took it in turns to nominate the pub we had our drinks in but over the years we’d settled on three. Tonight, it was my turn, which meant we’d spend the evening around the corner from my flat.

“And not too humid,” she said.

“And you don’t have to sit in traffic.”

“And you don’t have to work,” she replied. “Let me rephrase. Sunny, not humid, workless, traffic-less, summer evenings in London are the best.”

I nodded. I couldn’t argue with that. “And kicking back with friends is the best way to spend those evenings.”

“Agreed. Oh, the Punchbowl?” she asked, tipping her head back to look at the sign as the softening sunlight caught the strands of her hair. “This is the one Guy Richie owns?”

“He sold it,” I said, peeling my eyes from her and opening the door, indicating for her to go before me. “Years ago. Trust me, it’s nice.” It was my favorite pub in London. It was like an old-fashioned place that had been polished up and made to look nice. And that kind of suited me.

“It’s Mayfair. Of course it’s going to be nice,” she said. We headed inside, and she looked around. “Gosh, it’s a lot bigger on the inside.”

It had plenty of choice when it came to the beer, which the boys enjoyed, and the dark wood and red leather chairs gave it an authentic feel.

“This okay?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Sure. But I bet you can’t get Dom Perignon here,” she said.

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Grab that table and I’ll go and order. You want champagne?”

“I really don’t. Wine, please.”

“What kind of wine?”

“The house white is fine.”

I’d ordered Danielle house wine once. Jesus, she’d been pissed off at me. Apparently, no one drank house wine, and on top of that I was supposed to have remembered the *kind* of wine she preferred. Apparently, I’d found the only person in London who drank house wine.

It was tradition that whoever got to the pub first ordered drinks for everyone, even if it meant beers went flat. It wasn’t a complicated order, but I took the barmaid through it three times just to make sure she had it, then returned to our large, round table with a tray of seven drinks. It looked like Stella and I were in for a big night but the boys would be here soon enough.

“So did you guys work together? Grow up together? How do you know each other?”

“Duke of Edinburgh,” I replied. “Gangs had just started to build up on our estate when I was a teenager and my mum thought that weekends working toward something positive like the Duke of Edinburgh award—spending time outdoors, climbing mountains, and volunteering—would keep me out of prison. And it did.” A number of the kids I’d gone to school with had ended up doing time.

“And you stayed in touch all these years?”

“Yeah. Took three years to get all three awards. And it introduced me to a different future. Did you do it?” I asked as I took a seat on one of the low stools.

She shook her head. “I knew people who did, but I was indoorsy rather than outdoorsy. Is that what you enjoyed? The hiking? You climb a lot of mountains, right?”

“That’s part of it,” I replied. “But because kids from all over the area, from all different schools and backgrounds all did the award together, I met people who wanted more out of a life than just staying out of jail or to be a drug dealer,” I said as I transferred the last pint glass from the tray to the table. I’d been the only kid from my school to do the Duke of Edinburgh award, and I hadn’t told a soul in my class. I learned early not to hand my enemies ammunition. “The kids from other areas had different stories to tell, completely different lives. And I realized my fate wasn’t fixed—I didn’t have to stay on the estate where I grew up.” I took a breath in, still sensing the gratitude I had for stumbling onto the Duke of Edinburgh award. If I hadn’t

seen that poster tacked up on the notice board by the assembly hall and surreptitiously gone and taken a photograph when I'd been excused to use the loo during a geography lesson, I might have had a very different life. "There was a girl that we did the silver medal with who ended up sailing across the Atlantic—her and her mate. Amazing. They were the youngest all-girl crew to ever do it. Seeing those aspirations in other people sows seeds. The beginning of my ambition was born spending time with the others on the course, understanding what was out there in the world for me, sharing our hopes and dreams for the future. I discovered my grit and determination. By the end of those three years, I'd built the foundations of the man I'd become and made the five best friends it was possible to make."

"Beck, that's amazing."

Stella's eyes were sparkling, and she seemed genuinely enthralled by my story. But it *was* amazing. For all of us. Those hours climbing up and down mountains in the rain, snow, and unbearable heat, volunteering with disadvantaged kids, raising money for the homeless—they had been the time of my life.

"Speaking of—here's Dexter," I said, glancing at the door.

Dexter arrived at the table and his gaze slid from me to Stella and back again, his eyebrows receding farther into his hairline with every second that passed.

"Hey, mate," I said. "You've heard about Stella." I gestured next to me.

"Oh, right. You two are going to the wedding together." He kissed Stella on each cheek before taking a seat next to her.

"That's the plan," I said before Stella could start on how impossible it would be.

"And you're friends now?" he asked.

"We're getting there," I replied. "As I'm going as Stella's plus one, we thought it would be good to spend some time together."

"He's pretending to be my boyfriend, so I need to know everything about him. I'm hoping as his friends, you'll be able to fill me in on all the stuff he doesn't want to tell me."

Dexter shot her a grin that said he'd just won the lottery. "I'm pretty sure we can manage that."

"Manage what?" Joshua asked as he approached the table, setting his wallet down before noticing Stella. I swore one of these days he was going to walk right into the road because he was thinking up some complicated

algorithm or something.

“Joshua, Stella. Stella, Joshua.” I should have ensured we arrived late, that way we only had to do introductions once.

“We have to rake up every awful thing we know about Beck to tell Stella,” Dexter said.

“This isn’t a Vegas residency—we’re here for one night only,” Joshua replied.

I really should have briefed them before bringing Stella. They were joking, but I wasn’t sure what would send Stella running in the opposite direction of the wedding. The last thing I needed was for these guys to destroy my last chance to meet Henry.

By the time Andrew arrived, Stella already knew I was shit at football. I didn’t bother to add that it was because I hated the game. By the time we’d all sunk our first pints, Stella was almost through her glass of wine and the flush in her cheeks and her near-constant smile suited her. Apparently laughing at my expense relaxed her.

“His legs were so thin, he could have slid down a plughole,” Dexter said.

“Fuck off,” I said. “I was just lean, that’s all.”

“Spindly more like,” Tristan said. “My mum used to pack chocolate bars into my rucksack to give you. She thought you were malnourished.”

“That’s a lie. You never gave me any chocolate.”

“Of course not. I kept it for myself.” Tristan shrugged as if I were stupid.

“You all did all the levels together?” Stella asked.

“Yeah. We all did bronze, silver, and gold, so it took a while,” Tristan said. “Years. I couldn’t shake these guys even if I wanted to.”

“One of the best things I’ve ever done in my life, even if it did mean I hung out with this lot of losers,” Dexter said. “Getting all three medals is one of the achievements in my life I’m most proud of.”

I nodded and looked up to see the other four guys nodding too. Tristan was a billionaire who’d built up his online pharmaceutical distribution business from scratch. Dexter was a diamond dealer and as sharp a man as I’d ever met. All six of us were the best in our field. We all had a lot to be proud of. But Duke of Edinburgh would make top three on our list of accomplishments any day of the week. We all owed a good portion of our success to the skills we developed during those times.

“And you get to go to Buckingham Palace, right?” Stella asked.

“If you complete gold, you sure do. We met the Duke of Edinburgh.”

Dexter pulled out his phone and brought up a picture of him and his mum and dad in front of the palace gates. We all had a similar picture. And of course, we had plenty of the six of us.

“You all seem very passionate about it,” Stella said.

“Well, Beck here is,” Dexter said. “If he hadn’t done Duke of Edinburgh, he would have fallen down a plughole.”

“Fuck off. I was *lean*.”

Stella laughed and part of me wanted to strip down naked and challenge anyone to take the piss out of me. I was still lean, but unlike when I was fourteen, I now had the muscles that defined my shape. I didn’t get out into the country to hike as much as I’d like, but I was committed to running and the gym.

“So, what else do I need to know about this guy?” Stella asked.

“He’s disgustingly competitive,” Tristan said.

“Coming from you?” He had to be kidding. Tristan was one of the most competitive people on the planet and the worst loser who ever lived.

“We’re not talking about me,” he replied. “We’re talking about you.”

“We’re all competitive,” I said. None of us could argue with that. What went unspoken was that we’d all step in front of a train for each other.

When Gabriel’s father died when I was seventeen, I caught three trains and walked seven miles to get to the funeral.

Two years ago, when Tristan’s sister’s boyfriend punched her, Joshua tracked him down online, drained his bank accounts of money, destroyed his credit rating, and gave him a criminal record for aggravated assault.

When I bought my first flat in Hackney, all of them showed up and helped me gut the place.

We were brothers. I’d learned some time ago that family wasn’t about blood that you shared but experiences that bound you.

“Okay, what about current bad habits?” Stella asked.

“Honestly, he’s not got the greatest track record with women,” Joshua said. “But other than that, he’s a pretty decent guy.”

“What does his track record with women look like?” Stella asked.

“Women just aren’t my focus,” I replied before anyone else could add something I couldn’t row back from. “So I can be a bit thoughtless.”

“Have you ever had a serious relationship?” she asked.

“Serious?” Dexter asked with a chortle.

“I work too much,” I mumbled.

“Like I keep telling you, mate, you won’t have to consciously try to make an effort when you find the right woman. But until then, a fake relationship sounds like a good idea. Make sure you keep him on his toes,” Dexter said.

“So this is some kind of immersion weekend before you go to the wedding?” Joshua asked. “I guess you had to squeeze it in before you go to New York next week.”

Fuck, I’d completely forgotten I was headed stateside next week. Stella wasn’t going to be happy.

“You’re going to New York?” she asked. “For how long?”

“The trip is ten days in all. I’m spending a few days in Chicago, but I don’t go until Thursday.”

“Can you cancel? We have prep to do. I won’t make a total fool out of myself in front of all my friends.”

I’d been winning with Stella before my trip had been mentioned. She’d relaxed and I’d begun to enjoy her company. I already recognized the beginning of a spiral into meltdown territory.

“I can’t cancel. These meetings have been arranged for months. But it will be fine. I feel like you know me better than my own mother at this point.” The meeting in Chicago was about the possibility of converting an old hotel into luxury flats. It could turn out to be very lucrative. And I was looking forward to diversifying and spreading my wings a little.

Stella set her drink on the table and sat back, looking as though dark clouds had gathered above her. Her mouth was downturned, and her eyebrows pulled together. “I’m serious, Beck, Karen will stop at nothing to embarrass me. And I don’t think I could handle it. I’ve had enough humiliation to last me a lifetime. Being at the wedding is bad enough.”

“Humiliation? What do you mean?”

Her eyes filled with tears, which was the last thing I was expecting. Despite her claim that she and Karen were friends, it didn’t seem that way at all. But why would going to the wedding be so awful? I didn’t want to ask and risk upsetting her even more. “You could come with me to America?” I suggested.

“Don’t be crazy. I can’t follow you to New York. Apart from anything else, I don’t have enough holiday left. Especially since I have to take a week for the wedding.”

“So, hand your notice in. You’re not going to be able to do that job and do all the design on my building anyway.” What was I doing? I shouldn’t be

encouraging her to give up her job. It would be better for me if she realized herself that she couldn't do the two things and ended up pulling out of my project.

"I'll figure it out." She tapped her finger on the bottom of her wine glass. She didn't sound too convincing. "In the meantime, you need to cancel your trip."

"That's not going to happen. I'll be at the end of the phone. We can even FaceTime. But I'm not cancelling. End of story."

"Oh, did I mention how stubborn Beck is?" Joshua asked.

"Piss off," I replied. "You wouldn't cancel in my position either. And there's no need to. If we were having a relationship, we would talk a lot by phone, so that's what we'll do. I'll call you five times a day if necessary." Truthfully, going to the US when Stella was so jittery wasn't ideal, but I'd have to make good on my word and call her a lot—ask her questions, answer hers. It would be fine.

"I guess, like you said, I can wait and see how confident I'm feeling and tell them I'm sick if I don't think we're ready."

"We're going to be ready. I promise you." One thing Stella would learn about me was that I didn't make promises I didn't keep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stella

With Beck in New York, I was going to have to make the best of things. It wasn't as if he were on a desert island somewhere without his mobile. After elbowing my way through the lunchtime crowds of Seven Dials, I threw my salad onto my desk and pulled out my phone. It was nine in the morning in New York. Beck should be ready for a few questions.

Me: *Are u there?*

Beck: *Where?*

Me: *On the other end of the phone?*

Beck: *No.*

He was *almost* funny.

I had to use the time he was away as efficiently as possible. I needed to think of the kind of digging Karen was going to do. No internet research was going to tell her anything that would be a problem. It wasn't like Beck was secretly gay or married or a priest or something.

He liked women. His friends had assured me of that in the pub. I grinned to myself. He was always so cool and confident, it was nice to see he wasn't perfect—the way his friends ribbed him about stuff in front of me had clearly irritated him.

It was cute.

Almost as if he wanted to present the best version of himself to me. As if he wanted me to like him.

And I did like him. So far. Not that it mattered. Although, obviously he was attractive. An eighty-five-year-old lesbian nun would be a little giddy

around Beck.

But it didn't matter. Because we weren't dating. We were getting to know each other. That was different.

Somehow.

Me: *What's your favorite restaurant in London?*

Nothing.

Two minutes later—nothing.

Ten minutes later—still nothing.

Five hours later just as I was logging out to go home—Beck was still radio silent. What could be more important to him than this? I thought he desperately wanted to go to the wedding.

Three dots popped up, indicating he was online, not that I had the phone jammed in my hand or anything.

But then nothing.

I typed out “hello” and then deleted it. Then typed out another less polite message and deleted that one as well.

I knew if any sane person could see me now, they'd wonder what the hell was going on. Time to call in the only person I was completely sure was sane: Florence.

I shot past the lifts and took the stairs where I could get mobile coverage.

“Hey,” she answered.

“I need you to talk me off a cliff. Oh, and hello.”

I heard her take a deep breath and it made me copy her and fill my lungs.

“What's going on.”

Florence understood how difficult this wedding was going to be for me. She'd understand a little freaking out. “Beck isn't answering my messages.”

As I exited the building, by some miracle my bus was waiting for me at the stop. I climbed on and pressed the phone harder against my head, hoping I'd hear Florence over the traffic and announcements on the bus.

“At all? Or has he just not answered one text. Yet?”

“The one I sent him five hours ago hasn't been answered. And before you ask, he's seen it and it's after lunch in New York.” I wasn't being entirely unreasonable and expecting him to answer in the middle of the night or anything.

“You know what I'm going to say,” Florence replied.

I stared out of the window, watching the push and pull of the office workers trying to escape the area and the tourists pouring in. “That I should

never have agreed to go to this wedding in the first place?” Well, that was completely certain. “It was a deal I couldn’t say—”

“You know that’s not what I was going to say. He’s in New York for a reason, not just to message you the entire time. He’ll reply. He knows he has to keep you happy and stop you from completely melting down.”

She was right. He was probably in a meeting. Or multiple meetings.

But didn’t he get a loo break?

“Karen is going to do her best to figure out if we’re an act. I can’t give her any chinks in our armor.”

“Yeah, she’s on a mission now. If I didn’t know better, I would say she’s more interested in you and Beck than she is about the wedding itself. She called me again last night and asked a ton of questions about when you two met and then when I’d met him.”

My heart pounded, sucking up blood from my toes and making them turn marble-cold. I’d half hoped Florence would tell me Karen had forgotten by now and that in Scotland she’d be far more focused on her wedding and her guests, but she’d done the opposite. “Maybe I should have gone to New York,” I replied. I could have phoned in sick, although knowing my luck, I would have bumped into someone from the office on the Heathrow Express.

“Who cares what Karen thinks, anyway,” Florence said. “She’s a witch. You don’t need someone like that to believe you.”

I thought Florence got it. “Karen can’t know that Beck and I aren’t a real couple. Gordy hasn’t said something, has he?” Was she trying to warm me up before she told me that Gordy had spilled the beans?

“Gordy doesn’t speak to Karen. And actually he hasn’t spoken to Matt much either. Between you and me, they’ve had a bit of a falling out. Gordy really doesn’t approve of what he’s done.”

Gordy was a sweet, kind man who might just deserve Florence.

My thoughts tumbled down into the I-can’t-believe-this-has-happened valley. I’d spent a lot of time in that place, ruminating and wondering what had gone on, when things had gone wrong, how long Matt and Karen had been together—I couldn’t go back there.

“Well, he’s done what he’s done. I’m trying to look to the future—otherwise I wouldn’t be going to this wedding.” The bus pulled up at my stop just three doors down from the flat I’d thought would become the place where Matt and I lived as newlyweds.

“Exactly, so who cares if Karen figures out you and Beck. You still get

the job. You still move forward.”

I might still get the job of a lifetime but somehow, I needed more than that. I had to believe that I could be more than the girl whose best friend and boyfriend got married. “I need evidence,” I said. “Yes, the job’s important. I need the chance to get my design business up and running, but I need something else too. I’m in a rut—or I’m on a losing streak or something. At the moment, if I got that job, I’m worried something would happen to stuff it up. I need this pretend boyfriend thing to go right to break the pattern.”

“To end your losing streak?”

I put the key in the lock and pushed the door open into the hallway. Absolutely nothing about coming home had changed since Matt had left. Except Matt wasn’t here. The coat hooks still had too many coats on them, even though they were just *my* coats and jackets now. The succulent his mother had brought on her last visit still sat on the console table. The deep red carpet still made the hallway look dark. “Exactly. Maybe.” It wasn’t exactly a run of bad luck I was having. But I’d gotten into a pattern of bad stuff happening and it was starting to feel normal. “Something good needs to happen. And you know what? I want to convince everyone at that wedding, including Karen, that Beck is my boyfriend because I want to know that people think it’s possible.”

“I’m not following you. Think *what’s* possible? That you could date a guy like Beck?”

“Sort of. I mean, he’s good looking, hardworking, he has a great body, his own business. He’s funny—sometimes. He’s got nice friends. I don’t know, I just want people to believe that I’m worth someone like that. That I’m worth something more than a cheating boyfriend. I swear people think that I must have done something to deserve it.” The fact was, I was always trying to figure out what I could have done differently. What I could have done to have stopped Matt cheating.

“Stella, I believe you’re worth more than a man like Matt.”

I didn’t like the tinge of pity I heard when she said my name.

“You don’t count. You’re biased.” I pulled open the bedside drawer that had been Matt’s. When I’d packed up his stuff, I’d forgotten this drawer, and when I realized, I didn’t bother to tell him. And I hadn’t emptied it. It was almost as if I didn’t want to get rid of the last pieces of him for some reason. Now a packet of mints, a pen that he’d gotten from his dad when he got his first job, and a dog-eared copy of *Into the Wild* were the only things of Matt

left in this flat. In my life. I slammed the drawer shut. “It’s not just the Beck thing—I want people to think I’m strong and capable. And that my whole life hasn’t been busted into a million pieces.”

“You want everyone else to believe that?”

I did. I wanted the entire world to believe that I was okay. That I was not only capable of surviving Matt and Karen’s betrayal, but I had thrived despite them.

If everyone else believed it, maybe I could too.

The sound of a message arriving bleeped on my phone.

“I’m putting you on speaker,” I said. If Beck was online, I wanted to make the most of it.

Beck: *J Sheekey. You?*

So he hadn’t died. And I liked his choice in restaurant.

Matt always liked Rules for the venison, so we used to go there a lot. I preferred something a little more modern and less stuffy. Like J Sheekey or Scotts. But Matt didn’t like fish.

Me: *Scotts*

Beck: *Nice. I like it there too. Do you have brothers and sisters?*

I grinned and flopped back on my bed. Beck was taking this seriously.

“You think this will be one of those things that I look back on and say, thank God that happened? Thank goodness Matt cheated on me and ran off with Karen and married her within weeks?”

“Absolutely,” Florence said as if she were in no doubt. “Wouldn’t surprise me if they were divorced by the end of the year.”

“And I won’t even notice they’re divorcing because I’ll be so busy at work.”

“And you’ll be having amazing sex with an intelligent, handsome, funny guy who treats you like gold.”

“Actual sex? Or the make-believe sex like I’m having with Beck?”

“You never know—by the end of a week in Scotland you might be having *actual* sex with Beck,” Florence replied.

I ignored the fizzle under my ribs at the thought.

“I just want the design job. I can live without his penis.”

“I bet it’s super handsome. Just like him,” Florence said.

“I’m going,” I said through my giggle. “You’re ridiculous and Beck just replied. I need to pepper him with questions.”

“I hate to say I told you so, but I knew he’d reply,” Florence said. “I’ll be

saying the same thing when you two end up hooking up in Scotland.”

“I’m hanging up,” I said.

Beck and I weren’t going to hook up. We were going to nail this fake boyfriend and girlfriend thing. Beck was going to get his Mayfair building, and I was going to get my life back.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Stella

“You think we’re ready?” I asked, unzipping my case in our hotel room. Between Beck’s meetings, the time difference, and my dragon of a boss, Beck and I had texted every day, spoken a handful of times, and even squeezed in a video call over the past ten days, but I was still nervous. I’d been trying to dampen down the rising panic all morning, but now that we were here, an hour away from beginning the celebration of a marriage of the two people who’d betrayed me, being here seemed ridiculous. Being here with *Beck* made it worse as if he emphasized that I was alone. I had no one. “I’d not considered the logistics of sharing a room. I need a drink.”

“The logistics?”

“You know. Two people. One bed.”

“I think it would raise suspicions if we had separate rooms,” he said.

He obviously thought I was too stupid to live. Of course I understood we had to share a room in the hotel, but I’d not mentally prepared myself. All my energy had gone to focusing on getting through the weekend. The day of the ceremony, my plan was to take a seat on one of the pews at the back, on the side away from the aisle so I could see and hear as little as possible. Then, rather than wait around for photographs, I’d disappear back to the hotel. But we had days to get through before that final obstacle.

And here we were at the first obstacle—I’d not given sharing a bedroom with a perfect stranger much thought, and as if my suitcase wanted to provide me with proof, I pulled out my pajamas. If Beck and I were really dating, my pink nightwear with daisies speckled all over them would not be the way to

go. No doubt he was used to seeing women in something sheer, sexy, and impossible to sleep in. Well, tonight he'd get to see what women wore to bed when they weren't sharing it with an attractive man. "I know," I replied. "But, it's weird. We hardly know each other."

"That's not even remotely true. I know more about you than anyone, barring my immediate family and my five closest friends."

The more time I spent with Beck, the more questions kept popping into my head. "What about your mum's middle name?" I asked.

"Bridget."

"I should have probably met her."

He chuckled, like he did most times when I began to sidestep into meltdown territory. He'd had to talk me down from a cliff at least three times since we'd made our pact. He was good at it. Knew what to say and which buttons to press. It was weird—I knew he was doing it to make sure he got what he wanted, but it always came across as if he had my best interests at heart. He was dangerous like that because he was just protecting what he wanted. I needed to remember that. He wasn't just being nice. He had an agenda, however convincing he might be. Everything he did was pretend.

"You know we're not really dating, right?" he asked. "And we're only *pretending* that we've been dating for just less than three months." He'd unpacked at lightning speed, zipped up his suitcase, and stowed it behind the door.

I sighed dramatically. "Beck, when you know, you know. Three months is a long time. It's time we thought about taking things to the next level. We're in love. It's serious. What are we waiting for?"

He paused for a second. "Three months is a long time? Would you be expecting to talk to someone you're dating about the future, about *marriage*, after three months?"

I thought about it for a second. I couldn't remember when Matt and I had started talking about marriage and the future, even names for our kids, but we'd been so young when we'd met it hadn't seemed imminent. Just something we'd do in the future. Except the future had never arrived. "I think it would depend on the relationship, but if it was the good kind, then sure. Why not?"

"Three months in I'm not even making dinner reservations a week in advance—I'm certainly not thinking about honeymoon destinations."

"So, are you just waiting for the right girl to come in and bowl you over

or are you refusing to settle down before a certain birthday or . . . What's your deal?"

He scooted back on the bed and watched as I continued to unpack, unzip, and tidy. "You think I've scheduled in *getting serious with someone* on the day after my thirty-fifth birthday?"

"Some men do." Matt had been a planner. Whenever I'd mentioned marriage, he'd always tell me how he wanted to get to a certain point in his career or be living in a different house. There had always been some practical reason why it wasn't the right time. Although seeing how quickly he'd married Karen had changed all those reasons into excuses. "You're saying you're not one of them. Have you had your heart broken—is that the issue?"

"There's no issue and no history of a broken heart. I'm just happy doing what I'm doing. What about you? You're looking to find a man who's going to march you down the aisle within three months?"

"God, no, but if I was going to marry someone, I think I'd know within three months."

I couldn't imagine marrying anyone now. Matt and I had grown up together. There was nothing we didn't know about each other. I'd never have that kind of intimacy with someone again, but that was what I was looking for—someone who knew me inside out and back to front and vice versa. I wasn't into hiding, pretending—presenting my best side as Karen would say.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be ready to commit to anything but a particular cocktail from now on. It's difficult to find someone you want to spend time with and want to share every thought in your head with and hear exactly what they're thinking. Imagine if the last few weeks with us had been real—squeezing in phone calls, texts. It's hard and it has to be worth it." It hadn't been difficult with Beck because I was hell-bent on not being humiliated. And he was easy to talk to and valiantly put up with my crazy questions.

"Just so we're clear, if anyone asks, we're not engaged, right?" he asked.

"You look terrified at the prospect of even pretending." I shook my head. Thank God I wasn't dating Beck. We wouldn't last an evening. He screamed *scared of commitment* from every pore. "We're desperately in love but there's no engagement. But of course, if someone nudges you and says, 'You next,' you have to try not to look as if they've just asked you to carve your leg off with a rusty knife. Smile and say something positive like—"

"'If she'll have me' or 'I hope so.' I get it, Stella. You don't need to worry that I'm going to mess up."

I wasn't really worried about Beck. He could more than handle himself. I was worried about me. How would I react to seeing Karen and Matt celebrating the official start of their lives together? Would I be able to swallow down the pain at the sight of everyone gathered to wish them well? Would I be wishing it was me and then hating myself for being so pathetic? "Is there a mini-bar? I need a drink."

Beck glanced at his watch before heading over to the cabinet under the window. It was barely lunchtime, but I needed something to give me the courage to get down those stairs. "What do you want?" he asked, peering into the small fridge.

"Do they have wine?"

He pulled out a bottle and set about getting a glass and pouring it for me. "It's going to be fine, Stella. We've totally got this. We just need to stick together like we did at the engagement party."

What did he know? It wasn't his ex and ex-best friend getting married. I just needed to remind myself that it was just a week out of my life and in return, I'd hopefully get my career back.

I could do this.

I could make people believe I hadn't been broken by Matt and Karen's cheating.

I could convince everyone I had a new, better life.

Probably.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Beck

I didn't like weddings even if I'd been invited. There was always someplace better to be—work, hiking with the boys, an abattoir. But this wedding was different. This wedding *was* work. And Henry Dawnay was the only meeting I had planned. I scanned the bright, sunny room where they were having welcome drinks, trying to look as if I wasn't looking for anyone. Which I totally was. It might be day one, but I didn't want to miss an opportunity to run into Henry.

“God, this is pretty,” Stella said. I wasn't sure if she realized she'd tightened her hand in mine as if I were her life jacket in choppy, open waters. I looked around the room again, trying to see what she did. I supposed it was pretty. There were blue and white fresh flowers everywhere I looked—framing the doors, in swags around the picture rails, and small arrangements on every table. The French doors opened up to a brick patio where people were spilling out onto a lawn. Perhaps Henry was out there. It sounded like they had a string quartet playing—maybe he liked the music?

As we walked through the room, a waiter approached us with a tray of champagne. I took two glasses and handed one to Stella, who promptly downed hers, so I handed her mine. She smiled, slightly embarrassed, but took the glass nonetheless. She needed to take it easy on the alcohol, or I was going to have to carry her back up to our room. She was beyond stressed out. And I wasn't sure if it was just because it was her ex's wedding or if she was worried that we'd be caught faking it. Getting to know her had been eye-opening. I'd gotten an insight into how women thought. With me, what you

saw was what you got. I'd realized over the last couple of weeks that the women I normally spent time with didn't tell me half what they were thinking. In contrast, Stella didn't hold back. I had a near-constant running commentary on what was going on inside her head. She'd assured me that all women thought similarly about various issues—men who only called late at night, men who wouldn't go down on a woman but wanted a blow job, and men with back hair, among many other things. I also knew her opinion on men who ghosted women—which had happened to Florence before Gordy came along, apparently—on the joys of working from bed, and the importance of hedgehogs. It was as if I'd suddenly inherited a sister.

Except Stella was hot.

"You look beautiful," I said, trying to calm her nerves. If I didn't know better, I'd think she had a drinking problem, but I'd never seen her like this before.

She was looking particularly stunning today. She'd picked out a floaty, floral dress with long, billowing sleeves and a deeply cut neckline. When she walked, I got a glimpse of her toned, tanned legs. It was a dress that looked demurer than it turned out to be.

And that suited Stella—one thing on the face of it, hinting at something more interesting underneath.

That dress could have been made for her. But my favorite thing about her today was the way she'd scraped up one side of her hair with a clip that had fresh flowers on it. It was innocent and sexy at the same time. It showed off her long neck and emphasized her cheekbones. She was gorgeous, even if she didn't realize how gorgeous.

She had nothing to worry about. I'd only laid eyes on the bride once, but the first time I'd seen Karen, I wondered why on earth Stella's ex had dumped her. Not that Karen wasn't attractive, but she wasn't as beautiful as Stella, either. Not even close.

"I don't see Henry," she said, emptying her second glass of champagne and catching a passing waiter, swapping her empty glass for two full ones.

She handed one to me.

"Are you sure you're not going to take both of them?" I asked with a smile.

She grimaced. "Sorry. I need to be medicated to get through tonight. Hopefully it won't be so difficult after I see them for the first time."

But she was friends with them, wasn't she? I wasn't getting the full story

from Stella, but given she'd been so open about so much with me, she must have her reasons to keep secrets. I wasn't going to make her feel uncomfortable.

"Here's Florence and Gordy. They might have seen Henry."

"How are you holding up?" Florence asked once we'd all greeted each other.

"I'm fine," Stella replied. "Well, you know, as fine as can be expected."

"You need a drink," Florence said. "Or maybe you don't," she added as Stella stumbled on a completely flat surface. It wasn't even eight yet. At this rate she'd be throwing up within the hour.

"That was my shoes, but I have to admit, this isn't my first glass. At this rate, Beck will have to carry me upstairs."

"And that's not part of the package," I replied, and Stella blushed and put her finger to her lips.

I hadn't meant part of our deal—it was an offhand comment that was just meant to be a joke, but I could feel the heat in her cheeks in the tips of my fingers even though I hadn't touched them. She needed to stop being so fixated on what was fake between us and focus on what was real.

I really knew her—more than any woman.

I really liked her.

And I really wanted to get to know her more.

Right on cue at just before ten, Stella clutched her stomach and said, "I'm not feeling great. I might head back up to the room."

I hadn't spotted Henry and felt sure he wasn't about to arrive just as everyone was leaving. I'd have to be patient. It was just that all of my patience had been used up getting to this point. I needed his signature on the contract. I had exactly a week after the ceremony to get his signature. Then I could call the bank to tell them to call off the dogs and I could start on redevelopment. I was done waiting.

"I'll come up with you," I said, taking Stella's glass from her before she could down the last half a glass of champagne that we'd likely both see on the way back up. Luckily, Stella was a harmless, funny drunk. Cute really.

I'd had a couple of girlfriends who turned into two-headed, fire-breathing monsters after a couple of glasses of wine. I'd not dated one of those for a while. The last one had been Joan. She'd been cool and sexy, and it was all going so well until one Friday night we went for dinner after she'd been drinking—it was as if she'd been possessed by an evil spirit. She'd started telling me how no one was going to fall in love with me because I was such a cold-hearted bastard who used women for sex. Her cool-girl act had been exactly that—an act.

Stella just got more relaxed. Her shoulders fell by several inches each drink and then her head had tilted to one side as she kept telling Florence and Gordy how much she loved them.

Stella grabbed Florence and they hugged each other as if they were expecting to never see each other again.

“It'll be about nine hours until you see her at breakfast,” I said.

“Yes, and Bea and Jo will arrive soon. It will be so great to see them.” Stella launched her hand in the air and cocked out one hip. She was going to take somebody's eye out. “To see all the girls from St. Catherine's.”

Hopefully, Henry would arrive tomorrow. Joshua better have been right when he'd said Henry would be here all week, or we were going to fall out.

“Right. Bed,” she said.

I placed my hand at the small of her back, gently encouraging her forward.

“Beck, you're a very nice guy,” she said, pointing her finger at my cheekbone as we started up the old, oak staircase, her toned thigh slipping out from under the fabric with every step she took. The dress was perfect for her—sweet and sexy. If the dress had downed at least a bottle of wine, I'd say they were related. “You've been the perfect gentleman tonight.”

“Were you expecting something else?” I asked as we reached the landing, and I pulled out the key to our room.

I turned when I realized she wasn't by my side—she was frozen in the middle of the hallway.

“Am I attractive?” she asked.

The ground beneath my legs suddenly felt less stable—was she about to turn into a Joan? Was this a trick question where any answer I gave provoked rage? If I said yes, I would be objectifying her, and if I said no, I'd be some kind of mean bastard. “Of course. Let's go inside.” I gestured to our room, holding the door open.

“Do you mean that?” she asked as she slid past me. “Or are you just saying that?”

I took a deep breath as I got a great view of her bottom as she bent from the waist to unclasp her shoes. There was no doubt she was attractive. From the moment I’d laid eyes on her, I’d been struck by her openness. And her high cheekbones and her eyes that watched me so intently. “I rarely say things just for the sake of it,” I replied, shrugging off my jacket and placing it on a hanger.

“But am I *marriage* material?”

Oh God, were we really going to do this? I wasn’t her therapist. I wasn’t her sister or best friend. I didn’t do girl talk. “I have no idea what marriage material is.”

“Karen’s marriage material.” She struggled with the zip on the back of her dress, and I stepped forward to help her. “Well, clearly. We’re at her wedding. But I obviously wasn’t. Not for Matt anyway. And not for anyone, according to my left ring finger.” Before I could turn away, she let her unzipped dress fall to the floor. For a half-second, I expected her to proposition me, but she seemed to have moved on from worrying about sharing a bed and a bathroom and now seemed perfectly happy to walk around in her underwear. I wasn’t about to discourage her. Not with a body like that. Her skin was flawless, and her curves were in all the right places. Some men liked big boobs, but I liked a woman whose breasts were in proportion with everything else. Like Stella’s.

She bent over and reached under her pillow and began to put on her PJs. “I bet the women you normally go to bed with wear super-sexy negligees, right?” She stumbled on the word negligee, and I had to bite back a grin. She was verging dangerously close to adorable.

“Usually they’re naked.” There was little need for clothes if a woman was staying the night with me. I didn’t do sleepovers to watch Game of Thrones and drink tea.

She scrunched up her nose. “Urgh. That’s gross. And cold. And what happens if there’s a fire alarm?”

“So you’re saying I should leave some clothes on?” I asked.

Her eyes widened and she started to giggle. “Yes! Cover your penis.”

It wasn’t the usual thing I was used to hearing in the bedroom.

“Do you think someone will marry me someday?” she asked, looking down at her bedclothes before collapsing on the small, blue sofa next to the

mini-bar.

I pulled on a t-shirt and padded toward her. She needed a glass of water. “Do you just want to marry anyone, or does it matter who?” I asked. I’d never understood women who had a *goal* of getting married. Didn’t that just happen if it happened?

I crouched at the drinks’ cabinet, pulling out glasses and water.

“I’m just saying that I think some girls are the type men marry and some aren’t.”

I handed her a glass.

“Thank you,” she said. Her eyes were dull and the corners of her mouth downturned. She was usually so upbeat—determined and focused on our preparation. I took a seat beside her.

“I’m not sure that’s true. But then again, I’m probably not the guy to ask.”

“I bet you’re the type that just goes out with models and bloody ballerinas.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever dated a ballerina. Is that a thing?” I stretched my arm across the back of the sofa cushion, angling myself toward her. Why did she have a thing about ballerinas? And marriage? Maybe it was just because we were at a wedding of her ex.

“But I’m not your type, right? I can tell.”

There was no doubt about that, but not because I wouldn’t give her a second glance if I passed her on the street. I would. I’d notice across the room. I might even buy her a drink—or dinner. But getting to know her these past few weeks—she was different. Worth more somehow. “Stella, you’re an attractive woman—”

Before I could finish my sentence, she lunged at me, pressing her lips to mine.

I froze.

Ordinarily, I had no problem with women kissing me. Especially a woman as attractive as Stella. But I knew Stella well enough by now to know her kissing me wasn’t about me. It was all about being at this wedding, the nerves and the alcohol. Tomorrow she’d be shrouded with regret and that wasn’t the way it should be. If I was going to kiss Stella London, she wouldn’t regret it. She wasn’t going to be thinking about her ex or getting caught and she wasn’t going to be under the influence of a bottle of champagne.

She pulled away and covered her face with her hands. “Oh my God. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing. Of course, you don’t want me.”

I didn’t know what to say. “It’s not that, Stella. It’s just—”

She covered her ears and screwed her eyes shut. “No, please don’t give me a rundown. I’m tired, drunk, and emotional. I’m really sorry.” She bounced up from the sofa and headed to the wardrobe, pulling down blankets. “I’m going to sleep on the sofa. Please, can we pretend this never happened?”

Bloody hell, as if I was going to let her sleep on the sofa. The last thing I wanted to do was embarrass her. If she hadn’t had so much wine, I may well have been the one kissing her rather than the other way around. What a shitstorm. “Don’t be silly. I’ll take the sofa if sharing a bed makes you feel uncomfortable.”

“The other way around, more likely. I’m an idiot. I was just lonely and feeling sorry for myself. I’m really, really sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize. I’m very flattered—”

She groaned and dragged the blankets to the sofa, shooing me off as she set about creating herself a makeshift bed.

“I’m serious. You’re gorgeous.” It wasn’t like I could tell her I’d be completely up for getting naked if she were sober and not so obviously sad about her ex-boyfriend or not being married. Or something.

She got under the blanket and turned toward the back of the sofa, her legs curled up so she could fit. “I’d be really grateful if we could just forget all about this.”

I scraped my hand through my hair, desperate to make her feel better. It really was no big deal. “Of course. Consider it forgotten, on one condition: you sleep in the bed. I’ll take the sofa if it makes you feel better.”

“You can’t sleep on here. You’re about six foot fifteen.”

I’d much prefer not to spend the night with my legs wrapped around my head. I’d probably take the floor instead. “Six foot two. So, let’s both sleep in the bed. I’ll build a pillow wall down the middle if it helps?” I set about pulling the pillows down to the middle of the bed but by the time I finished, Stella hadn’t moved a muscle. There was only one thing for it. I scooped her off the sofa, and before she could ask me what the hell I was doing, I put her down on the bed.

“There. Now sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

“Thanks,” she said in a small voice, and I grinned to myself. She was cute when she was embarrassed. I had no idea why she didn’t think she was

marriage material, she outshone everyone in the room tonight. She might not believe it, but she was entirely kissable and almost irresistible. But tonight, between us? The time just wasn't right. When it was, I would kiss her, and she wouldn't be thinking of any ex-boyfriends when I did.

She wouldn't be drunk.

She wouldn't be sad.

And she wouldn't ever be sorry.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stella

Oh. My. *God*.

Every time I thought back to last night, my stomach dived into my feet and I had to pause whatever I was doing to make sure I wasn't about to throw up. Why could I have not passed out rather than decide I'd try to kiss Beck? It was as if I wasn't content with the humiliation of being at my ex-boyfriend's wedding with a stranger who was *pretending* to be my boyfriend. I had to bear the additional shame of trying to kiss the most handsome man alive.

I was an idiot.

I wasn't sure anything was worth spending the rest of the week here. If I'd been sober enough to charge my phone, I was pretty sure I'd have booked a flight out of this cave of mortification by now. It didn't help that we were all being bused to Matt's uncle's castle from the hotel for a day of *activities*. It might only be a fifteen-minute journey, but the narrow, winding roads mixed with the memories of the evening before were threatening to bring up last night's dinner. At least I was at the front of the coach—last on, first off. I'd nearly missed it, and I was almost certain that by the end of the day I would wish I had.

The bus pulled up in front of Glundis Castle. Last time I'd been here, Matt and I stayed in the west wing in the Churchill bedroom, named after its most famous occupant. I tried to push away the memories. Things were different now. I couldn't change it. Every time we'd been away together in the last few years, I'd wondered if Matt would propose. Last summer when

we were here, it hadn't been any different. I pressed my head against the window to take in the turrets on top of the four stories of weathered red brick. The wide, stone steps narrowed toward the entrance and a red carpet had been laid to give everyone the VIP treatment as they entered. Last time I'd been here, I'd been treated as a member of the family. This time, I was one of many guests.

When I got off, I stood in the rare Scottish sunshine, trying to focus on something other than the sloshing in my stomach. "Hey," Florence said, bounding over to me. "I didn't see you get on the bus. I wondered if your head was hurting a little too much this morning."

"Don't remind me. I was a mess."

Jo and Bea came up behind us and I opened my arms and pulled them into a four-way hug. My girls. At least today I wouldn't see much of Beck—hopefully by tonight, by magic, his memory would have been erased and he wouldn't recall my sad, pathetic humiliation. Today the men and women had been separated and different things planned for each group. Apparently, the boys were shooting. We were probably flower arranging or something. The invitation assured us it would be an enjoyable day. I knew better.

"It's so good to see you," Bea said. "I love that I get to hang out with you for an entire week!"

Thank God there was finally an upside of being here. I was beginning to wonder if I should just spend the rest of the week with fake tonsillitis. Or something more contagious that would give me an excuse to check into my own room, where I'd be as far away as possible from Beck Wilde. If only I could just rewind and make myself go right to bed without speaking a word to him.

I was never drinking again. Ever.

"Can you believe this pottery shit?" Jo said as we followed the rest of the party around the back where five long trestle tables were set out with chairs on either side. Free-standing shelving full of plain pots and glazes flanked the tables. "Why can't we go shooting with the boys?"

If I hadn't made a complete fool of myself with Beck last night, I would have agreed, but today I was grateful we'd been divided by gender—even if it was sexist bullshit.

"Matt would never agree to pottery painting and Karen wouldn't go shooting, so I guess it makes sense," Florence said. "It's kinda like the hen and stag parties they didn't have."

“I know, but I’m desperate to meet Stella’s new man!” Bea said as we took our seats at one end of the table. If I thought I’d have a reprieve from my nausea, I was wrong. Florence was the only one who knew Beck was actually a fake boyfriend. She’d convinced me that the fewer people who knew the truth the better. I hated lying to Bea—she was always so open about her dating life.

“Well, we’ve got another four days so I’m sure you’ll get to see him at some point,” I said, trying my best to give a genuine, newly-in-love smile.

“Speak of the devil,” Florence said as we followed her gaze to see Beck heading toward us.

Oh God. What did he want? I’d faked being asleep when he got up for a run, then dashed into the shower and made it out before he returned. I’d given myself a metaphorical pat on the back—it wasn’t as if we had anything in particular to say to each other. And I needed a few hours for my humiliation to be brought down to a simmer.

Now I was going to have to act like the dutiful girlfriend. “Hey,” he said. “Hi, Florence. Jo.”

“I’m Bea, Stella’s friend from St. Catherine’s.” Bea stood and beamed at Beck.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Bea,” Beck replied as he bent down to kiss her cheek. “I’ve heard so much about you. And I’ve just met James.”

Impressive that he’d remembered Bea’s boyfriend’s name and put them together. He was so bloody convincing he should take acting up for a living.

“Stella,” he said and my heart ping-ponged in my chest as humiliation, confusion, and a little lust fought to be first in line. “Can I have a word?” He beckoned me toward him and started walking away from everyone.

I followed him over the grass. What the hell was he doing here? I’d been such a complete lunatic last night. I’d never tried to kiss a man before. Why had I started with Beck Wilde? He was probably going to make us have some awkward conversation about how he thought of me as a friend, and I’d have to explain that last night hadn’t been about him—it had been about wine. And trying to make myself feel better. Maybe it had been a little about him, because he was so bloody nice to me on top of that six foot two of good looking. It was hard to resist *without* wine.

He stopped about twenty meters from where everyone was choosing their pottery, so no one would be able to hear what we were saying.

“Look, I’m really sorry about last night, Beck,” I said, trying to head off

the talk he was about to initiate.

Beck pushed his hands through his hair as if he were gearing up to deliver bad news.

“You don’t need to worry,” I said. “I promise it won’t happen aga—”

He cupped my face in his hands, his warmth heating my skin.

“What?” What was happening? Why was he touching me? Was this part of the show? I searched his face, looking for answers.

“I’m going to kiss you now. Are you ready?” he asked.

I took a step back and he stepped forward, keeping his hands on my face.

“Did you hear me?” he asked.

“I don’t understand—”

Before I could finish my sentence, his lips were on mine, and sparks of energy raced from his lips across my skin.

What was happening? His mouth was soft but insistent, and he smelled of coconut shower gel, freshly mown grass, and something indescribable but undeniably male.

He broke our kiss but didn’t move away, instead resting his forehead against mine. This *had* to be for someone else’s benefit—he’d done this to prove we were a couple.

“I’ve been waiting to do that.” He straightened and took a half step back, as if he wanted to check not just my face, but my entire body’s reaction to his kiss. Which was entirely understandable because his kiss still reverberated from the bottom of my toes to the breath escaping from my lungs to the buzz of my jaw under his fingers.

I felt it *everywhere*.

“Did I miss something?” I stuttered, trying to figure out why he’d kissed me. Who was watching?

He snaked his arm around my waist, and he pulled me toward him, kissing me again, this time his tongue parting my lips. He groaned as he moved deeper and my insides tightened, my heart sped, and my skin pricked like popping candy under my tongue. My knees weakened and I had to lean into him to stop myself from falling. But it didn’t stop the dizziness, the way the world seemed to sway as he touched me.

“Christ,” he said, pulling away but keeping me in his arms. “I’m not quite sure how I’m going to be able to leave you alone for the rest of the day, but I’m going to have to. I’m thirty seconds away from pulling you down onto the grass and dry humping you like my fourteen-year-old self.”

I smiled up at him, confused and a little disorientated. “What . . . I mean, did something happen? Did someone say something?”

He paused, and there was a softness in his eyes I’d not seen before. “Last night . . . Well, I wasn’t expecting it. You were . . .”

“Hammered,” I finished for him.

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to take advantage last night. On my run this morning, I decided I didn’t want to wait a moment longer to kiss you.” His expression changed as he caught me—presumably looking as dazed and confused as I felt. “This is okay, right?” His thumb stroked my jaw. “Last night you seemed to be on for the kissing.”

This entire situation was so weird. Last night I’d been a mess—a lunatic. And this morning, when I’d thought about trying to kiss him, all I’d felt was complete mortification. I hadn’t been picking out pottery to paint wondering if I still liked him or if he’d kiss me today, so I wasn’t prepared for his question. “It’s fine,” I replied. “Unexpected. It’s not because anyone has said something?” I asked.

“Stella, listen to me. I don’t kiss women because I have to. I kissed you because I wanted to. I want to.”

I wanted to turn away from him so he couldn’t see how much his kiss had affected me, no matter the shame from the previous evening. “Last night, I shouldn’t have—”

“Last night was last night.” He paused. “You’d had a lot to drink.”

I’d completely thrown myself at him, and though I’d been drunk, I could unfortunately remember every moment of it. I pressed my palm against his chest to get some space. “We’re here to introduce you to Henry, not to be . . . you know.”

He pulled me closer and kissed me again. “Business comes first. But I really like kissing you.”

I pressed my fingertips over my mouth to hide my smile. He really was an excellent kisser. And in the sixty seconds since it had happened, I’d not thought about Matt or Karen or their betrayal once. Apparently, kissing Beck was like pressing a temporary delete key in my brain. I nodded. “Me too.”

The sound of breaking pottery brought me back to where we were, and I glanced over my shoulder to find Florence staring at us. I was going to have some explaining to do. Not that I had much to say. It was just a kiss. “I should get back to . . .” I grimaced. “Painting pottery.”

“Sounds fascinating. Once you’re done, do they fling them into the air for

us to shoot?” he asked. “These people do the weirdest things for fun.”

“These people?”

“You know. People with money.”

“Do I need to remind you that we flew up here on a private jet you use all the time?” I asked.

“Yeah, but my money isn’t old money. I’m not one of *these* people,” he said. “I don’t shoot at inanimate objects for fun. I like good food, sport, and sex. I’m a simple man.”

I laughed—I wouldn’t have made the distinction between Beck and *these* people. But I suppose there was a difference. Most of the boys I’d grown up with had been wealthy, but he was right. There was a difference now that he’d pointed it out. It wasn’t obvious, but beneath the surface, there was a hunger, a drive Beck had that I didn’t see often. “Simple pleasures are the best,” I replied.

“Absolutely.” His mouth twitched at the corners, and his eyes sparkled with a hint of wickedness. “I have to get back to clay pigeon shooting. I wonder if how they have sex is as unsatisfying as what they call sport.”

Like a fourteen-year-old girl hearing the word *sex*, I shivered as he spoke. I couldn’t imagine sex with Beck could possibly be unsatisfying. I glanced at the ground, hoping to hide the heat I felt in my cheeks. “Yup. We both have to go and enjoy ourselves.” At least I’d managed to sit on a table with people I loved and away from Karen, but now being away from the boys for the day didn’t seem so much of a relief as it had on the coach ride over here.

“So, I’ll see you back at the hotel?” He dipped to catch my eye, as if his question carried more meaning than it first appeared.

I nodded and folded my arms, turning away but feeling a pull toward Beck that hadn’t been there before.

It had been so long since I’d been kissed the way Beck had kissed me. In fact, I wasn’t sure, I’d ever felt a kiss so deeply before. With Matt, we’d been too young to realize what a kiss could mean—how it could be the promise of something, good or bad. Beck’s kiss had been so powerful that if it was the promise of something, it would either be catastrophic or the best thing that had ever happened in my life.

I wasn’t sure I could withstand either.

I wandered back to the tables, carefully avoiding looking at Karen’s table.

“How’s Beck?” Florence asked, grinning at me as I approached as if she was just dying to tell me she’d told me so.

Bea and Jo were both looking at me like baby birds waiting to be fed scraps of gossip. “Oh, you know—tall, dark, and handsome.”

“He most certainly is,” Bea said. “And a phenomenal kisser by the looks of things.”

There was no doubt about that.

“Let me help you choose what you’re going to paint,” Florence said, springing up from her chair and shooing me over to the shelves stacked with the different types of pre-prepared pottery.

She handed me a vase. “Oh my God, what’s going on?” she asked in a loud whisper.

I glanced back at our table to see if anyone was watching or close enough to hear, but they were all engrossed in what they were doing.

“Nothing, I mean—”

“Stop that right now. Don’t tell me that was nothing. That wasn’t a kiss for show. Are you sleeping with him? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me this even though I completely knew it was going to happen.”

“No, I’m not sleeping with him. This is as far as it’s gone—what you’ve seen is the entire extent of what’s happened between us.”

“Wait—that was the first time you’ve kissed? What’s going on?”

“He said he’d been running this morning and had realized he wanted to kiss me.”

Florence narrowed her eyes, silently accusing me of not telling her the entire story.

“You know how drunk I got last night? And being here—it was all a little overwhelming. And at some point, I might have lunged at Beck.”

“Lunged?”

Lunging wasn’t really my style. Not that I had a style with men. There had only ever been Matt. “Yeah. It was horribly embarrassing and if you tell anyone, I’ll kill you—”

“But he was down for it?”

“No, he politely declined.” My insides began to curl up in shame as I remembered last night. Despite him kissing me today, I still wished it hadn’t happened.

“But then today?”

“You know as much as I do. He said that he wanted to kiss me.”

Florence took a deep breath. “Well, he’s obviously crazy for you,” she said matter-of-factly. “It’s so nice that he didn’t kiss you when you lunged

but did just now in front of everyone. He clearly couldn't wait."

Florence was a hopeless romantic. "He's not *obviously* crazy for me. It was just a kiss." One that I'd felt in my bones and gave me goosebumps just remembering it.

"You're together for the next week. Sleeping in the same bed. Something more is bound to happen."

I rolled my lips together. It was just a kiss. But what if Florence was right and he kissed me again? Wanted more?

Obviously, someone had to come after Matt. Unless I was going to check in to my local nunnery for the next fifty years, there would be another man. I knew that somewhere deep down, I just hadn't gotten to the point that I wondered who that someone was or wanted a particular someone to be next.

Not that I could have ignored Beck and his handsomeness. It hit you in the face like a freight train.

And he'd been so nice to me—confident, reassuring, and concerned.

There was a reason I'd lunged at him and not the bellboy.

"You're clearly both attracted to each other, and if he still likes you post-lunge, then that says a lot," Florence said.

"Post-lunge? Really? Can we not focus on the lunging? It's humiliating enough." But Florence was right—if he could see me drunk and emotional and not be running for the hills, perhaps Beck was the next someone. The problem was I didn't know which way was up and I didn't trust anyone enough to tell me.

"He has a vested interest in being nice to me," I said, my mind whirring with doubt and distrust. "He was probably worried about me abandoning him after his rejection last night and kissing me was his way of trying to keep me happy." Was that what his kiss had been about? Had he just been protecting his own best interests? He seemed genuine enough but if he'd wanted to kiss me, was he really such a gentleman that he'd held back last night?

"Stella, I witnessed that kiss. There was nothing fake or forced about it."

But she didn't know Beck.

I didn't really know Beck. And even though what I did know of him I liked, the fact that I was at the wedding of the man I thought I was going to marry told me my judgement wasn't to be trusted.

No, I was here for business—fighting for my future. I wasn't about to get thrown off course by a man's showstopping kisses.

No way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Beck

I was sticking out like the sorest of sore thumbs. I was wearing a navy-blue Tom Ford shell jacket in a sea of green and brown Barbours and tweed. It said everything you needed to know about me and the people here—I was new money versus their old.

But fuck it, I was a better shot than most of them. Shooting clays was so fucking boring. I didn't understand the appeal. It was no better than shooting cans at the back of the abandoned garages with an air rifle. And I'd mastered that around thirteen.

In any other scenario I would have just gone back to the hotel. My emails were piling up, and I had a thousand missed calls, but nothing, not even clay pigeon shooting, was going to drive me away. Henry Dawnay was ten meters away from me, and I wasn't going anywhere until I'd introduced myself.

Obviously, I didn't want to stare, but out of the corner of my eye I could see he was standing with three or four other men, one of whom was Stella's ex-boyfriend. We hadn't been officially introduced but I'd caught Matt's eye a few times, first at the engagement party and then last night. It was strange. He'd obviously moved on because he was getting married, but I got the distinct impression there was some unfinished business with Stella from his perspective.

But perhaps I was imagining things.

My imagination had been working overdrive recently. Last night when Stella had tried to kiss me, I'd been a second away from pushing her against the wall and kissing her until she didn't know what day of the week it was.

Ever since, I'd been imagining what she tasted like, how her skin felt under my hands. I'd been wondering if the floral scent that I couldn't quite place was a perfume or just how she woke up. And now I'd kissed her, I'd been thinking about when I'd get to do it again.

But that would come later. Right now, I needed to focus on why we were both here.

A table with drinks and snacks on it had been set up, and when I saw Henry break off from the small group he was talking to and head toward the table, I decided to seize the opportunity. I took a settling breath. I couldn't blow this by going in too hard and fast, which was my usual MO. In my experience, men like Henry didn't like to feel ambushed. They were used to having the control in most situations, so I needed to take my time and stick to my plan.

When I got to the table, I set about making myself a cup of tea. "It's a lovely day to be outside," I said, trying to sound as casual as I could—as if I didn't want to pin him down and sign away his property in Mayfair.

I was used to doing business with all different types of people. When I'd been flipping bedsits in East London, the people I'd worked with had been the opposite to the ones I now dealt with when developing luxury residential property in the W1 postcode. I prided myself on finding common ground with some people, flattering the egos of others. I did what was required to get what I wanted. The difference was whoever I normally worked with, wanted or needed something from me. Henry was different. The Dawnay building wasn't on the market.

Henry didn't need me.

And that together with the fact he was old money meant I was so far out of my comfort zone I needed oxygen and a parachute.

"A perfect day," he replied and held out his hand. "I'm Henry Dawnay. How do you do?"

I shook his hand. "Beck Wilde." I couldn't bring myself to say "How do you do" back. I liked to find common ground with people, but I wasn't a faker. I couldn't pretend to be someone I wasn't, and I'd never said "How do you do" to anyone.

Henry smiled and the muscles across my upper back began to unlock. I was finally here. In front of the man who could give me what I most wanted: a closed door on my past. I just had to bond with a man I had nothing in common with. A man who would no doubt look down on me because I

hadn't been to a school he'd heard of. I had to get him to like me, trust me. I had a lot of work to do.

First thing was first, I needed to point out the coincidence of us being at the same wedding. "Henry Dawnay, that name's familiar to me," I said, poised to put two and two together in front of him.

Before I'd gotten much past giving Henry my name, we were interrupted. By Stella's ex. I held back a groan. I just needed a few more minutes to tell him we had a connection and that I'd been trying to get in contact with him.

"We haven't met," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Matt, the groom. You're Stella's plus one, right?"

Plus one? That was an interesting way of referring to me and it gave away a lot more than he intended. He was clearly trying to dismiss me, and if I *had* been Stella's boyfriend, perhaps I would be offended. But he served it up with such transparency it didn't earn my offense. I nearly laughed at his petty point-scoring, but there was no need for him to know that I saw through his bullshit. "Beck Wilde. Stella's boyfriend. Great to meet you and congratulations."

He held my gaze as if he were trying to stare me down. Christ, he'd be getting his dick out in a second and suggesting a pissing contest.

I cast my mind back—I didn't think Stella had ever mentioned why she and Matt had split up. But if they were still friends, and they had been together a long time, I guessed it was something innocuous like they just fell into a brother and sister relationship. I would have to ask her. It was the kind of information you would tell a new boyfriend you were serious about. And anyway, I was interested.

"Looks like it's going to be a beautiful week," I said. "Perfect wedding weather. You're a lucky man, given it's Scotland."

"Indeed. And of course, I'm marrying the perfect woman," he said. "How are you enjoying the day so far?"

Perhaps it was my imagination again, but it seemed like his reference to Karen being perfect was rather pointed.

"Great company, wonderful weather, and a cup of tea. What more could a man wish for?" I replied, glancing across at Henry.

"Here, here," Henry said, raising his teacup.

Matt smiled tightly. "Absolutely," he said. "I've spent almost every summer of my life up here, enjoying the spectacular countryside. And to get to enjoy it with the wonderful weather is the icing on the cake."

“You’re very lucky,” I said. Matt and these people weren’t like the rest of us. They could take entire summers off to shoot and ride horses while I pulled out rotting floorboards from a flat in New Cross. Now I had people to do the physical work, but my summers were still spent in the office, negotiating the price of my next property or managing builders and designers.

My money had to be earned.

Theirs just had to be babysat.

“I don’t think we run in the same circles,” Matt said. “What is it that you do?”

I might not want to answer Matt’s questions because he was no doubt wanting to know so he could judge me. But at least it was information I wanted Henry to know. “I’m a property developer,” I said. “Residential mainly. It’s how I met Stella. She’s a designer on one of my buildings.”

Matt’s mouth twisted as if he’d taken a bite of something sour. “Really? What kind of building?”

“Luxury residences. My latest is in Mayfair.”

This was the perfect moment for Henry to tell me he had property in Mayfair. That he owned some rundown building that needed to be redeveloped, but he was staring out across the countryside, as if I’d been talking about the weather.

Patience. This was our first conversation. And I had a plan, even if it had been thrown off track a little.

“How interesting,” Matt said, clearing his throat and seemingly flustered.

“Excuse me, I need to make a call,” Henry said, and I tried not to inwardly groan. Losing an opportunity to chat with Henry was bad enough. There was no way I was going to get left with Stella’s tool of an ex-boyfriend.

“That reminds me,” I said. “I have to return an email. Good to meet you both.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket and wandered toward the knoll that led down from the house. I wasn’t sure how I was going to get through the next week surrounded by these people, who were all sweetness and conversations about the weather on the surface. Perhaps it wasn’t just the surface. Maybe an indulgent life and summers shooting clays and playing croquet provided unlimited charm.

I’d never know. I’d never fit in with these people. My father had made sure of that.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Stella

I cleared the smudge of mascara from below my right eye and set about trying to avoid the same mistake on my left eye. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this way before seeing a man. I couldn't even quite figure out what it was I did feel. Was it nerves? Even when I was first dating Matt, I didn't remember a *physical* reaction just at the thought of a man. The way my breath got higher in my throat when I thought about Beck, the way my skin seemed to tighten when I remembered our kiss—it was all new. I kept replaying our kiss in my head, wondering what had brought it on—whether he'd kissed me out of necessity or desperation or if it had been, as he'd described, just about desire. And when I saw him again, would he have had a change of heart and not want to kiss me? And if he did want more kissing, should I resist him, reminding myself that everything between us was a lie?

Too many questions.

I popped the mascara wand back in the tube. Beck wasn't back from whatever it was the boys were doing today, and I didn't want to look as if I'd been waiting for him. Thankfully my pedicure had made it to four days without a chip, so I grabbed a pair of black sandals. Tonight, women and men had separate dinners, again in some kind of effort to recreate hen and stag nights. It seemed a little forced and ridiculous and although I didn't want to admit it to myself, part of me wanted to spend the evening with Beck despite knowing this growing warmth I felt for him might be entirely in my head.

I jumped at the rattle of the door handle but managed to do up my second sandal and stand as Beck entered the room.

“Hi,” I said as if I’d just been caught doing something I shouldn’t and nerves tumbled about through my stomach like autumnal leaves in a breeze.

His gaze swept down my body. “You look . . .” His eyes grew bigger and then finally met mine. “Nice.” The way he said it reverberated in the base of my spine as if he’d pressed his tongue against my skin. How did he make the word “nice” sound so sexy?

“Thanks,” I said, hoping he couldn’t read my thoughts.

“You look as if you’re leaving,” he said as I picked up my evening bag.

“We have this separate dinner thing,” I replied, opening up my bag and checking that I had everything I needed, despite having checked it just before he came in. I just couldn’t look at him in case he saw how much I enjoyed our kiss earlier. I wanted to be cooler than that. Like it was no big deal that this hot, sexy guy sought me out to kiss me in front of everyone. Like it was real. “Drinks started at six-thirty.”

He checked his watch. “I was hoping we could talk.”

The leaves landed with a thud. In my experience, whenever men wanted to “talk” it was never about anything good.

He pulled his jacket off, tossed it on the bed, and stalked toward me as if he were on a mission. I took a step back when it looked like he was going to mow me down, but as he reached me he circled an arm around my back and slid his hand behind my neck, kissing me again. This time it started more urgently, as if he’d been storing up his kisses all day. My body sagged—soft against his hard, marble-like chest. He was warm and smelled so good, like a forest floor after a rainstorm.

His moan sent vibrations through my body, weakening my bones and making me gasp.

“Talk, huh?” I said as we pulled away.

He swept his thumb over my cheekbone. “Yeah. I didn’t want anything to be . . . I wanted to check I wasn’t out of line earlier.”

“When you kissed me? So you did it again?” Nothing about him *seemed* fake. But then again, I’d believed everything Matt had told me as well.

He shrugged. “Apparently.”

“Don’t sweat it.”

“Don’t sweat it?” he asked as he toed off his shoes and sat on the bed while he removed his watch.

“You felt the need to kiss me, so you did. No big deal.”

He chuckled as he stood and unbuttoned his shirt. I needed to get the hell

out of there. The way he was going, he'd soon be naked, and I couldn't guarantee I would be able to keep my hands to myself. "No need to have a discussion? I thought women liked to talk about these things."

"It may have escaped your notice, but women aren't one large homogenous group of people who all think and act the same way."

"Ahhh," he said as he peeled off his shirt, and I came face-to-face with his hard, bronzed chest. At least he didn't wax. A man as good looking as Beck had every right to be vain, but there was something distinctly un-masculine about bare chests in my book. "That's where I've been going wrong." He began to unbuckle his belt, and I turned and headed to the door. Someone had turned the heating up and I was trying to keep my cool. "I'll see you later," he called after me as I headed out into the corridor.

I suppose I had half an answer to my wondering what was going to happen next between us—no change of heart from Beck and a follow-up kiss.

Beck and I were supposed to be pretend. But the constant flip of my stomach and the way my heart sped as if I were running the hundred-meter final in the Olympics whenever he was around were undeniably real.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Beck

I was prepared. I'd tweaked my strategy of how to approach Henry about the Mayfair property. I'd just tell him how I hadn't made the connection earlier, but that he must be the Henry Dawnay who owned the Dawnay building and go from there.

I was ready to see him again.

Primed to make my move.

But he wasn't bloody here.

I checked my watch for the seventieth time that evening. It was almost ten and this thing was supposed to be over by ten-thirty. He was a no show. I'd kept my ears open all night, but I'd not heard anyone mention him. I swirled the tonic water in my glass, keeping the door to the reception room in my eyeline as it had been all evening, hoping he would make a last-minute appearance.

It was useless. I might as well go back to the room. I drained my glass and headed out. Maybe I'd check the car park to see if Henry's car was still there. Although, that wouldn't tell me much—he might have simply done something else for the evening. I kept telling myself to be patient, but I didn't have an infinite amount of time. There was just over a week left.

As I turned the corner, laughter from the conservatory caught my attention. Through the small-paned glass, I saw Stella chatting to Florence amongst the other women of the wedding party.

I paused and just as I did, she turned and saw me watching her almost as if she knew I was there. She looked stunning, her hair scraped up into a

ponytail, her face slightly flushed. Without thinking, I grinned at her, and she smiled back before dipping to say something to Florence and then heading in my direction.

“Hey,” she said as she got closer. “You okay?”

I shrugged. “I thought I’d head back to the room and catch up on emails.”

She blinked a couple of times as if she were waiting for me to say something else, to tell the truth.

“I’ll come too,” she said after a couple of seconds.

“You don’t need to.” I needed to catch up with work but at the same time it would be good to have some company. Someone to ruminate with on where Henry was. Someone I could run my newly tweaked strategy by.

She looked up at me as if she were peering into my brain, wanting to know if what I said and what I meant were matching. “I know. But I want to. Let me just get my bag.”

As Stella went to leave, the bride caught up with her and Stella visibly stiffened when she pressed her hand on her arm. “You’re leaving?” Karen asked, all smiles.

Stella smiled back, but I knew her well enough now to distinguish a real smile from a fake one, and there was nothing genuine about the smile Stella wore. “We want to save some energy for all these different events,” Stella replied.

“Yes, it’s spectacular, isn’t it? It was Matt’s idea to make a week of it—a real celebration. And I love Scotland, as you know, although I’d not been to the castle until Matt brought me up here to convince me that this was where we needed to get married.”

Karen continued to chatter on, but Stella didn’t say a word—she just nodded and gave intermittent tight smiles. It was a side of Stella I hadn’t seen much of, like a deer caught in the headlights. She seemed vulnerable and . . . stuck.

I stepped forward, taking Stella’s rigid hand. “I’m dragging her away. I hope you don’t mind,” I said as Stella’s palm melded against mine.

“Of course not,” Karen said. “I’m so delighted you’re here to celebrate with us. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Stella’s fake smile faded, and she turned to me. “Thank you. I always get tongue-tied around . . . her.”

I’d seen a very different Stella to the one holding my hand. One who was determined and unafraid to ask for what she wanted. Someone confident.

Sure of herself. What was it about Karen that made Stella lose her ability to speak?

We made our way toward the stairs, still hand in hand. “You went out with Matt for ages, right?” I asked.

“Since university.”

“But you know Henry, who is Karen’s godfather—you said you went to stay with him. So you knew her before she was going out with Matt?”

“We’ve been best friends since the age of five,” she said as she tried to pull her hand from mine, but I tightened my grip.

“And now she’s marrying your ex-boyfriend. Is that weird?” It seemed weird to me but horses for courses.

We reached the top of the staircase and turned down the corridor toward our room in silence.

Eventually, Stella said, “It’s a little weird.”

I didn’t spend enough time talking to women about personal stuff to know much, but I knew from the silence, the way she’d gone stiff and looked at the ground when Karen came along, that *a little weird* was an understatement.

“How long after you and Matt splitting did he and Karen get together?”

She gave a half laugh, half sigh and then shook her head. “I have no idea. Matt and I broke up about three months ago. I didn’t know there was anything between him and Karen until I got the wedding invitation.”

“Jesus, Stella. I had no idea.” It made sense why it had taken so much to get her to come to this wedding. “Why the hell were you invited?”

She twisted her hand out of mine then dug about in her evening bag. “Oh, you know, I think they wanted to pretend it was all fine or something. Act as if it shouldn’t be a big deal because Matt and I had split. And they wouldn’t have expected me to come.” She held up the key card and I took it from her, unlocking the door and holding it open before she stepped inside.

“You must want to design the Mayfair building pretty badly.”

“More now than when you first asked me. It’s like I didn’t realize that’s what I needed—as if it’s given me a future, something to aim for,” she replied.

I stayed silent as the words stuck in my throat, weighed down by sorrow for her. If she hadn’t been able to see a future for herself, she’d clearly been devastated.

“I’m just going to go and get changed,” she said, scooping her

nightclothes from the bed and heading for the bathroom before I thought of something to say.

I stripped down to my boxers, turned on the TV, and lay against the headboard as I scrolled through my phone as if that had the answers.

“Hey, where’s our pillow wall?” she asked as she emerged from the bathroom, her hair piled on top of her head and her pajamas on. She looked fantastic when she was dressed up, all magazine-glossy, but Stella was one of those women who looked even better without all that stuff.

“Housekeeping must have demolished it.”

“Well, I guess you’re safe tonight. I’m sober,” she said as she peeled back the covers on her side of the bed.

“I sort of like drunk you,” I replied, putting down my phone and sliding under the covers.

She laughed as she lay down on her side facing me. “It’s not a look I wear well.”

“From what I’ve seen, you wear most things well,” I replied. “Want to talk about Matt? Or Karen?”

She shook her head and placed her hands under her cheek. “There’s nothing to say. I thought he would be the man I’d spend the rest of my life with and later this week he’s going to marry the person I thought was my best friend. Safe to say my judgement’s a bit wonky. I’ve just got to get through this week, focus on my future and not my past.”

Silence stretched between us.

“That’s what I keep telling myself, anyway,” she added.

I curled her hair around her ear, not knowing how to make it better for her. I’d done nothing but make it worse. “I’m sorry I brought you here.” I’d made her come face-to-face with these people who’d hurt her. She’d said she didn’t know when Karen and Matt started seeing each other, but to be getting married only a few months after Matt and Stella split, there must have been something going on while they were still together.

I hated cheaters.

“Don’t be. You’re helping me with my future, remember?”

It didn’t seem enough. “Did you not want to marry him? Is that why you split up?”

She stared across me at the dresser under the window. “I’d have married him years ago and he knew that. I thought we were just waiting for the right time. Apparently, it wasn’t the time that was wrong, but the girlfriend.”

Listening to her, it was like my stomach was filling with curdled milk. “You expected him to marry you, and he led you on and then found a better option?” It sounded familiar. At least Matt hadn’t left Stella pregnant and then made her homeless.

“I’m not sure he led me on.” She turned and lay flat on her back facing the ceiling. “I thought we were heading toward marriage and spending the rest of our lives together. Even when he ended things, I thought he was just having a bit of a freak out before making such a big commitment. I’d never really considered us split up and then . . . the invitation.”

“Jesus, that’s closure.”

“It was a shock.”

“What did you say to him. To Karen? How did they excuse what they’d done?”

More silence.

“Nothing,” she said. “I mean, I never asked him. Or her.”

I sat up. “You’ve never spoken to him about it? Not even when you got the invitation?”

“What was there to say? It wasn’t like I was going to talk him out of it or negotiate a wedding for myself instead. What would have been the point?”

“You could have done a lot of shouting, gotten it off your chest, let them know how you feel.” I wanted to do it for her.

She shrugged. “I’m already the kind of woman they think they can lie to and cheat on. I’m already the girl they invite to the wedding because they think I’ll be happy for them or something. Or they don’t care. I suppose I didn’t want to give them reason to respect me even less.”

“Who cares what they think? Either of them. They’re clearly people you don’t want anywhere near you. You should have confronted them for you, to make yourself feel better. Stand up to them. Don’t be the woman who takes everything they dish out with a smile.”

Tears welled in her eyes. I’d gone too far. I didn’t mean to call her weak. She was here—at her former best friend’s and ex-boyfriend’s wedding. With a smile. That took courage and strength. But it was okay to feel wronged. To be angry. I was angry for her.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just . . . people like them . . . they act as if it’s their world and we just live in it. Like we don’t matter. They’re so entitled or so they think. They don’t care who they mow down on the way to getting what they want.”

My mother was a victim of that entitled attitude—it still made me so angry. “You deserve more, Stella.”

“I’ve rehearsed it,” she said in a small voice almost as if she didn’t want me to hear it. “What I’d say. To him and her. I didn’t sleep much in that first week after I got the invitation. I had plenty of time to prepare a speech. Probably spent more time on it than the father of the bride has on his.”

“So, say it to them.”

She took a deep breath. “I’d end up getting tongue-tied and Matt would try to talk over me . . . and would I feel better?”

“You won’t know if you don’t try.”

“I think I’d prefer to just avoid him. He hasn’t come near me at this wedding. And as long as he doesn’t, I’ll be fine. I don’t want to be made to feel like the entire situation is my fault. And that’s what would happen.”

“You’ve not spoken to him at all while you’ve been here?”

She shook her head. “If I know him at all, he’s angry that I’ve come—despite the invitation.”

“Karen can’t keep away from you. I’ve seen her come up to you a few times.”

“Yeah, I’ve come close to saying something to her, but then I think I only have myself to blame. Our entire lives, Karen has taken what she’s wanted, and I’ve never spoken out, never criticized her or told her what I really thought. At school she made us swap beds because she didn’t want to be near the loo. When we ate out in restaurants, she’d make me order a pudding and then she’d eat it herself. She would borrow my clothes and not return them. I’ve let that happen. For years. And I’ve done the same thing with Matt—I’ve wanted him to be happy more than I wanted me to be happy.”

“You don’t know how to put yourself first,” I added.

“It sounds like a cliché.”

“It sounds true.”

“I think they just have such forceful personalities, and I genuinely want people I love to be happy.”

“But they’ve got to want you to be happy too, otherwise people will ride roughshod over you.” It had happened to my mother—used when there wasn’t anything better to do and then dropped when life moved on. It made me sick. “Promise me you’ll start pleasing yourself before you start pleasing other people.”

“I can’t make promises that I don’t know I’m capable of keeping.”

“Promise you’ll at least try. And if Matt says anything about you coming to this wedding after what he’s done and then sent you an invitation . . . he’ll have me to contend with.”

“You’re going to be my knight in shining armor?” she asked.

“No swords. I’m going to tell him what a useless human being he is.”

She turned back toward me and placed her warm, soft hand over my arm. “Please don’t say a word. I’ve managed to avoid him so far—that’s all I’ve got to do until we leave on Sunday.”

“He better keep away from you.”

I couldn’t stand up to the man who’d discarded my mother like she was nothing because he was dead, but if Matt even breathed in Stella’s direction, I couldn’t hold myself responsible for what I’d do.

“Promise me you won’t say anything,” she pleaded.

“Stella, I can’t make promises that I don’t know I’m capable of keeping,” I said, replaying her words back to her.

“Don’t think I haven’t seen that steel in you. I know you are perfectly able to control yourself if that’s what you want to do.” She slid her hand over mine. “Don’t think I’m not grateful. Just you *wanting* to protect me is . . .” She sighed. “More than Matt ever did.”

“But why should I control myself? That guy needs some home truths—”

“For me. That’s why.”

With those two words she’d stolen the wind from my sails.

For *her*.

It was a simple reason, but the best. And one that couldn’t be argued with.

“I promise I won’t say anything,” I said. For *her*—she was worth the promise.

For *her*, I’d keep decades of frustrations locked up and wouldn’t unleash them on Matt, however tempting it was.

For *her*, I wasn’t sure if there was anything I wouldn’t do.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Stella

Beck held my hand as we left the hotel room to join the others downstairs for a lunchtime picnic. I'd woken up feeling sore—not on the outside but somehow the inside of me was bruised. Maybe it had been that way for some time and I just hadn't noticed. I couldn't believe I'd confessed to Beck last night about Matt and Karen. He must have thought I was a total doormat.

Just as we were stepping onto the brick veranda, Karen appeared. There was no heading off in the opposite direction or avoiding eye contact—we were face-to-face, and shame rose from my feet and seeped into my belly. Shame for not saying anything to her and for allowing myself to be treated the way she treated me.

“Hi,” she said, glancing down at my hand linked with Beck's. “It looks like the sun is going to hold.”

“Looks beautiful,” I said, trying my best to smile. Even if I did have the courage to say something, I couldn't risk upsetting things for Beck. Henry was Karen's godfather after all. If I ruined her wedding, we'd be asked to leave, and Beck would lose his chance of getting Henry to sell him his building. But if I *was* to say something, I might tell her how her first boyfriend had turned up at my house the week before he ended things between them and told me he loved me. I might say how her little sister, Elsie, had told me once that she didn't like the way Karen spoke to me. I might even show her the message I got from her mother the day after the invitation arrived, telling me how sorry she was for what her daughter had done.

But of course, I stayed silent.

“Well, head over to the weeping willows where everything is set up,” she said. “I’ll catch you later.”

“She’s very upbeat,” Beck said as we made our way down the steps. “It’s annoying.”

I laughed. “Yeah. She’s always been that way—nothing much gets to her.” It had always seemed like Karen had some kind of internal suit of armor.

“I think it’s genetic,” he said. “Life’s always wonderful.”

Different colors of tartan picnic blankets were laid out on the grass by the river. On each blanket there was a wicker hamper and a square card with names printed on them. Beck would think this was normal and put it down to the idiosyncrasies of the upper classes, but set seating at a picnic was anything but normal—it didn’t matter who you were.

Beck and I wandered from one empty blanket to another looking for our names.

“People are different. You can’t know someone just by virtue of the fact their family has money.” Beck was looking at name cards intently, and I wasn’t sure if he was ignoring me or hadn’t heard me. “There we are,” I said, spotting my name two blankets farther up, at the very edge of the party. I kicked off my ballet flats and took a seat.

“Have you thought anymore about confronting Matt or Karen—or even better, both of them?” he asked, handing me the card while he unbuckled the hamper.

“You might enjoy making enemies, but I don’t.”

“It’s not about making enemies. It’s about standing up for yourself.”

There was no point in having this conversation again. It wasn’t as if I’d helped Karen pick out her wedding gown or was a bridesmaid or something. “Well, if I had confronted her, I wouldn’t have been invited this week and you wouldn’t be here. So, count yourself lucky and zip it.”

He chuckled, handing me two wine glasses. “Yeah. Okay. Point taken. I just don’t get it, that’s all.”

I spotted Florence and Bea on the other side of the sea of blankets, down by the river. Karen must have given them a blanket for four.

“Look, Florence is waving,” Beck said.

I nodded. “Yeah. She’s over there with Bea and there’s Jo, too,” I said, spotting the rest of our gang.

“No doubt your good friend Karen was in charge of the seating plan.”

“Come on,” Beck said, standing up. “We’re going to take our blanket over there.” He tugged at the green wool I was sitting on. “Get up.”

“Beck, no. We can’t. There’s a seating plan for a reason. Anyway, it doesn’t matter if we’re back here.”

“We bloody well can.” He scooped up the hamper. “This week is difficult enough for you without her seating you nowhere near your friends.”

“It won’t be malicious from her perspective,” I said, not entirely believing it. She probably hadn’t wanted me in her eyeline as a reminder of what she’d done, although in that case she shouldn’t have invited me.

“I suppose it depends on your definition of malicious. If not giving a shit about you or your feelings is malicious, then that’s the least she’s being. Get up,” he said again, “or I’ll put you over my shoulder and carry you. If you won’t stick up for yourself, I’ll do it for you.”

I shivered. I couldn’t remember any man coming to my rescue before. I wasn’t used to a man who worried about my feelings or the enjoyment of my day.

Something ignited inside me, giving me energy, and I got to my feet.

Matt should have been that guy.

He should have been the man who wanted better for me than I wanted for myself, who stood up for me and did things to make my day better.

Because we’d been together for so long, what I had and what I should expect for myself had melded together and I’d lost sight of what I was worth. Beck might be a fake boyfriend, but on every measure, he was better than Matt had ever been.

He was nicer to me. More respectful. He was in my corner—batting for me, cheering me on. Not to mention more handsome, funnier, and a better kisser.

Matt had done me a favor by dumping me. The constant, subtle putdowns, the lack of affection and kindness, not to mention the way he always pushed his needs to the top of the list, even if I’d let him. Beck had provided me with a new normal, and I could never go back now.

It really said something when having a fake boyfriend was better than having a real one.

Instead of sadness, the realization about Matt freeing me provided relief. And uncertainty—if I’d been wrong about Matt for so long, what else was I wrong about? Who else?

Before I got a chance to overthink, Beck tucked the blanket under his arm and made his way between the other guests. I had no choice but to follow him as I hastily put my shoes back on and gathered the wine glasses. Although it felt a bit naughty, it also felt liberating. For once, I was doing something to make myself happy.

“Hi,” Beck said, as we arrived at the spot where all my friends were. “Do you mind if we join you?”

“Of course not,” Florence said. “I don’t know why you weren’t over here with us in the first place. And who the hell has assigned seating at a picnic anyway?”

Beck shot me an I-told-you-so look and, despite him being a tiny bit irritating, I couldn’t help but admire how he just didn’t give a shit. It felt like a small victory over Karen and Matt, and Beck was the man who’d made it happen.

“Who’s having wine?” Beck asked, offering up the bottle in our basket. When everyone passed, he filled my glass and put a few mouthfuls in his. “Day drinking and staring out at that river,” he said as we all looked through the screen of willow branches down to the jetty that led into the river. “It’s like something out of an E.M. Forster novel.”

“You read much E.M. Forster?” I asked, laughing.

“I read *A Room with a View*,” he said, which stopped my smile in its tracks.

“You did?” I asked. “For school?”

“No. I saw the film and liked it, so I decided to read the book.”

He was obviously serious, and I had to stifle a giggle. He seemed such an unlikely audience for anything Merchant Ivory.

He looked at me. “Are you laughing at me?” he asked, smirking.

“Never,” I replied and took a sip of my wine. I was such a horrible liar.

“What can I say? It’s a good film and a better book.”

“It doesn’t seem like your kind of thing. Isn’t it wistful and romantic?” Beck was dogged and determined. You didn’t get to be as successful as he was from a standing start without having an edge. A love of costume drama didn’t seem to fit. But what did I know? I couldn’t tell good people from bad. Friends from foes.

I wanted to ask more about his taste in films—prod to see if it was a character trait or a fluke—but I didn’t want to give away how little we knew about each other. “I’ve never seen it,” I said. “So I couldn’t possibly

comment.”

“When we’re back in London, we’ll watch it one night.”

I glanced over at Bea, to see if she was taking any notice, but she was talking to Florence about something. Was this conversation real or fake? Either way, I was enjoying it.

“You’ll have to point out all your favorite bits,” I said.

He chuckled. “I can tell you don’t believe me, but my sister went through a phase of reading everything by him, and I was a dutiful younger brother and sat through the film a couple of times. Looking back, she must have been recovering from heartbreak. I guess she was around fifteen.”

Shit, I’d forgotten her name. I lowered my voice. I couldn’t not ask but didn’t want anyone to overhear. “Are you still close with . . . your sister?”

“She’s older and married with two kids. I don’t see her much but when I do, I enjoy it.”

“Tell me that’s not Karen and Matt arriving on a boat,” Florence said, pointing at the water, interrupting me imagining a sun-kissed, younger Beck reading E.M. Forster. People began to murmur and, sure enough, Karen, dressed in white, and Matt in his usual summer outfit of chinos and a blue shirt, climbed out of a small rowing boat and up onto the jetty. I might have been hoping that one of them would go head-first into the water, but I wasn’t about to admit to it.

“She’s such an attention seeker,” Jo said. “Who has an entire week of wedding celebrations in the first place. And then this?” She cocked her head at the river.

If Karen had told me she was going to sail into her wedding picnic on a rowing boat in a white floaty dress when we’d still been friends, I would have thought she was fun and carefree. “It’s not a bit of fun?” I asked.

“Everything’s fun for Karen if everyone’s looking at her,” Bea said. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“If she’s so selfish and self-involved, why have we all been friends with her for all these years?” I asked. Had Bea and Jo seen this side of Karen since she got engaged to Matt or had they always felt this way?

“Because you always wanted the four of us to do stuff together,” Bea said.

“You’re always the one who includes Karen on the email chain or suggests she gets the invitation to dinner.”

It hadn’t been conscious. I just liked to include everyone. “I never

noticed . . .”

“Because you see the best in everyone. Want the best for everyone. It’s lovely, but people like Karen eat up your goodness like summer pudding,” Florence said.

Karen always liked to be at the center of things, the rest of us just looking on like we were members of the audience rather than on stage, but it had never really bothered me—I hadn’t seen her as taking advantage of me. Maybe Matt was the same. When we were together, I’d thought we were co-stars, but perhaps I was just backstage sweeping up after him.

“Or Eton Mess,” Bea said. “Matt was no different—they both took advantage of your kindness.”

Beck nudged me and nodded toward Florence and Bea as if to tell me I should pay attention to what they were saying.

The thing was, I vaguely remembered Florence and Bea saying these things to me before and me dismissing them. But now, with what had happened, what Beck had said and kept saying . . . I couldn’t ignore who Karen and Matt really were anymore. But who else was going to reveal themselves as my enemy rather than my friend? If two of the people I was closest to in the world could betray me, then anyone could.

As the happy couple walked up the riverbank to join us, people began to clap. Beside me, Beck chuckled. “I was hoping one of them would go in.”

I bit down on my bottom lip to stop myself from laughing. Today had kind of summed Beck up—moving the blanket and calling out this spectacle, forcing me to acknowledge what was really happening.

He dared to do what I didn’t, say what I couldn’t, made me see things the way they were rather than how I wanted them to be. Whether our kisses had been real or fake, Beck was changing the way I saw the world and the way I saw myself.

I just hoped I wasn’t as wrong about him as I had been about Matt and Karen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Beck

Stella's eyes dipped to my bowtie, then up to my jawline and finally up to meet my gaze. "You look cute."

The sun cast a golden, hazy light across the hotel room, making her look even more beautiful than usual, lighting up her face, highlighting the beauty spot on her cheek, emphasizing the deep v of her cupid's bow. The short skirt didn't hurt—she had killer legs.

"Cute?" I asked. "I'm not sure cute is a compliment."

"Maybe I wasn't giving you one," she replied.

This girl never let me get away with anything, and I couldn't remember when I'd ever had quite so much fun. No woman had ever given me a hard time like Stella did—certainly none of my girlfriends had. I ended up dating women who were easy. Not in the sexual sense, but in the sense that they fit into my life and didn't require me to work at anything, which left me to put all my energy into my business.

It suited me. Perhaps Stella would be easy as a real girlfriend but as a fake girlfriend she was challenging and funny and had told me I was irritating on more than one occasion.

"You look a lot better than cute," I replied.

She spun around, black and white sequins clinging to every curve. "You think it's thirties enough? Everyone is bound to have gone to costume shops and had stuff made. I bought this for one of Matt's work dos when we were up in Manchester."

"It's a sexy take on the thirties. And why would you want to be like all

these people anyway?”

She smiled. “They’re not so bad, you know. Anyway, I don’t have anything else, so it will have to do.”

“It will more than do. I’ll struggle to keep my hands to myself all evening.” We hadn’t repeated our kisses from the day before, but looking at her now, kissing her was all I could think about.

“I have a feather boa,” she said, ignoring me. “But I think it looks tacky. What do you think?”

She hung the black feathers around her shoulders. Normally, when a girlfriend asked me my opinion on her outfit, I’d say whatever was going to get us out the door fastest, but with Stella, I studied her. I wanted her to look as good as she could, feel the most confident she ever had. I wanted her to feel like she had all the power when she was with these people. Because she was better than all of them. “I think without. The dress is enough on its own.”

“You’re right,” she said, discarding the boa on the bed. “It’s kind of distracting. And I look like a stripper.”

“If it’s going to get you in character, then maybe I’ll change my mind.”

She picked up her evening bag and whacked me with it. “Let’s go.” She led the way out of the hotel room.

“So, it’s just cocktails tonight?” I asked as we made our way down the corridor. “No food?”

“I have no idea. I can’t imagine Karen hasn’t thought of that. So perhaps substantial canapes?”

“I might be ordering room service when we get back,” I mumbled. “There’s Henry,” I said, nodding toward the party making their way toward us from the other end of the corridor. “He’s rarely alone. It’s part of the reason it’s so difficult to speak to him.”

“This is perfect. I’ve not seen him yet. Come on,” she said, picking up speed so we could run into him.

“Henry,” Stella said. “How wonderful to see you.” Her grin lit up her face and a pang of jealousy bloomed in my gut. Had she ever smiled so widely at me?

“Stella, darling. How are you? You’re looking wonderful.” Henry was all charm and warm smiles.

“I’m wonderful, thank you. Can I introduce you to Beck Wilde?”

She placed her hand lovingly on my arm, tucking her body into mine as if she belonged to me. My breath caught in my throat, not because it was

uncomfortable but because the idea of her belonging to me felt . . . right.

“Mr. Wilde, very nice to see you again. You did very well with the clays the other day. I hope you leave some grouse for us tomorrow.”

“You have my word on that, sir,” I said. Maybe I was a hypocrite—I couldn’t even spell the word vegetarian—but I didn’t want the souls of tiny birds haunting me. I’d leave that to old money. “After we met,” I said, “I realized our paths have almost crossed a couple of times in London.” I wasn’t about to mention the time at the Dorchester when I tried to introduce myself. “There was a property of yours I was interested in.”

Henry frowned. “Really? I don’t recall.”

“Yes, the Dawnay building in Mayfair.”

He took in a deep breath and then shook his head. “Yes, place still isn’t let. But I don’t remember any offers.”

“Well, perhaps we could find some time to discuss it,” I said.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “Right now, I must go and see Graham.” He shook his head and turned back to Stella. “You look wonderful, darling.” He turned to me. “Look after her . . . Mr. Wilde.”

Great, I thought as Henry headed toward the bar and left Stella and me at the entrance to the party. He hadn’t even remembered my first name.

“Who’s Graham?” I asked.

“No idea,” she replied. “Tell me what happened?”

“What? When?”

“Henry mentioned that you shot well,” Stella said as we found ourselves a table and took a seat.

“Oh yes. It’s surprising how often these men miss considering they do this kind of thing all the time.”

Stella groaned. “Give it to me straight. Did you beat everyone else?”

Why was she groaning? I thought she’d be impressed.

“Easily,” I replied. “That’s what too much time with an air rifle and three empty tomato soup cans looks like.”

She leaned toward me. “I’m going to ask you a straightforward question and I want you to give me an honest answer—how badly do you want this building in Mayfair?”

Had she missed something? I thought I’d been more than clear. “Badly.”

“Put your ego to one side, hand over your credit card, and follow my instructions ‘badly’?”

“You want me to buy everyone a round of drinks?” I asked.

“That’s the very last thing I want you to do.” She pulled out her phone and began scrolling. “We’re free tomorrow morning—no wedding events. We’ll try in the village but if not, we’re going to have to make a trip into Inverness,” she said like I knew what she was talking about.

“For what?” I asked.

“You’re clearly not winning over Henry. That introduction was a car crash.”

Car crash seemed a harsh way of putting it. It hadn’t been that bad, had it? He might not have remembered my name, or asked me anything about the Dawnay building and my interest in it. He might have cut the conversation short, but it was progress, wasn’t it? I suppose it hadn’t been great, but I’d at least spoken to him.

“So, we need to get you back on track,” Stella said. “We’re going to go shopping and buy you some things, and I’m going to help you build a relationship with Henry.”

“What sort of things are we going to buy that will help me negotiate with Henry? A rope, duct tape, and some chloroform?”

“Funny,” she replied. “Clothes. We’re going to give you a makeover.”

“You’re going to give me a *Pretty Woman* moment?” I asked.

“Think of me as Richard Gere. And you’re Julia Roberts, just not as hot.”

“Well, for the record, you’re a lot better looking than either Richard or Julia.”

“See? You can be charming.” She smoothed down the lapel of my jacket, and I had to fight back the urge to pull her on to my lap.

“So Tom Ford’s not good enough?”

“It’s far *too* good. You know these people aren’t cash rich. Their wealth is in property and art and trusts . . . They are caretakers of a fortune—they spend their time trying not to spend money. You know this; you’re not stupid.”

“That’s the point. I can make Henry cash rich if he’d give me the time of day.”

“Your way hasn’t worked so far, and he didn’t show much interest in speaking about your offer on his building. If you want him to sell you that property, you need to play by his rules. No one likes a show-off.”

I liked Stella’s feistiness, had since I’d met her that first day when she’d turned me down flat. But a step farther and I’d officially be pissed off. “I’m not showing off.”

“Then why did you win yesterday?”

“You’re not suggesting I should pretend to be less than I am so I puff up these people’s egos, are you?” I asked.

“If all it took was ego-puffing, then that would be easy. And I can’t imagine that you are so pig-headed that you wouldn’t be prepared to puff, puff, puff if that’s what it took. You can be so completely charming, so utterly convincing, I don’t get why you’re being so stubborn about using your powers of persuasion with these people. If I didn’t know better, I’d say part of you doesn’t want the Dawnay building at all.”

“You know that I want the building more than anything.”

“Why? You have plenty of money. It can’t just be a financial thing.”

She waited as if I was going to answer her, as if I was going to tell her all my secrets.

I stayed silent.

“It’s like you’re trying to antagonize people. You need to get them on your side, but you know this, and so I don’t get it—the Tom Ford when everyone else is in tweed. The winning at clays even though what you should be concentrating on is talking to Henry and letting the host win. None of this makes sense.”

“Oil and water,” I said. “We don’t mix. They don’t like me.”

“I like you,” she said.

Didn’t she get it? She wasn’t like the rest of them. She wasn’t like any woman I’d ever met. “You’re different.”

“Then trust me and let me take you shopping tomorrow.”

“If you let me kiss you,” I countered. It had been too long since our last kiss.

A small smile curled around her lips. “You always want to make a deal. But you’re asking for something I’m more than willing to give without anything in return. Maybe you need to sharpen your negotiation skills.”

This woman was as sharp as a pin.

“Well, then maybe I’ll make you wait.”

She sighed. “More waiting.”

I pushed down a grin and tried to ignore the ache in my balls at the thought of denying her.

Yes, I wanted the Dawnay building. But right at that moment, I wanted Stella London more. Tonight was going to be a long night, and I was going to have to use every ounce of my self-control to stop myself from pulling her

out of this cocktail party, back to our room, and stripping her naked immediately.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Beck

If I told Stella what I had planned to do to her tonight, she'd no doubt rip off one of her ultra-high heels and thwack me with it. Stella was sexy as hell, gave as good as she got, made me shift my focus about a lot of things, but best of all being with her felt easy, comfortable—like being at home. It was like being with a friend, but better because she was gorgeous, and I wanted to get her naked.

Patience. I'd had to exercise a lot of it this evening and I was fast running out.

I unlocked the door to our hotel room and held it open as she walked through.

“You promised me kissing,” she said. “But it's later and still I'm kissless.”

“Kissless?” I asked. “Well we wouldn't want that.” I spun her around to face me, cupped her face, and pressed my lips to hers.

Her hands slid up the sides of my shirt and I held back a shiver. When had a simple touch over my clothes ever had such a visceral effect on me?

I wanted this woman. *This* woman. Not just sex with a pretty girl. I wanted to undress Stella, to lick and bite every square centimeter of her until I knew her better than I knew myself.

I wanted to *devour* her.

She sighed under my touch and her hands caught my wrists. I pulled back. “You okay?”

She grinned, her lips reddened with heat. “Absolutely.”

“You know that this is more than kissing tonight?”

“Oh yeah?” she asked. “What did you have planned?”

I circled my arms around her waist and pulled her tight against me. “Naked stuff.”

She laughed. “Such a Casanova.”

The smooth guy I used to be, the one who knew how to seduce a woman, had disappeared. I’d never really understood the concept of being disarmed until Stella London. I bent and kissed her neck. “Not trying to be anyone but me,” I replied, tugging at the buttons at the back of her dress.

I stripped her down to her underwear and walked her backward to the bed. I needed to get a grip, to take back control of this situation. I leaned over, pressed a kiss to her soft stomach and let myself breathe her in. Tonight, she’d be mine. Finally.

I hooked my thumbs into her knickers, dragging them off as I pushed her back onto the bed and kneeled at her feet. My dick started to throb at just the thought of what she tasted like. Of how she smelled.

Jesus, what was the matter with me? I was like a teenager leafing through the underwear section of my mother’s catalog.

I pressed a kiss at the juncture of her thigh, and she groaned. Good. It wasn’t just me. She was worked up too—she wanted this. Wanted me.

I made my way up to her perfect hip bone, across to the other side and down, enjoying her warm, smooth expanse of skin, needing to take my time but greedy for all of her all at once.

“Beck,” she groaned, sliding her hands into my hair, the sound vibrating through my body in a way I was sure would register on the Richter scale and gathering in my balls, building my need for her by the second.

I pressed a kiss over her clit. “You’re going to have to be patient.” I said the words as much to myself as to her.

She sighed and I began to lick—slow, dirty strokes, going deeper and deeper. I wanted to bury myself in her. I took a breath, trying to dampen down the starting growl of my orgasm and focus on making the strokes longer and longer. Her hips lifted off the bed, and I pressed one hand on the hot skin of her stomach and the other on her thigh to keep her in place.

“Tell me before you come,” I said.

A gush of wetness spilled out onto my tongue and Stella began to grind against my mouth. “Beck,” she cried.

I moved away. “You close?” I asked.

“Yes. No . . . but . . . Oh God,” she groaned again as I pressed my fingertips into her milky skin—warm like sun-kissed seawater.

For a split second I wondered if Matt had ever gone down on her. I doubt he had any idea of what to do with a woman. I would show Stella that she wasn’t missing anything by not being with him.

I resumed my exploration of Stella, kissing, licking, and sucking, reveling in her sighs and moans, savoring the way she squeezed her eyes tight shut as if trying to block out the pleasure she was feeling. Her body was perfect from this angle, all smooth curves and goose-bumped plains. Her pulse tripped under my tongue, sending sparks of lust right to my cock. She definitely wasn’t far off, and I pulled away to assess her expression.

She was lost. Floating. Her cheeks flushed, her hair spread out on the bed. I’d never seen her look so beautiful.

“No coming,” I barked.

“I’m close,” she said, her voice breathless and weak.

We’d just have to do something about that. I gave her one final lick and then sat back. “Take a breath.”

She gave me a confused look.

“I said no coming and I meant it.”

I liked that her orgasms didn’t come too easily. By the time I’d finished with her, she’d be coming on command.

She lifted up onto her elbows. “Beck, what . . .”

“You’re getting nothing else until you promise you won’t come without telling me.”

“I p-promise,” she stuttered.

I resumed my position, blowing on her clit and circling her entrance with my finger. She moaned. “I mean it, Stella. Relax and take a deep breath or I’m going to stop.”

“What are you doing to me?” Her gaze flitted around my face.

“Trust me and you’ll find out.”

Her ribcage rose as her lungs filled and then she exhaled—a long, slow breath pushed from her lips.

“Better?” I asked.

“Define better.”

“You’re not going to come straight away?”

“Yeah, you and I have a different definition of better.”

I pressed a kiss to her hip bone to stop myself from smiling. “You’ll see.”

I twisted my fingers, working around her entrance, and lay my tongue flat against her clit. Her body tightened, her breaths shortened, and her hands fisted in my hair.

She was close. Again. “Stella,” I growled. She needed to get better at communicating.

Without further prompting, she took another deep breath and relaxed her body into the mattress.

“Better.” Her compliance made my mouth wet and my dick hard. Stella was fucking fun and fun to fuck.

As fingers and tongue worked, I luxuriated in the way Stella tried to keep her breaths deep and her body relaxed, but when I slid a third finger inside her, her back arched and she spluttered, “I’m going to come.”

I withdrew my fingers and sat back. I wasn’t ready yet.

“So, this is what you do?” she asked, her skin flushed and her words tripping into each other as if she were exhausted. “You torture women?”

I could do this for hours with Stella.

I couldn’t hide the grin she provoked. “I’m playing with you, not torturing you. And believe me. It will be so much better when I finally let you come.” I stood up, my erection raging against my stomach, desperate for release. It wasn’t just Stella I liked to deny.

“The things for which you have to work hardest taste the sweetest.” I dropped a kiss on her mouth and headed to the bathroom. I undressed and poured two glasses of water.

Her eyes went to my cock as I returned. “You’re going to fuck me now?”

“We’re going to fuck all night. But you’re not having my dick yet. You’re going to have to work a little harder until you’ve proved you’re ready.”

She groaned and this time it wasn’t in pleasure.

“Drink this. I don’t want you getting dehydrated.”

I expected her to argue, but she lifted herself up on her elbows, still eyeing my hard-on as she took the glass from me.

My cock jerked under her inspection, and she sighed and gulped down the water as if she couldn’t wait for her reward.

She’d get it. Eventually.

She gave me back the glass and lay down.

“Legs open,” I said as I retook my position and began working my fingers and tongue. Her hands gripped the sheets, but without my prompting she released them and blew out a breath.

Good girl.

I took her to the edge three more times, but she didn't complain. In fact, she seemed to see it as a challenge.

She sank into the mattress, her limbs heavy, and the glazed look in her eye suggesting she'd fully embraced my *torture*.

I worked harder and she tried to muffle her cries, but the rippling of her stomach and the curl of her toes gave away her pleasure. She finally gave up and exhaled on a loud moan. "Beck," she cried. "I'm going to come."

"Keep breathing deeply and come for me."

She shot me a panicked look as if she were afraid of what her orgasm might do to her.

"You're going to be okay," I said as the convulsions in her body began to spread. I could almost *see* her orgasm crawl up her body. Her nipples peaked, her back arched, and silently, she reached for me—in reassurance or need?

I had no idea but something in my gut stirred.

I crawled up her body, and she circled her arms around my waist as her orgasm enveloped her.

"You okay?" I asked as she recovered. I rolled to my side and she came with me, hooking her leg over mine.

"Um, yeah. That was . . . I don't know. Intense. I've never . . . I mean . . . *intense*."

I chuckled. "You enjoyed my torture."

"I'm not sure about the torture bit. It was a challenge but the orgasm . . . It was like the mother of all climaxes. I've never felt anything like it."

It was no less than she deserved.

"We're just warming up."

"I'm plenty warm," she said as she pushed herself up on her elbows then straddled me.

She was deliciously wet, immediately coating my cock in her juices. "Where did you learn that shit?" she asked as she moved her hips forward and back. "I mean, I expected you to be a little more . . ."

I tucked my hand under my head as I waited to hear her explain her misconceptions of me.

"I don't know. Selfish. Impatient."

"You've clearly been fucking the wrong guy."

"Apparently," she said, pressing her palms against my chest. "I mean, there's only ever been Matt. I guess I don't have a lot of experience."

Jesus, on top of it all, she was at the wedding of the only guy she'd ever slept with. Every time I thought I understood how difficult this week was for her, I found out something else.

"Well, now there's me." She deserved the best sex that life had to offer. And I couldn't help but enjoy the fact that I'd been the man who showed her how good it could be.

I flipped her to her back and grabbed a condom from my wallet on the bedside table where I'd left it. I didn't want to wait a moment longer.

The more I got to know Stella, the more I wanted to know. When she'd first had her freak out and I'd spent the day with her, listening to her reel off information, all I'd wanted was to make her feel better so she didn't bail on this wedding. But now, I wanted to *know* her. I wanted to know things about her that were completely unnecessary to fake a relationship in front of strangers. I wanted to get inside her head. Inside her body. I wanted to *feel* this woman.

"Are you ready?" I asked as I positioned my cock at her entrance.

"It depends. Are you going to torture me again?"

"I'm going to fuck you. No more torture."

"Then I'm more than ready." She ran her hands down her body then pulled her legs wide apart. Fuck, I wasn't even inside her, but just knowing that in seconds I would be was enough to have my jaw tense and my cock jerking in my hand.

I moved inside her, just enough so she'd feel me.

"Oh God," she said on a sigh as if she'd been lost in a desert for days and I was giving her a cold glass of water.

Slowly I inched into her, and she took deep breaths as if she was trying to control her orgasm, as if a single stroke of my cock was going to tip her over and have her coming. That didn't hurt my ego.

I shoved in the last centimeter, wanting to get as deep as I could, and she arched her back, lifting off the bed.

"So deep, Beck."

It was deep, tight, and fucking perfect.

I had to take a breath. I wasn't ready to give in, and I wanted her to come again.

I withdrew just as slowly, trying to get used to the feel of her around me. Trying to get used to how she looked—the way her breasts shifted as I moved over her, the way she bit down on her bottom lip in concentration, the way

she looked at me as if I'd wrapped up the moon and given it to her.

I wasn't sure I'd ever been *aware* of anyone in bed before. Not that I wasn't focused on a woman's pleasure—that was always part of the package. But compared to how I was taking Stella in—how I wanted to savor it all, remember it—it made me see that before her, it had always been anatomical, biological. With her it was . . . different, burrowed deeper somehow.

She grasped my arm. "You okay?" she asked, pulling me out of my own head.

I was more than okay.

I nodded, pushing into her faster this time. She closed her eyes and pushed out a heavy, slow breath. Christ, even her breathing was sexy.

I shut my eyes in an effort to block everything out—blanking my mind, seeing only white. I needed to focus. I began a rhythm, trying not to be so fucking aware of how soft and tight and perfect Stella London was.

"Beck," she whispered, bringing me back to the moment. "It's so good. How is it so good?" She trailed her fingers down my back, and I couldn't stop the guttural roar that rippled up from my gut and out of my throat.

Sweat gathered at my hairline—not from the physical but from the mental effort of holding myself back from pouring into her. My cock was swollen with need, my muscles heavy with desire, and I kept thrusting, kept pushing into her. I needed to make it good for her, but more than anything, I wanted to keep these feelings, these new sensations that floated around me, whispering and wondering and new.

"Beck, Beck, Beck," she began to chant in panic.

"Hey," I said, folding myself over her so my chest was flat against hers.

"I'm so close and it feels so good. I don't think I can stop it."

I exhaled, almost relieved it would soon be over. I couldn't stand this any longer—I couldn't bear how fucking good it was.

I knew I wouldn't be able to stop my orgasm as hers arrived. "Shhh," I said, pressing a kiss to her neck. "You can come, baby."

She blinked lazily and her hands dropped over her head. I felt it begin. The pulse under her skin, the tiny shiver that morphed into a shudder. She arched her body, and it flicked a switch in me.

There was no more holding back. I pulled back and thrust in one more time, my orgasm creeping up my spine, circling and spinning, higher and higher until it exploded into every cell in my body.

It pulled every ounce, every molecule of energy from me, draining me of

everything but the sensation of coming. All I felt was the buzz of her skin against mine and how fucking perfect that was.

I slumped against her, burying my face in her neck, and she tightened her grip around me, as if she thought I might go somewhere.

As if I could.

I didn't have the energy to lift my head.

And even if I did, there was nowhere I'd rather be.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Stella

The windscreen wipers were working overtime to clear some sort of path in front of us. The roads were ridiculously narrow around here, but it didn't seem to faze Beck, who was at the wheel of the Land Rover he'd rented.

"You think we should turn around?" I asked as I gripped the papers I was carrying.

Beck shot me a look, then patted my leg, his hand staying a little too long on my thigh for it to be a friendly reassurance. Up until last night I'd doubted things between us—unable to understand what was real and fake. But last night was real and I had the bruises, the bitemarks, and the near-constant buzz under my skin from being with Beck that proved it.

"It's fine. Just rain. I can slow down if you're nervous." I didn't know if it was the words or the tone, but I believed him when he said it was fine. Still, he lifted his foot off the accelerator a little and we slowed without me having to ask. At every opportunity, he showed me that he thought about my feelings, my desires, my needs. Being with him was a revelation. "It's meant to clear in a couple of hours, so the journey back should be easier. At least we're not going to Inverness. A helicopter would be more difficult in this visibility."

There was no way I would have gotten into a helicopter in this weather, but thankfully there was a shop in a village about twelve miles away that would have most of the stuff we needed.

Not that buying things was going to help. What I really wanted was to get to the bottom of what was driving Beck. He was smart. He'd had money long

enough to know how these things worked—it didn't matter what world you came from, people did deals with people they liked and trusted, yet Beck was doing his best to not fit in.

"We have a trip to Fort William next," I said, looking at the detailed itinerary we'd been given when we arrived. "That should be relatively easy to dress for. We have that hike—we need to deal with that. And then the shooting. It's too late to get you a dinner jacket—"

"I've brought a perfectly nice dinner jacket."

This guy had a thing for Tom Ford, and who could blame him? He looked spectacular in everything he wore, but old money went to Saville Row. And they could tell the difference.

"Just because I don't have a tailor that my family has been using for four generations doesn't mean my dinner jacket isn't a perfect fit."

"You need to stop focusing on how things should be and just figure out how they are so you can get what you want."

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel.

"Why are you so determined to stand out from everyone around you?" I said, sliding my hand onto his leg. Beck's comments about people with money still weren't making sense to me, and I was determined to get to the bottom of it. I wanted to know him better. I wanted to understand exactly what made him tick. I'd thought I'd known Matt and it turned out I'd been living with a stranger all these years. I wasn't going to settle for what Beck told me. I wanted to dig deeper. Not least because we were sharing a bed.

Last night had been . . . unexpected. It was impossible to deny that Beck was attractive. But he wasn't my type—well, physically, he was everyone's type, but Beck was so . . . brash wasn't the word. But he had a confidence about him that Matt had been missing. Matt was confident on the outside and comfortable in the world of public school and old money, but he didn't have the core of steel Beck did.

He also didn't have the penis Beck did.

But it wasn't just Beck's dick that had made last night so memorable. It was the way he'd made me feel. Like it was me, rather than sex, that he wanted. I couldn't ever remember feeling like that with Matt. Being with Beck was . . . liberating. It allowed me to stop focusing on where I was and what had happened, and I'd been forced into the present. But it wasn't as if Beck was going to be part of my future. As much as Beck and I were enjoying each other's company, as much as I'd been convinced that things

between us were real, we were both in Scotland—together—for a reason. And it wasn't to start a serious relationship.

The corners of Beck's mouth twitched as he fought a grin as he faced the blurred road in front of us. I wasn't sure if it was what I'd said, my hand, or whether he was thinking about last night, too.

Beck cleared his throat, caught my wrist and placed my hand on his thigh. "The hike won't be difficult," he said. "We're not going up Ben Nevis. We don't need poles and shit. I've brought some gray hiking trousers."

I'd bet they were brand new. And I'd bet his arse looked fantastic in them. "Yeah we can probably solve that with a nail brush and some scissors."

"I have no idea what that means, but I know you're not cutting up those trousers. I went up Scarfell Pike in them last year. There's nothing wrong with them."

That sounded promising. At least they wouldn't still have their label on and crease marks on the legs from the packaging. That was the thing with old money—nothing was new. Nothing looked as if you'd just spent money on it. But Beck knew this. He wanted to stand out. But why?

"You went up Scarfell?" I liked the idea of Beck out in the wilds, his hair a little tousled, a smear of mud across his perfect jaw. I'd witnessed Beck a little sweaty and it looked good on him.

"Yeah, some charity thing that Dexter was doing."

"So you sacrificed your pristine, expensive gym for the outdoors? I thought you left that behind when you got your Duke of Edinburgh?"

The road veered to the right and some signs of life came into view. "Looks like where we're headed," he said, nodding at the buildings up ahead. "And I have no problem getting outdoors. Never have, never will. I might live in the city—"

"In a penthouse in one of the most expensive postcodes in the country, in Europe even."

"Doesn't mean I don't like getting out. I grew up in the country. And you're the one getting wiggy because it's raining." He took my hand from his lap and pressed a kiss to my wrist as if it was totally normal. His lips were like a shot of lust injected right into my veins.

I pulled away, unsure of how long I could withstand the intensity of his touch.

"Oh, this must be the village," he said. "Can you spot the shop you want to go to?"

I glanced to either side of the street as Beck slowed down. “There on the left,” I said.

“You sure we’re going to find what we need?” he asked as he pulled in front of a shop with dark-green window frames and a cream sign on the front that said *Cameron James-Gentleman’s Outfitters*. “It looks like a ghost town.”

“It’s not Saville Row, that’s for sure. What I do know is that I didn’t bring an umbrella.” It was only about three meters between the car and the door to the shop, but it was enough distance to drown in this weather.

Beck pulled his jacket from the backseat. “Use this.”

Before I could say no, he’d stepped out of the car and instead of making his way to the store he rounded the bonnet and opened my door.

I could get used to a man doing that for me, although I couldn’t tell him that. “I can open my own door. You’ll get soaked.”

I slid from my seat, holding his coat over my head, enjoying the scent of him as it surrounded me. “Here,” I said, trying to share the shelter of his jacket.

He ignored me and took my hand, pulling me forward.

The bell was still tinkling as we closed the door behind us and let the rain drip onto the mat in the entrance.

I looked up at him and my stomach did a deep dive from a mile-high cliff. I wondered if I’d ever come up for air. The rain had emphasized his beauty. His face was splattered with raindrops and his hair was slick with water, as if he’d just stepped out of the shower. “You’re . . .” I traced his brows with my fingertips and he lazily shut his eyes.

A man behind us cleared his throat. “Can I help you?”

Beside me, Beck scrubbed his face with his hands and slicked back his hair.

“Yes, we need something for Beck to wear when he goes shooting.”

“Very well. My name’s Angus. Please follow me.”

The shop looked tiny from the outside but seemed to go back for miles. We were the only customers, but the place was stocked as if they were expecting a sudden surge of people to descend on them at any moment. From the floor to the admittedly low ceiling were built-in, aged-oak cabinets and shelving stuffed full of shoes, shirts, jackets, walking sticks, boots, coats, trousers, kilts, wellingtons and binoculars. Every so often there was an island cabinet showcasing socks or cravats or ties. It was as if it had been airlifted

from Saville Row right to the highlands of Scotland. We were bound to find everything we were looking for right here.

“Miss, if you’d like to take a seat.” Angus indicated a small, buttoned, red velvet chair to the side of a cabinet full of blue ties of differing patterns. “Sir, if you want to make your way into the changing room, just there.” Angus nodded toward an oak door right beside me. “I’ll bring you some things,” he said, then scurried away.

“What? He doesn’t want to know my size or what I like?”

“This guy is what? Sixty? My guess is he’s been doing this job about forty-five years. He’ll know your size from looking at you and will know what you want better than you do.”

“What I want is Henry’s signature on those papers.”

“Exactly.”

Beck sighed, then his face cracked into a grin. “Wanna come in and make out with me before Angus comes back?”

I laughed. That was exactly what I wanted to do. But before I could respond, Angus returned, his arms weighed down with tweed, and he shoed Beck back into the changing rooms.

“I was expecting the fit to be less fashionable,” Beck said as he came out in a three-piece, dark-green tweed suit.

“Yes,” Angus said, apparently able to read minds. “It’s a traditional label that likes to throw in a modern twist in some of their designs. May I say, it fits you as if it’s been tailored.”

Angus was right; the jacket clung to Beck’s shoulders perfectly and the dark green seemed to bring out the green in his eyes.

“And you think a tie?” Beck asked, unbuttoning the jacket, showing off the waistcoat.

“Not everyone will be dressed formally, but Henry will be,” I said, trying not to focus on how freaking good this guy looked in tweed. How was that even possible?

“And the color is right for grouse,” Angus said.

“Then let’s take it,” Beck said. “What else?”

“I have a list,” I said, pulling out the pad of paper and pen I’d brought from the hotel. “We need some shooting boots, a waterproof jacket. I think some moleskin jeans for the Fort William trip. Maybe a casual tweed jacket and a hat?” I wasn’t sure I’d manage to get Beck into a hat, but it was worth a try.

“You can forget about the hat,” Beck told Angus. “But the rest is fine.”

Angus scurried away, and Beck turned to me. “I’m not a hat kind of man.”

“You didn’t think you were a tweed kind of man until five minutes ago.” He rolled his eyes. “If I ask you a question, will you tell me the truth?” I asked.

He frowned. “I’ve never lied to you.”

Beck was right. He’d never given me any reason to doubt what he told me, but I was doubtful of everything at the moment.

“Why’s the Dawnay building so important?” I asked. “You’re a rich man. You own the rest of that block. You could make a lot of money without that property.” He stepped forward to see if Angus was approaching and I got the feeling he’d welcome the interruption. But lucky for me, Angus was still gathering Beck’s new wardrobe. “You’re going to a lot of effort,” I continued. “It feels personal.”

Beck took a breath and exhaled as if he were surrendering. “Maybe it is.”

I stayed silent, willing the words to flow. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know everything about this man.

“My mother used to live in the building. When she was first pregnant with me.”

I knew there was something more to that building than the real estate, but such sentimentality was a shock. “You want to buy it for old time’s sake?” I asked.

“Hardly. She was asked to leave just before she gave birth and she had nowhere to go. She told me the story when I was sixteen. I’ve been fixated on the building ever since.”

“Because she was asked to leave?”

He nodded, fiddling with the display of blue ties next to me. “Henry inherited the building from his cousin, Patrick Dawnay.” He paused. “My biological father.”

A chill snaked up my spine.

He’d talked about his dad—a man he clearly loved from the way he described him. And a man who was very much alive. “I thought your dad was ___”

“I never knew Patrick Dawnay. My dad raised me and is the only man I consider a father. Patrick Dawnay got my mother pregnant and then threw her away like she was nothing. She was his mistress and was provided with a flat

in that building. But when she got pregnant, she got an eviction letter from his lawyer. Along with money for an abortion.”

The edges of me curled up and I tried not to shudder.

Everything made sense now.

His obsession with the Dawnay building.

The determination to be different from people with old money. He didn't want to fit in. He didn't want to be a man who would do that to his mother.

I stood, stepped toward him and slid my arms around his waist. He stepped back, out of my reach.

“Don't feel sorry for me.”

I looked up at him. “Not for you. For your mother. No one deserves that.”

He nodded and this time he relented when I put my arms around him and placed my head on his chest.

“The Dawnay building won't exist when I'm finished with it.”

“When *we're* finished with it,” I corrected him.

“Do you always have to have the last word?” he asked.

“Pretty much. And I'm not done. The clothes aren't enough—they'll just make sure you don't stand out. You need to switch up how you are approaching this. You're self-sabotaging.”

He sighed. “I know. I'm letting these people get under my skin. Every time I speak to someone, I want to ask them when they last did a full day's work.”

“You'd be surprised,” I said. “Have you met Matt's uncle Richard?”

“Nope.”

“He doesn't have to work—his family trust is gigantic—but he's a pediatric neurosurgeon. Works full time in the NHS, doesn't even see private patients.” He'd think I was making it up if I told him he liked to take on complicated cases from abroad on his off days.

Beck just nodded, and I could tell he was just thinking that there was always an exception, but people were people—rich or poor. Some were nice and some were arseholes.

“And Nancy Meadows, who I will introduce you to if I get a chance, works seven days a week, raising money for one charitable cause after another. The woman never takes a holiday. Last year she raised thirteen million pounds for a homeless charity. Not everyone born with money is worthless. And not everyone who made it on their own is a decent human being.”

“I know, it’s just . . .”

“You’ll like Henry. He really is one of the good guys. Just give him a chance to show you.”

“I *need* this building,” he replied.

“Then you know what you need to do. You need to be charming, and friendly, and get Henry eating out of the palm of your hand. Once you connect, you’ll like him—respect his opinion. I swear to you.”

He nodded. “I need to focus on the goal and not get bogged down in the injustices . . .”

“Yes, keep the endgame in mind, but it might not be such a chore if you give these people a chance.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “I don’t know what I’d have done without you.”

I closed my eyes, grateful that he’d needed me because I’d needed him right back. Without him, I’d still be mourning a man who wasn’t worth my tears, but now I was focused on my future. On the Dawnay building and the Mayfair development. We were going to get Henry to sign that building over, and we were going to rip that building to bits and rebuild it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Beck

I was hoping that Stella remembered I was supposed to be Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* and not Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*. We'd stopped by Boots to pick up a nail brush and a pumice stone, which was on Stella's list, then at the entrance of the hotel, she'd scooped up some soil from the flowerbed, putting it in a small plastic bag she pulled out of her purse.

"I still don't understand what's happening," I said as I took a seat back in our hotel room. Stella was laying everything we'd purchased out on the bed.

"I'm going to show you. Can you get the scissors from the vanity pack in the bathroom, please?"

I'd just have to humor her. As I flicked on the bathroom light, images from the night before flashed into my head. Stella's skin was so smooth it was like gliding my tongue over gin-soaked ice. My hands had fit perfectly over her hips. And she'd smelled so good.

But sex was sex. It was rare not to enjoy it—even though it had been exceptional with Stella. What was more surprising was how completely alluring it was that she'd been entirely focused on our mission today. And the way she'd held me when I'd confessed my connection to the Dawnay building had been . . . comforting—no, more than that, it had bound us together somehow. No one else knew why I wanted that building so badly. It had just sort of tumbled out earlier. I couldn't help it.

I'd always professed to like the shallows when it came to women, but I couldn't help but wade deeper with Stella. Every step forward, things got better between us, felt more right, as if I'd been waiting for this woman and

now that she was here everything in my life made more sense.

She was kneeling by the bed when I handed her the scissors, completely focused on the lining of the jacket of the five-thousand-pound suit I'd just bought and would wear once. She snipped the thread of the lining and made a hole in the seam about three centimeters long.

"Is this some kind of passive-aggressive shit where you make me buy things and then destroy them because you're annoyed about me not going down on you for long enough or something?" I asked.

She paused what she was doing and looked up at me. "What kind of girls have you been dating?" Her expression was part horror, part pity. "And you went down on me plenty. Couldn't you tell by my nineteen orgasms?"

Stella had made me work for her climax, which meant I appreciated it all the more when I'd finally coaxed it from her. And it had made mine all the stronger. "I'm happy to try it again if you think it wasn't quite long enough. Wouldn't want to disappoint."

She grinned but shook her head as if I was some incorrigible fifteen-year-old boy obsessed with his older sister's best friend.

"Let's focus. You need this signature from Henry. Then after . . ." She shrugged. "Let's . . . let's just grab the trousers and sit on them," she said. "We don't want them looking too new." She reached for the pumice stone and started to rub it over the seam on the shoulders.

"You know, I'm starting to think you're a little bit crazy."

"Everything needs to look worn and not like we bought it ninety minutes ago."

"You mean you want it to look as if my grandfather bought the trousers and I'm so fucking stingy I've raided his wardrobe." I toed off my shoes.

"Open mind, remember." She looked at me with a grin so warm I felt the heat in my bones.

I took a seat next to her on the floor and picked up the pumice stone. "So, you know why I want the Dawnay building so badly. Why do you want the design job bad enough to watch your ex marry your best friend?"

She blew out a breath. "Shouldn't you be encouraging me, not questioning why I'm such a lunatic?"

I shrugged. "You're here now. For which I'm very thankful. But if I were in your shoes, I'm not sure anything could have dragged me here."

She blinked, closing her eyes for a second longer than normal, as if she were trying to wipe her mind clean of a memory. "Ironically, designing your

Mayfair development is an opportunity to move forward after all that's happened. I hate my job, but I can't leave it until I have something else. I had a successful design business in Manchester but Matt had a job opportunity in London, so we moved down. I had started to build a new business, but when he . . . left, I'd only managed to get two small jobs. I wasn't properly established and I had a mortgage to pay—London's expensive."

"He left you with the mortgage?"

"I told him to leave. I didn't think through the cost of the place."

"He should have done the right thing and kept paying his share." My jaw tightened at the thought that Matt believed he could just drop Stella and leave her to pick up the pieces.

"It was my fault. I should have thought it through." She always took on every problem like it was her own.

"You should have asked him to contribute."

"I couldn't do that. He wasn't living there."

"But you gave up your business, moved cities for him." Stella didn't seem to see the injustice that was obvious to me.

"For me too. I wanted a life together and anyway, I love London. I always wanted to be there."

She didn't look at me the entire time she spoke. I wanted to tell her how sorry I was, but I knew she wouldn't want my pity. "You're good at giving. Not so good at taking," I said.

Idea spun through my mind of what I could do for her. Maybe I could buy her something, pay her mortgage or something. It wasn't that Stella was a woman who couldn't look after herself—more that she was a girl who deserved to be spoiled.

This Matt guy needed someone to show him that girls like Stella didn't come along all the time. She'd made sacrifices to make him happy. She'd given things up for the good of their relationship, for a future together. She'd been part of a team, whereas he'd only been thinking of himself.

"As long as Henry signs on the dotted line, this Mayfair development will turn things around for me. I've started sourcing suppliers already."

As nervous as I was about her taking on the project, I wanted her to do well and create a better future for herself. "Maybe I can put you in touch with a few people as well."

She looked up at me from beneath her lashes. "You'd do that?"

Didn't she get it? There wasn't a lot I wouldn't do for her.

“It’s no problem. And I don’t think I’ve ever said thank you for coming here and doing all this.”

“It’s not like I’m not getting something in exchange.”

Was that what it was? A simple exchange? Perhaps I was making too much of what she was doing, but it felt like we were a team. That she was sitting on the hotel room floor, her arms deep in a sea of tweed because she *wanted* to help me.

“The Dawnay building’s going to be a game changer for both of us,” she said.

“Agreed. But can we stop calling it the Dawnay building?” I asked.

“What will you name it? The Wilde building?”

“The entire development will be called One Park Street.”

I didn’t need to name the building after myself. I just wanted to erase its legacy. And at the same time, create a new one for myself. And Stella.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Stella

I had a hot, semi-naked man in my bedroom, but the itinerary specified that *I* had to be semi-naked with a bunch of *women*.

There was nothing better than a day at the spa.

Usually.

And as well as not being with Beck, I risked having to speak to Karen.

“Stella,” Karen called as soon as I stepped into the relaxation room—a darkened space, lit only by candles that reflected off the gold walls. Whale music played in the background and loungers were organized around a central display of stones and crystals. “There’s a free seat here.”

Typical that she’d be the first person I’d run into.

Before she’d run off with my boyfriend, I would have assumed she was being nice by offering me a seat, but now, I couldn’t imagine it was possible for her to do anything nice for anyone. Perhaps she wanted to put on a show for the other people, or maybe she just needed to feel better about herself. Either way, I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of making a scene by refusing her offer.

At least Florence was on the other side of me.

“I was just telling Florence that I hadn’t seen much of you,” she said, patting the chaise longue next to her. “I want to hear all about your new man.”

I had to dampen down a smile instead of the panic that usually came when I had to talk about my fake boyfriend. If nothing else, Beck was now my very *real* lover. “What is it that you want to know?” I asked.

“Is it serious? What’s he like?” she asked.

“It is from what I’ve seen,” Florence interrupted. “He’s charming, generous, funny, and crazy about Stella.”

Florence was quite possibly the best human being. She knew I was a useless liar. But for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel the need for protection. “You’ve not seen anything until you’ve seen him naked,” I added.

Florence’s eyes widened, and I nodded.

“Good for fucking you,” she said, and I grinned. “You know what? With a man like that, I’m not sure I’d make it out of the bedroom.”

“I needed some recovery time,” I said and that was the truth. After our first night together, I needed some mental space to process the things he’d made me feel. But after last night, it was physical recovery I needed. Every muscle and bone ached. And I wasn’t sure if it was from the things we’d done or my desire to do each one again.

“So, it’s just casual sex?” Karen asked.

Nothing I’d said had suggested that. “I didn’t say it was casual.” I grabbed a magazine from the pile on the table between Florence and me.

“But it can’t be all that serious,” Karen said. “You’ve only been together a few months.”

There were lots of things that were unbelievable about me being at this wedding, but Beck was right, one of them was that I’d never confronted Karen and Matt. Maybe the reason they thought they could betray me so fundamentally and then expect everything to be hunky-dory was because I wasn’t the kind to confront people—that I was too focused on not making people uncomfortable, that I wanted everyone to be happy and get along.

I’d been trampled on for far too long.

“Who cares if it’s casual?” Florence interjected. “Beck’s so hot, I’d take whatever he was offering.”

“Yeah,” Karen said. “He doesn’t look the marrying kind.”

“Well, someone looking for marriage isn’t necessarily the best kind,” I replied, flicking through the pages of my magazine but not taking them in. I wanted Karen to stop commenting on my love life like she hadn’t stolen my boyfriend. Clearly Matt was available to be stolen but still—she should have some shame. “Just a few months ago, I was dating someone who I thought was the marrying kind and look how that ended up.” I put my magazine down and turned to Karen, my pulse thudding in my ears as I tried to gather my courage. “I spent seven years with Matt and he’s marrying you. Perhaps I

don't want someone who pretends to want to marry me and then ends up marrying my best friend."

I could almost hear Florence's jaw hit the floor behind me as I blew out a breath and my shoulders slid down from where they were up by my ears.

I'd been keeping all that in, squashed up like a ball, and now it was out, I had more room.

Karen blinked, furiously. "Well, if you felt like that, I don't understand why you came."

"Felt like what? Hurt? Betrayed? Devastated?" Did she really think I'd be fine with it? "Given what you did, I don't understand why you invited me," I replied.

"I thought you'd be happy for us. It wasn't like the two of you were still living together."

I snorted, blown away by her lack of empathy. I'd been trying to find a reason for what happened—if only I hadn't insisted on the blue lounge chair or agreed to move down to London, but it was obvious now.

None of this was my fault.

The elephant that had been sitting on my chest since I received the invitation had moved on to rest his arse somewhere else. "If that were true then you would have had the decency to tell me to my face that you were marrying my boyfriend. I wouldn't have found out when I opened the invitation." She didn't think I'd be happy for her; she just didn't care.

"People can't help falling in love, Stella. I thought you'd understand."

She thought I'd understand because I always had. I'd always excused her selfish behavior, constantly put her happiness ahead of my own—I did it with everyone. And I'd had enough.

"I was in love with him for seven years, or did you forget?" I asked. After all these years, Karen's motives for most things still flummoxed me. Was it possible that they were truly in love?

Either way, I didn't have to pretend I was happy for them.

She looked at me, her eyes wide and her mouth parted as if she didn't know if she should run or scream at me.

"Was it worth it? Are you happy?" I asked, genuinely wanting to know. Would marrying my ex-boyfriend fulfil her? Had losing a friend she'd had since she was five years old made her feel good?

"Of course," she said, and I could almost see her feathers bristle. She checked her watch. "I think they might have forgotten about me. I'm going to

see what the delay is.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed. “They shouldn’t be keeping the bride-to-be waiting.”

My limbs were floating, like I’d already had my massage. I always assumed confrontation brought anger and frustration but for me, telling Karen how I felt seemed to have instilled some kind of peace.

“Well, good for you,” Florence whispered as we watched Karen leave. “I’ve been waiting for years for you to stand up to her. I can’t believe she thought you’d be happy for her.”

“That’s how much of a doormat I’ve been,” I said.

“It says far more about her than you, but I do like this new Stella. Has spending time with Beck made you brave?”

“I’m not sure brave’s the word.” Time with Beck hadn’t given me courage, but it had given me a little bit of distance and perspective, away from the drama and debacle. Beck was an outsider, who had no skin in the game. Florence had been telling me for years I should stand up to Karen, but somehow seeing myself through Beck’s eyes changed things.

“If Beck doesn’t make you brave, how does he make you feel?” Florence grinned so wide I couldn’t help but smile back—because of Beck but also because I had a friend like Florence who wanted me to be happy. Friends like her were rarer than I used to believe.

“Like I have more room to breathe,” I replied. “He’s . . . I mean, it’s nothing—we’re stuck up here together and it’s . . . convenient. But I’m twenty-six and I’ve never had a fling, so I guess this is the holiday romance I never had.”

“It’s way overdue. And you never know, it’s not like he’s Marco Russo and heading back to Italy in a couple of months.”

I laughed. Marco Russo—how did Florence remember things like our Italian student teacher when we were fourteen? Every girl in the school had been utterly distracted by his swarthy looks and had completely underperformed in the end-of-school exams. “Back then you were all about going to Italy when we finished the exams.”

“Like he would have even remembered our names at the end of the year,” she said.

“Right? He never knew our names in the first place.”

“I’d never seen a man so attractive,” Florence said. “I was sure that if I could find him in Italy, he’d fall in love with me, we’d get married, live in

Tuscany, and paint and be happy forever.”

We’d all had childhood fantasies that seemed ludicrous now. Just like the thought that I was going to marry Matt seemed now like something that had always been utterly impossible.

“You seem happy,” Florence said. “When you’re with Beck.”

I guess I was. But I wasn’t going to let myself think that it was something more than it was. “You’re ridiculous.” I tossed my magazine back on the table between us. “Beck is a stopgap. He’s a something that happens before real things happen. Like the anesthetic before an operation or the canape before the main meal.” The words tasted bitter on my tongue. I wasn’t sure that was true for me. Beck felt like the start of something, but I didn’t want to be that naïve girl who tumbled into something and got taken advantage of, again.

If Beck wasn’t my future, he was a whisper of a future—a hint that there could be something after all that had happened. For the first time in a long time, I was starting to wonder what would make me happy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Beck

I'd woken up resolved. Stella was right. I knew what I needed to do. I just had to focus on the goal and not get hung up on what these people—Henry's cousin—had done to my mother.

Stella had helped me focus. She brought out the best in me.

My new clothes, pumiced and muddy in places, made me look like everyone else, and I nodded at a few people as I made my way toward the group of men gathered at the edge of the sweeping drive.

"Morning," I said. "Beautiful day for it." I'd come across these people in my life—hell I was good friends with a couple of trust funders. Stella told me that Henry was a good man and although it was difficult for me to believe that someone related to Patrick Dawnay could be decent, I trusted her.

Henry was over by the keeper, so I headed in that direction.

"We're shooting wild birds today, not grouse reared on the estate." Matt stepped up beside me, dressed in a light-green tweed suit, brown socks up to his knees and a flat cap to match.

At a distance, he could have been fifty years older than he was. I'd drawn the line at headgear, and although Stella had wanted me to wear breeks and wellies, I'd insisted on trousers and walking boots. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," I replied.

Stella had insisted that I do my homework on what a grouse shoot involved. I was usually well prepared, but I'd been resisting it, rejecting every part of this way of life—perhaps because I'd been rejected by it in the

first place. Patrick Dawnay hadn't wanted me, had pushed me and my mother aside, and I didn't want to want any part of it. But, as Stella said, if I wanted the Dawnay building, I had to do whatever it took.

"Do you like shooting?" Matt asked.

"Golf is more my thing," I said.

"Excellent," he said. "Perhaps we should play a few holes when I'm back from my honeymoon. The girls can get together for lunch and leave us boys to it."

Why on earth would he think I'd want to spend time with him? He was Stella's ex-boyfriend. And even if he wasn't, I had enough friends. Five super-competitive arseholes were enough to contend with. There weren't any vacancies in my friendship circle.

"How are you enjoying Scotland?" he asked. "That rain yesterday was dreadful, but at least we're seeing the sun today. I didn't want to have to cancel."

"You don't call off a shoot because of a spot of rain, man," Henry barked at Matt as he came up beside us. "We wear waterproofs and get on with it."

"I enjoy the rain," I said, because it was the truth. "I never miss a run because of weather."

"Quite right," Henry said. "You'd never go outside in Scotland if you were afraid of a bit of water." He sniffed, then turned to me. "So, you're Stella's new chap, are you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, she's a lovely girl. I'm very fond of her. Known her since she was a small child. She was always clever but never shouted about it. I liked that about her."

Henry and I agreed on one thing at least. "She underestimates herself," I said. "Very modest despite being quite . . . wonderful." It was easy to be honest when I was talking about how great Stella was.

He nodded. "Puts other people first. Other people who frankly don't deserve it." He shot a glance at Matt, who had the good sense to be pretending not to hear what we were talking about.

"I've just seen Phillip. Please excuse me," Matt said. "I must go and ask him about his speech."

"Yes, he should scuttle off," Henry said. "The way he and my god-daughter have treated Stella has been absolutely terrible. Selfish and entitled—both of them. Stella's better off without him."

A grin filled my face. “I couldn’t have put it better myself. But his loss is my gain.”

“Just make sure you realize what you’ve got in that girl.”

I’d liked Stella from the moment I’d met her, found her attractive, enjoyed her feistiness. But getting to know her had brought an entirely new level of captivation with her. I respected her as well as enjoyed her company and couldn’t keep my hands off her. “Every day I realize it a little more,” I replied.

“I’ve never understood womanizers. When I found my wife, I was determined to marry her. I saw how kind she was. She brought out the best in me and I could make her laugh. What more could I possibly want? And all these years later? It’s still the same—together we make each other better.”

I looked out onto the countryside, all mossy greens and muted browns. That was Stella—she made me better. She saw things in me that others didn’t, and she coaxed the best out of me.

“All Matt knows how to do is take,” Henry said. “Perhaps Karen is what he needs. If he’d married Stella, she would never have known what being adored and respected felt like. And she deserves that. She’s a special soul.”

“Very special,” I agreed. Gut instinct had guided me well during the course of my career, and at that moment it was telling me that there was more to what Henry was saying than him just giving me a warning to look after Stella. It was almost as if he knew that we weren’t really together, and he was warning me not to pass up the opportunity to keep her in my life when this week was up.

But perhaps that was my mind playing tricks on me.

“You’ve shot grouse before?” Henry asked.

“Never,” I admitted. “Not really my scene. I’ve shot clays a few times. And a lot of soup cans.”

“Ahhh, sounds like me as a boy. With my air rifle at the back of the stables.” I chuckled. Perhaps Henry and I had more in common than I imagined. “That’s clearly why you were such a good shot the other day.”

“Soup cans come in handy,” I said.

“I take it you haven’t brought your own gun?”

I shook my head.

“I didn’t bring mine either. I’ll help you pick one out. Follow me.”

As we walked toward the keeper, Matt’s chortle echoed out across the party. Henry cleared his throat. “I told Karen that a man who’s prepared to

cheat on a woman, will cheat on *any* woman.”

“I think those are wise words,” I replied.

“You look after Stella. Maybe the next time I see you, after this week, it will be at your wedding.”

I didn’t have to make an effort to agree with Henry. The last few weeks with Stella had been fun. She’d found the whole idea of pretending we were dating more stressful than I had. Relationships for me had never required any effort but with Stella . . . I was much better at being a fake boyfriend than a real one. Being a fake boyfriend was far more demanding—we were more like teammates with a shared goal. But I preferred it like that, which had me thinking that maybe that’s what relationships were meant to be about. I laughed. “Well, we’re not quite at that point yet.”

Henry stopped and looked me dead in the eye. “You seem like a man who knows what he wants. If you want Stella, then don’t mess her around.”

I admired how protective he was over her.

Stella had a way of making me see things differently, even if she didn’t do it on purpose. She shook things up like a snow globe, and when everything settled down still again, things were back to normal but were forever changed.

“Yes, this will do for you,” Henry said, handing me a shotgun, and pulling me away from my thoughts of Stella and wondering what things would be like when the snow settled and I went back to life before her. Whether that was even possible.

“Perhaps we can carve out some time this week to talk more about the Dawnay building,” I said.

“Oh that’s right,” Henry said. “You said you’d tried to set up a meeting about it. Did you want to lease it?” he asked. “It would need overhauling, I’m afraid. It’s in a dreadful state.”

“Actually, I’d like to buy it from you.”

His eyebrows disappeared under his hat. “I don’t think it’s for sale.” He didn’t sound very convinced. “At least, I’ve never considered selling it.”

“I can offer you a good price. But I need to move things along quickly, I’m afraid. It’s a short window of opportunity, but like you say, the place needs work, even to let. If you sold it to me, you could invest in something else that’s easier to generate revenue from.”

Henry nodded but stayed silent. I didn’t want to push. I needed to be patient. Let the idea settle.

“Let me know the price you’re thinking. I’ll give it some thought. In the meantime, if you’ve got any paperwork I can look at or I can send to my lawyers, then let me have it.”

I was holding my breath as he spoke, not quite believing that we were having this conversation and that he hadn’t dismissed the idea out of hand.

I wasn’t sure if it was the tweed I was wearing or the warning I’d gotten from Stella to give Henry the benefit of the doubt, but something had shifted. If I kept listening to Stella, the Dawnay building might finally be mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Beck

The lock on the hotel room door whirred and Stella appeared in the doorway, grinning as if she'd been waiting to see me. Her expression hit me like a physical force, almost knocking me off my chair. It was like seeing me made her happy.

It felt fucking fantastic.

"How many defenseless little grouse did you murder today?" she asked as she kicked off her shoes. I put down my phone on the table to give her my full attention. Her hair was piled high on her head, and her face was free of make-up.

She looked beautiful.

"Funny. And you'd be proud." I gestured her over with a nod of my head.

"I would?" When she was close enough, I grabbed her hand and pulled her between my thighs.

"I bonded with Henry. You have quite the fan there."

She forked her fingers through my hair. "I do?"

"Yeah. He likes you a lot. Not Matt's biggest fan from what I can tell."

"Really? Well, that makes two of us." She leaned against me as I rested my hands at the tops of her thighs.

"You sure about that?" I asked her. "If he dumped Karen and told you he'd made the biggest mistake of his life, what would you do?"

"Agree with him."

"Would you take him back?" I asked. Stella had so much to offer—she didn't need to waste that on an idiot who didn't appreciate her.

“It’s never going to happen, so I don’t need to spend time and energy thinking about *what-ifs*.”

It was such an evasion—did she really not understand that she was worth more?

“You’d just go along with it?” I asked. Because that’s what Stella did. She went along with things to make other people happy, without really thinking about what she wanted.

“I’ve not given it much thought.” She paused. “But no.” She exhaled, her eyebrows pulling together as if she were deep in thought. “No, I don’t think I would. I’d always be waiting for it to happen again. And anyway, Matt’s not the man I thought he was. He’s . . . different. I mean, I was wrong about him. What he’s done is unforgivable, but . . .”

“There’s a ‘but’?” I asked. She couldn’t think that what he had done was justified.

“Yeah. There’s part of me—a very small part of me—that thinks it’s not the worst thing that could have happened. What if we had got married and *then* I’d found out he and Karen were sleeping together or that he didn’t love me the way I loved him. I don’t know if it’s being here at their wedding but, although it’s still painful, I believe things will get better for me. I’ll get to London and I’ll figure stuff out.”

I couldn’t stop smiling. I hoped I’d had a part to play in her believing the future held promise. I pulled her down onto my knee. Perhaps I’d show her how good things could be.

I slid my hand up her skirt. I was done talking about Matt. “How was the spa? What did they do to you?”

She squirmed as my hand dove between her thighs.

“Erm, I had a massage?”

“Who touched you? A girl or a guy?”

“A girl, why? Are you jealous?”

I nestled my finger underneath the lace of her knickers. “It depends,” I replied. “Did you have a happy ending?”

She threw her head back and laughed and I grinned—not at my question but at the glorious sound of Stella happy. It was indisputable that Matt was an idiot for cheating on her with her best friend. But what if I gave her up when we got back to London? What did that make me?

She gasped and grabbed my shoulder as my fingers delved into her. “No, you’re the only instigator of my orgasms this week.”

Which was how it should be.

“You haven’t told me how it went with Henry,” she said, shifting so my thumb grazed her clit, enjoying her shiver.

“You want me to talk to you about my day while I’m getting you off?”
Did couples do that?

She smiled then pressed a kiss on my cheek. “No, but I do want to hear about it.”

“Orgasms first,” I said, and pulled my hand away and lifted her onto her feet. She looked confused and then I began to undress her, lifting her t-shirt over her head. “And then we’ll talk shop.”

“If you insist. I’m not going to complain.”

“No, I’ll make sure you have nothing to complain about.” I released the clasp on her bra, and she shrugged off the straps as I knelt to unbutton her skirt. These clothes were for the people outside of this room. They were part of the act—a mask, armor—but this space, the private time between her and me, that was real.

Once naked, she lay back on the bed, her arm bent, and her head resting on her hand as she watched me undress. “I like hanging out with you,” she said, and my heartbeat skipped, giving emphasis to what she was saying—painting the words in bold type.

I wanted it to mean more.

I wanted her to feel more.

“I like hanging out with you, too.”

I peeled off the last of my clothes and took her in, naked and waiting for me. I couldn’t rush this. I wanted to breathe in every curve, every dip and arc of her. To map her body with my tongue and then try to explain how fucking insatiable she made me. I stepped forward and trailed my fingers up her body like a blind man reading the secrets of eternal life. I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss anything, that I’d taken in every last word she told me.

“You okay?” she asked. “You seem intense. You want to talk about Henry?”

She didn’t think it was possible that I was intensely fascinated by her. “I’m not thinking about Henry. I’m thinking about how sensational your body is.”

She slid her hand over mine. “Really?” she asked.

“Is that so difficult to believe?” I supposed when the man you thought you were going to spend the rest of your life with ended up cheating on you,

it was easy to believe you weren't worthy of . . . admiration? Worship.

She didn't answer and I continued my exploration.

I wasn't sure I'd ever taken my time with a woman the way I did with Stella. I never liked to rush things, but that was so the end result was intensified. I liked to take my time with Stella because I wanted to savor the moment—not just build up to orgasm. I needed to squeeze out every last drop of being with her, soak myself in her. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

“Flip onto your stomach,” I said, guiding her over.

I swallowed as the lines and curves changed, her skin highlighted by the hazy, setting sun coming through the windows. “Let's skip dinner,” I said. “We have all day tomorrow to spend with these people. Tonight, we should do this.”

She glanced over her shoulder at me, as if checking she'd heard me right. A small smile turned up the corners of her mouth—part suspicion, part unease. I got the uneasy part. The feelings Stella stirred in me were unfamiliar. I'd never spent much time fully clothed with the women I dated. But it was more than just knowing her well that set her apart. It was because Stella was Stella.

Unselfish.

Thoughtful.

Sexy.

There were a thousand things I liked about her.

I lifted her hips and pulled her back so her legs hit the floor. “Like this, I think.” She went up onto her forearms, her breasts grazing the mattress, and I growled at the memory of how they felt in my mouth.

Later.

I reached for a condom. I needed to fuck Stella hard and quickly tonight. Needed to claim her—to make her see what I saw in her.

Leaning over her, I whispered in her ear, “I'm going to make you come so hard, you're going to forget everything bad and only remember the good stuff.” I wanted her to forget her suspicions and bruised heart. I wanted her to know what being able to trust someone felt like. I slipped my hands over her shoulders, stroking my thumb over the dip at the top of her neck with one hand and then I trailed down the valley of her spine with my other. When I reached the base of her back, I kept going down between her arse cheeks, over her arsehole and into her opening.

She was soaked; her wetness fueling my lust. I was done just feeling her on the outside. I needed to be inside.

I put my thumb in her mouth, had her suck it clean, and then positioned my cock. Instead of taking it slow, I entered her in one hard, fast thrust, pulling her onto me as I pushed forward, getting deep, deep, deep.

She cried out so loud anyone on the lawns outside our window would hear. Hell, most people within a half-mile radius would.

“You’re going to break me in two,” she cried out, her hands bunched full of sheets.

“Never,” I growled.

I pulled back and thrust in again, hard and fast. She let out the same desperate moan, one melting into the next. My balls tightened, and I anchored my hand around her waist. I had to steady her, keep her still, and I needed to be close to her, to feel every vibration across her skin.

“More,” she cried out as I stilled.

I thrust again, not stopping this time before I pulled out and plowed into her over and over. I couldn’t tell who was making which sounds as they bounced off the walls of the room.

Her back arched. “I’m . . . Please. Beck, please let me come.”

This wasn’t the time to make her wait. Our lust and desire had pushed us into a different state of consciousness and orgasm was the only route out. I wasn’t going to be able to hold back anymore than she was.

But the way she asked my permission, the way she had waited for me to say yes before she fully let herself go—it was too much. She was too much.

“Come, baby.” The words scorched my throat, and before the command had fully left my lips, she began to quiver under my fingers. My climax pushed from the base of my spine, spinning, circling, and pressing out and up. It went on and on until I was bursting out of my skin.

I wrapped my arms around Stella’s waist, holding her tight as she bucked underneath me, her orgasm combining with mine as we cried out in unison.

I fell onto the bed, still holding her. Our jagged breathing settled as we found our rhythm.

“Beck . . .”

I waited for her to finish her thought. What would she say? Would she comment on how intense it was? But she left the sentence unfinished, almost as if she expected me to fill the gap.

She twisted in my arms so we were facing each other and placed her

palms on my chest. “Far more relaxing than the spa.”

I laughed. “Did you enjoy your day?”

She tilted her head, nuzzling into my body with a sigh. Wanting to commit her contentment to memory, I closed my eyes at the sensation of her breath on my skin. After fucking, my mind was usually elsewhere, either on fucking again or on my emails as I reached for my phone, ready to chase the next development, close the next deal. All I wanted to do with Stella was to be right here. With her in my arms.

“I can’t remember my day,” she replied. “But you need to tell me about Henry. You said you bonded.”

“Over you. I get the impression he’s not too impressed with Karen’s behavior.”

She didn’t respond.

“You might be right about him. He might be one of the good ones.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing you say that I’m right a lot when we start the design process.”

“Don’t bet on it. I’m a tough client to please.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, pulling out of my arms and wriggling down the bed as she grabbed the base of my cock.

I chuckled and then groaned as she kneeled between my thighs. I glanced across to the bedside table then handed her a hair clip. There was no chance I was missing the visuals.

She grinned and pulled her hair back, exposing her high, tight breasts and flat stomach. Sophie’s choice: My dick in her mouth, which was likely to be epic, or her skin sliding against mine as I fucked her again, this time face-to-face.

I wanted both options immediately.

Stella was teaching me a lot about patience.

Her hair tied back, she bent, fisting my cock in her hand. Her grip was perfect—confident and strong. She glanced up, wet her lips, and swallowed. I could have come right there, all over that perfectly smooth neck, and it would have been the best blow job I’d ever had.

It would be all over far too quickly if I watched right away, so I shifted so I was staring at the ceiling when I felt her tongue connect to the underside of my cock. It was like a starting pistol had been fired. I clenched my hands and tried to take a steadying breath as she licked long, steady strokes up to my crown. This was a marathon, not a sprint . . . I hoped.

As she took my tip in her mouth and started to suck, I had to focus on keeping my hips on the bed and not ramming deep into her throat. Then she pulled back, licking up one side then down the other. Every millimeter of skin she touched buzzed and intensified the growl underneath my skin. She circled my crown with her tongue, and I willed her to take me into her mouth, but she was making me wait. Paying me back. It was pure, delicious torture, and I was going to have to live with it.

Impossibly slowly, she took me deeper and deeper, tighter and tighter and tighter, and then she pulled back and used just a little teeth.

At that moment I would have signed over my entire fortune to her if she let me flip her over onto her back and fuck her mouth into the mattress. But I held still, paralyzed with need and lust until she groaned, and I couldn't hold back anymore. Some women made noises when they gave blow jobs, and it always filled me with suspicion—was that what they thought men wanted? Had they seen that when watching porn or reading *Cosmo*? But with Stella, her sounds were so uninhibited, so real and needy, that there was no doubt she loved sucking my dick.

I'd never wanted a woman so much in my life.

"I have to come," I announced.

"In my mouth?" she asked.

I didn't have time for a discussion. I pulled her onto the bed and flipped her to her back. "Lie there." I took my dick in my hands. I wanted to see her as I came. To watch every naked part of her. She brought one leg up as if to hide herself, and I shook my head and pulled her knee wide, opening her pussy and revealing her wetness.

Fuck, yes. My dick in her mouth had done that to her.

I pushed into my hand, once, twice, and when she lifted the back of her hand to her mouth, wiping herself clean of me, I erupted all over my stomach, her name booming through the room.

"You're fucking amazing," I said, collapsing back onto the bed.

"I barely touched you," she replied, pressing her hot palm against my chest.

"And look what you did. I'm a fucking mess. Your body . . . Your . . . everything."

I was skirting too close to saying something before I knew what it was I wanted to say. I had to reel in my confessions, how these feelings were pushing up and breaking the surface of my soul. I wanted to be a man Stella

wanted, craved, and deserved.

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

Stella

I should have been dreading a day trip with the people who'd hurt me most in the world, but with Beck by my side, I was actually looking forward to it. "Have you done many coach trips before?" I squeezed his hand as we strode across the courtyard toward the bus waiting to take us to Fort William.

"Do I look eighty to you?"

I squinted, trying to get a good look at him. "Maybe on a bad day," I replied.

He glared at me.

"Oh right, you don't have bad days. That's what Tom Ford does for you. The rest of us put up with Zara and plenty of days looking like we haven't slept in a week."

"Zara or not, I've never seen you looking anything other than fucking phenomenal."

My stomach dived to my knees. There was no one to overhear us, no need to pretend, yet the things Beck said when we were in public or private . . . He was nicer to me, more complimentary than Matt had ever been.

"The Scottish weather must be getting to you," I replied. Beck was the kind of guy who could get up at five in the morning and scrape his hands through his hair and be catwalk ready. Most of us weren't so lucky.

Raised voices by the door to the coach caught my attention and a man with a clipboard and hair as orange as a traffic cone smiled at Karen through gritted teeth.

"I don't know what to tell you," the driver said. "The booking is on the

system for forty-four.”

“We made it for forty-eight. There are still four more passengers than seats available.”

“We could drive,” Beck told Karen. “That way I can subject Stella to easy listening music.”

“You do *not* like easy listening,” I said, pulling on his arm.

“I’m not going to confess stuff like that when we first start dating, am I? I have to save the dodgy taste and bad habits until it’s too late. I guess now is as good a time as any to confess . . .” He took a deep breath. “I love the Carpenters.”

I collapsed into laughter. In some ways Beck had a gigantic ego—mainly wrapped up with his work and his lack of family money—but he threw me a curveball every now and then by not giving a shit what people thought about him.

“Let’s drive—we can sing along in peace,” I suggested.

We turned back to Karen and she rolled her eyes. “So that’s two people down. Matt and I will drive too to give us some alone time.”

A week ago, a comment like that would have hurt, brought her betrayal back with a vengeance. But now her comments slid off me like oil to my water—she’d lost the power to hurt me. She wasn’t working for my forgiveness. She seemed determined to only care about herself. I’d always been envious of her independence, of the way she charged through life, fearless and determined. But she wasn’t so much fearless as careless. She wasn’t so much determined as detached from people’s feelings.

I’d been looking through dirty glass for years and suddenly someone had come along with some white vinegar and a cleaning cloth. But just because I could see her clearly didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. It also meant I was always looking around, wondering where the other dirty windows were. Who else was I seeing the way I wanted to see them rather than the way they really were?

I didn’t trust my judgement.

“Is that okay?” Beck asked as we headed toward the car. “Are you worried the rental is too new money?”

I laughed. “How come you wanted to drive?” I asked.

“Rather than sit on a bus and play eye spy? I’d definitely rather drive.” He aimed the key fob at the car and the lights flashed before he opened the passenger door. “We can hang out, you can give me shit, and make me laugh.

And I wasn't joking about the Carpenters either."

I climbed into the car, fiddling with my phone. Bringing up their greatest hits on Spotify, I nestled the phone into the holder on the dash, connecting it to the Bluetooth. "What do you want first?" I asked as he slid into the driver's seat. "*Close To You? Superstar?*"

"I don't mind. Start at the top."

The first song was *Superstar*. The intro played, and the first line rang out. "I thought you were going to sing?" I said.

"I'm not good at multitasking," he said as he made a sharp left turn onto the drive, heading out of the hotel grounds. "Given how anxious you get in the car, I would have thought you would want me to concentrate."

"Just when it's rain—"

Before I could finish my sentence, he launched into a word-perfect sing-along, complete with intonation and emphasis.

"You not joining in?" he asked at a break between verses.

"Oh, I'm appreciating it as a spectator rather than a member of the band." I tried to swallow down a laugh, though it wasn't at his singing. It was more that `` easy listening.

He fiddled with the steering wheel and the music faded into the background. "So, tell me a bit about Fort William. Is that where the secrets of the upper classes are buried? Am I going to commit social suicide if I don't know that Matt's grandfather founded the place in fourteen fifty-seven?"

Beck might think that buying the Dawnay building was going to lay to rest some ghosts, but something told me it wasn't the building that was going to heal the hurt Beck still held.

"Well, from what Florence told me, today is just a lunch overlooking Loch Linne."

"I can't believe we're not hiking here. We're a stone's throw away from Ben Nevis. The area's beautiful. I looked it up and the hiking is really just a walk through the grounds." He shook his head. "I suppose they have to cater to the majority. It just seems such a waste of the landscape around here."

"I've never hiked in Scotland, but from what I've seen, it looks like it would be gorgeous."

"You've been up here and never hiked? You've got to be kidding me. The boys and I practically lived up here doing our Duke of Edinburgh gold award."

"I guess I've only ever been up with Matt and he never wanted to hike."

Didn't like the rain."

"Well, I'm going to bring you back and we're going to hike."

I held my breath, waiting for him to follow up his comment. Had he meant to suggest future plans? It was just the two of us in the car. There was no need to put on a show, so why was he suggesting we come back here? I'd seen Beck and I as a temporary thing—a holiday romance—but was he thinking that we might be more? My heartbeat began to boom in my ears, like a siren blasting—warning me—but of what? I wasn't going to let myself think about it. I was determined just to enjoy the moment with Beck and be grateful he was healing the wounds Matt had created.

"No camping though, right?" It was as noncommittal a reply as I could come up with.

"I'm not making any promises. Waking up in the middle of nature—it's . . . That kinda shit's important."

I laughed. "That kinda shit? You're a regular philosopher. You should write a book, offer counseling."

"I might say it badly, but it doesn't make it any less true."

"Well make sure you don't say it badly with Henry today. Are you going to talk to him about the Mayfair property?"

"I've got to. I can't chance it and wait until the ceremony when there might be a chance I miss him. I've got to find my opportunity today. I got the papers he requested ready to send through. I just hope he looks at them fast. We don't have a lot of time."

"Florence emailed me the table plan—we're at the opposite end of the room from Henry," I said. "So I think you should try to speak to him before everyone sits down. I'll just be a distraction, but you can get down to business if it's just the two of you. I'll find Florence and Gordy or head to the bar or something."

It might not be up to me to close the deal on the Dawnay building, but this was maybe even more my future than it was Beck's. After weeks of licking my wounds, the trip here had woken something in me, or perhaps it had closed the door on something. Now I was impatient to get started on my future—whether or not that future included Beck.

After searching high and low for Florence, I'd spotted her and Gordy in the car park, having a heated conversation, and I'd decided it wasn't my place to interrupt just because I didn't want to be wandering around the restaurant trying to avoid Matt and Karen and their families. Just a few weeks ago, I considered many people in this room *my* family, yet here we were avoiding each other's eyelines and pretending each other didn't exist.

I might not know exactly where my future lay, but I knew it wasn't among the people here.

"A gin and tonic, please," I asked the barman as I faced toward the bar, so as not to catch anyone's eye.

"You okay?" the barman asked, and I realized I was staring at him.

"Yes, completely fine. How are you?" I was being an idiot. I was a confident, capable woman in her prime, and I wasn't the one who should be avoiding anyone. I'd done nothing wrong. I took my drink and turned slightly to admire the view, grinning as I saw Beck talking to Henry. He was totally going to get the Dawnay building. I was sure of it. He could convince anyone of anything.

"Stella," a familiar voice came from behind me and I froze.

This couldn't be happening.

This was why I'd been hiding.

As much as I hadn't wanted to spend time with Karen, the very last thing I wanted to do was to speak to my ex-boyfriend.

"Matt?" I turned and looked at him, trying to fix my face with some kind of neutral expression.

His eyes were wide and red and the tendons in his neck bulging as if he were ready to hit someone. "What are you doing here?" he hissed, glancing around to check that no one was watching.

"At Fort William?" I asked, not quite understanding the question. "It was part of the itinerary, I—"

"This entire week? Why did you come?" He reached to grab my wrist, but I moved my arm and stepped out of his way just in time.

"What do you mean? You invited me," I said.

How was he angry with *me*?

"You weren't supposed to say yes, Stella. You're making a complete fool of yourself. Can't you see?"

As though a tide was turning in my stomach, nausea mixed with confusion and the sense of being cornered by an enemy.

There was so much anger and blame in his expression.

Anger at *me*. Yet it was me who was supposed to be angry. *He* was to blame. He'd run off with my best friend.

What had I done?

"If you hadn't wanted me here, you shouldn't have invited me," I said, trying to keep my voice steady despite feeling like I was trying to keep afloat on choppy waters.

The injustice of the situation was tempered by the shame that Matt always managed to sprinkle over me. Like when he told me I was being pretentious whenever I showed him a piece of furniture I'd found that would look good in our flat. Like the look he gave me when I won the pitch to redesign the interior of a local hotel up in Manchester. I'd never noticed before, but now that I thought about it, Matt made me feel ashamed of many things I was excited about.

"This is so typical of you, Stella. Needy. Desperate."

Matt and I had gone to India the summer of our graduation. On our first night in Delhi, on the way back from dinner, we came across an elephant and its owner in the middle of the city. The owner was charging tourists to take pictures with the elephant. I didn't understand how such a powerful animal was so easily led with a simple chain around its thick ankle. It could run his owner down and escape back to family and friends. How had the owner trained it to follow him?

It was only now, standing in front of Matt, that I realized.

The elephant had been conditioned to expect pain if it stepped out of line. It was the *fear* of hurt that stopped it from trying to flee.

The elephant's pain was physical. The pain Matt inflicted on me over the years was mental. But both the elephant and I had been cowed.

Diminished.

We'd both had our power taken away.

And standing in front of him, I could still feel the pull of the chain, the rub of his ire, and I wasn't sure if I had the strength left to charge over him and free myself.

"Karen wanted to be nice. I told her you'd pull a stunt like this. You're completely oblivious to reality, Stella."

I didn't know what to say. This was a man I loved for seven years. A man I'd trusted, thought I'd have a family with, yet he looked at me with a mixture of contempt, anger, and irritation as if we were almost strangers.

“You invited me,” I repeated. I could hardly tell him it was the last place I wanted to be.

“What did you expect when you came up here? That I’d change my mind? You should have realized years ago that we were only a temporary thing. I never proposed, Stella. I thought you’d take the hint. Things were hardly good between us, but you seemed to carry on regardless, not reading the signs, thinking we were going to be together forever. I thought moving to London would finally put an end to things. But you went ahead and followed me. Christ—wake up.”

I was a deer stuck in the headlights. Okay, Matt didn’t love me. Okay, Matt was marrying my best friend—but he was trying to say it was all my fault. I felt myself weakening under the cold determination in his stare. He was determined to hurt me. Determined to break me. Matt acted as if he’d cut the chain from my ankle years ago and had been trying to shoo me away ever since. Had I been so naïve? When he’d told me about the job in London, it had been a shock, but he’d never said anything about splitting up. Just that it wasn’t an opportunity he could turn down. He never suggested going on his own. Up until the night he told me he was moving out, I’d never had any indication things weren’t working. But maybe they’d never been good from his perspective. He had me questioning everything.

Had I missed him trying to end things? Clearly, I’d been working toward a shared future he didn’t want, but why hadn’t he just said he didn’t love me anymore? Why hadn’t he left sooner? And if he hadn’t wanted me to move to London with him, he should have just told me.

“This isn’t my fault,” I said. I felt pathetic that I couldn’t put together a more coherent defense to his accusations.

He sighed, rolling his eyes. “You only ever see what you want to see. You’ve always been the same—it’s like you have some kind of tunnel vision and you only see the Stella version of reality. No doubt you’ve done it with this new guy too.” He nodded toward the window where Beck was sitting with Henry.

Perhaps I had missed signs with Matt. Maybe I should have pushed him more about our future, but I loved him and I thought that he loved me. It didn’t occur to me not to trust him with my heart.

It wouldn’t happen again. My heart wouldn’t ever be given away so easily. Despite what Matt thought, in future I wouldn’t assume someone’s feelings matched mine. I wouldn’t expect people to be honest, and

straightforward, and loyal. I was done being the woman that men took advantage of.

I'd learned my lesson, and I wouldn't repeat the same mistakes again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Beck

Thank God for Stella. I couldn't have handled the endless lunches, drinks, and dinners or inane small talk if it wasn't for her. But today I needed to nail down Henry, get him to agree in principle to a sale of the Dawnay building, and it would have all been worth it. I wasn't leaving Scotland without that victory, and I had work to do. I was running out of time.

I glanced over at Stella at the bar. There was so much riding on this conversation. But when she looked at me, I didn't doubt myself for a second. *I* wanted this. Of course I did, but I also wanted this for her—so she could do the design, get her business back on track, and move on from her idiot ex. She might have needed this win even more than I did.

I headed over toward Henry and the large picture window that overlooked the loch and the mountains behind it. The landscape matched the colors of the shop we'd visited the other day. Browns, heathers, and greens. I'd never taken much notice of the landscape when the boys and I had come up when we were teenagers. Yeah, we liked the views, but we'd been focused on the goal of getting to the top of the mountain, the end of the trail, and our gold award. I wasn't sure I'd appreciated everything that got me to that point.

"Henry," I said as he turned away from the window. "You taking in this fantastic view?"

"I certainly am. I've been coming up here most of my life, but it still holds my attention."

"I was eighteen on my first trip up here. Before I'd started my first business, before I knew what I was going to do with my life. But nothing's

changed.”

“And we can take comfort in that.”

Though I’d rather chat to Henry than most of the other people here, I didn’t want to just make small talk with him. “I’ve put together a pack of papers to send you on email if you have an address,” I said. I pulled out my phone as Henry relayed his address to me and I typed it in. I’d made sure that the lawyers had everything ready, so if Henry was so minded, he could sign everything and get the deal done right away.

Not that I was expecting him to do that. I just didn’t want there to be any reason from my end why the deal wasn’t signature ready.

“Okay, I’ve sent that across to you,” I said, tucking the phone back in my pocket.

“I’ll take a look. But give me a little background, why do you want the property?” Henry asked.

I tried to swallow down the lump that formed in my throat that appeared every time I thought about my mother and the way she was treated. “I think I mentioned that I own others in the block. I want to make it the premier residential site in Mayfair.”

“So a complete transformation of the entire block?”

“Exactly.” I nodded.

“That property has held our family name since it was built in the mid-eighteenth century. Even if I was to sell, I’d want that name retained in relation to the building.”

Despite being related by blood, I’d never borne the Dawnay name. It had never been an option for me, having been disowned by my father. I was damn sure that as soon as I bought the building, its name would be the first thing to go.

I didn’t need constant reminders of who I wasn’t.

“The entire block will be one large complex that will have a brand-new name,” I said.

“Well perhaps you can work the Dawnay name into a wing or something?” Henry asked.

“I’d definitely look at doing something,” I replied, deliberately being noncommittal.

“We’d have to agree on what exactly it was that would carry the name,” Henry said. “Perhaps a plaque in the lobby explaining the family connection would work?”

Over my dead body.

“What do you think?” Henry continued.

“You want this incorporated into the contract?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” Henry replied. “Selling the building is not . . . Liquidating assets is not something I generally like to do. And that building has been part of our family estate for generations.”

I could tell him, explain how I might not have the Dawnay name but I had the Dawnay blood in my veins.

But there was no way I’d use my connection to my biological father to get anything in my life. He’d never given anything to me. And I wasn’t going to take anything. I’d worked hard for everything I’d ever had and that wasn’t about to change.

“I understand that it might be easier to transfer it to a family member. But in my experience, Henry—and forgive me if I speak out of turn—sometimes family members aren’t the best people to take care of a property like the Dawnay building. I want to tend to it, nurture it—bring it to life for another generation.” I glanced over at Stella, maybe hoping to feel some of the confidence she had in me and recharge myself. This was clearly important to Henry, and I didn’t want to misstep.

She was facing me, but she wasn’t talking to Florence. Stella’s head was bowed and her eyes were fixed on the floor as she spoke to a man whose back was to me. It almost looked like she was going to cry. Was it Gordy speaking to her?

Before I could figure out who was with her, Henry replied. “I see what you’re saying but—and you’ll have to forgive *me* this time if I speak out of turn—I don’t know you. I’m sure you’re a completely honest person who does what they say they’ll do . . .”

My attention should have been one hundred percent focused on Henry, but all I could see was the way Stella flinched when the man she was standing with tried to grab her wrist.

“Is that Matt with Stella?” I asked without thinking. I was interrupting when Henry should have all my attention.

“I believe so,” Henry replied.

What the fuck was he doing, grabbing her? She took a step back and then he stepped toward her, menacing and threatening, and his voice was starting to increase in volume.

I half stood, hovering over my chair. Should I go over there? Stella

wasn't mine to protect, but she didn't deserve anything Matt was dishing out.

I should be closing this deal with Henry, fulfilling a lifetime's ambition but— "Henry, I'm sorry, but please excuse me."

All I could think about was making sure that Matt had hurt Stella for the last time. He didn't deserve her time, her conversation, or anymore of her tears.

I might have walked away from closing a deal I'd been working toward my entire life.

But some things were more important.

I'd never moved so quickly, and my hand was on the small of Stella's back in a second. Two at the most. She gasped as I touched her, and when she looked up at me, I saw a sadness in her eyes that I remembered from the first time we'd ever met.

I glanced at Matt. He'd done that.

I wanted to kill him. But I'd made Stella a promise that I wouldn't even say anything to Matt, not hold him to account or tell him how worthless he was for treating a woman so valuable with such contempt—let alone bury him.

It was a good job that a promise to Stella overrode my desire to give Matt what was coming to him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to speak to my girlfriend," I said, and with that I led Stella out of the room.

Away from the man who'd thrown her aside.

Away from the man who stood between me and the Dawnay building, and the ending I so desperately wanted.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Stella

Even after a run, the man looked beautiful. Beck's glistening face, his heaving chest. It was almost too much. No wonder I'd managed to stay distracted these last few days.

"You look gorgeous," Beck said as he stood at the entrance to the hotel room.

Even the view wasn't enough to distract me from the guilt that still covered me like a fine layer of sweat on a muggy August day in London. "You think you'll see Henry today?" I asked.

Beck shrugged and pulled off his shirt. He'd whisked me out of the restaurant the day before yesterday, making some excuse about needing to speak to me. I'd never been so pleased to see anyone, but at the same time, Beck had been so close to closing the deal. And yesterday Henry had been visiting family and hadn't joined the hike. Beck could have missed his shot.

"I should have sent you back to speak to Henry. I could have waited in the car."

"You said that already. And there was no way I was leaving you."

"Also, did I say thank you?"

He turned to me and smiled. "You did. Many times." He toed off his shoes and headed into the bathroom, keeping the door open.

I could barely keep my hands off Beck on the car ride back to the hotel. At one point along the way, we'd pulled over and I'd crawled onto his lap on the back seat. I don't know what it was, but Beck interrupting Matt and me, walking away from Henry to come to my rescue was . . . I'd never had

anyone do anything like that for me.

“I’d do it again,” he added. “He was lucky I didn’t punch him out, and if I hadn’t made that promise to you, I probably would have. Are you still not going to tell me what he said to you?”

I couldn’t tell him. It was too embarrassing to admit that Matt had said I looked desperate by coming to the wedding. And that I should have realized he was never going to marry me. “You know. He was just trying to justify running off with my best friend.” I tried to dismiss what he’d said but just thinking about his accusations was like pouring vinegar onto a wound.

Had I been desperate? Had I missed the signs? It was true that I never thought Matt or Karen capable of so much deception, of such a lack of loyalty. I thought they loved me. But I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Typical coward. Trying to make you feel bad.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I lied. “I’m more concerned about Henry.” Focusing on the future was my only option now.

All I could do was move on, keep my heart safe, and not make the same mistake again. I had to focus on work. “He might have signed the paperwork if you hadn’t come to save me.”

“Maybe. Although, he seems stuck on keeping the Dawnay name attached to the building in some way.”

I’d been so wrapped up in my own drama, we’d not talked about what he and Henry had spoken about. “In what way?”

“Like a wing or the lobby or something.”

“And that’s a big no no for you, given, your background, I guess.”

He snapped his head around. “Yeah. Exactly.”

“I get that,” I said. He was treating this development as therapy of some kind. Having to keep the Dawnay name as part of it would undermine that in his eyes. But all the same, it seemed a small price to pay. “You have to ask yourself whether you’re prepared to walk away if it’s a sticking point with Henry.”

“I need to shower but come and talk to me,” he said.

I tried to think back to when Matt and I had first been together. Had we ever had conversations in the bathroom? Life was always so busy—I couldn’t remember the last time we’d properly talked.

“You think I’m being an idiot about the name? Am I cutting my nose off to spite my face?”

“I didn’t say that,” I replied.

Beck continued to strip off with the bathroom door open. He was so unselfconscious. We'd only known each other a few weeks, but I knew his body better than I knew my own. That small scar on his jaw that I couldn't see unless I was just a few centimeters away—the result of falling and hitting the rocks on a trip up Snowden. The dimples just above his arse cheeks that were the reason I liked to watch him from bed as he walked naked across the room. The way his hands were twice the size of mine and wrapped around my waist, my hips, my breasts as if they owned them. I'd miss all those things about him.

I'd miss him.

"Yeah but I've gotten to know that little twitch of your mouth and the way you look away—it means you don't agree. Tell me what you think, Stella. I want to hear it."

We hadn't known each other long, but in many ways he seemed to know me better than some of my oldest friends. "It sounds like there might be a bit of nose cutting off."

"I've been known to do it before," he confessed.

"Well, I'm hardly one to talk. Florence had to talk me into coming to this wedding."

"I can understand why you wouldn't want to come. What Matt and Karen did? It's awful."

"And I understand why you don't want the Dawnay name anywhere near your building."

He stepped into the shower and looked at me. "Don't ever let a guy tell you you're not a fucking prize, Stella."

He said it as if he thought I was the best thing ever to happen to any man, and his gaze created a tingle across my skin as if his lips were on mine.

"I'm not sure if that means you're going to accept Henry's condition or not."

He sighed like it was an impossible situation. "What would you do if you were me?"

"Wrong question," I replied. "You want to know what Warren Buffet would do or Jeff Bezos."

"You're telling me not to let sentiment get in the way."

"Actually, I'm not. I think that if your aim is to make the best business deal, then agree to let Henry keep the name. That's what Warren or Jeff would do."

“Of course I want to make the best deal,” he said.

That might be partly true but there were other reasons why he wanted the Dawnay building. “Or you want to lay ghosts to rest,” I replied. “And if that’s the case, then buying that building is never going to fulfil you in the way you need it to if you have to keep the Dawnay name attached to it.”

“So walk away?”

I shook my head. “I’m saying, decide what’s more important—putting the past to bed or getting that building. If this is about your father and Henry insists on keeping the name, then maybe you should walk away.”

Beck got out of the shower, and I padded back to the bedroom and dressed quickly in a Zara knockoff of a Prada skirt and blouse.

“As well as being a prize, you’re right,” Beck said, toweling himself off. “It’s more than a building or a deal. I can’t live with the name being a part of the building in the future. I want to move forward and for so many years, owning that building—having my thumbprint on it and not my father’s—has been the only thing holding me back.”

I knew the feeling about wanting to get on with my life. I couldn’t help but think I’d just shot myself in the foot. If Beck didn’t buy the Dawnay building, where did that leave me? In a crappy job that I hated and a flat I’d shared with Matt.

“Then I guess you have your answer,” I said.

“Maybe,” he replied. “If I can’t convince Henry to drop the name. But it’s worth another shot.”

“Hopefully you’ll get to see him at the ceremony today.”

Beck pulled on his trousers and pulled a shirt from the hanger in the wardrobe.

“And then we’ll be done,” I said. After today I could move on with my life. The Matt chapter of my life that I thought would last the entire book would be over. But with Beck and the Dawnay building still uncertain, I had no idea what would be over the page.

He grabbed his suitcase from behind the door, reached onto the bed for a t-shirt, and pulled it over his head. “Let’s pack,” he said.

“Now?” I glanced at my watch. “We can’t be late for the ceremony.” We could pack later. There was no way I was going to be late to the church and risk having to grab a pew when everyone else was seated and turned to watch me.

“No, let’s go today. Now. I have Henry’s details. I can call him. Email

him.”

My heart started to thunder, excitement and relief mixing in my stomach. Although the thought wasn't vomit-inducing like it had been at the beginning of the week, watching Matt and Karen get married wasn't exactly first on my list of things to do today. “Wouldn't it be better for you to speak to him face-to-face?”

“I think I need to let him stew.” He pulled his clothes from the wardrobe and threw them in the case. “Unless you want to be there for some reason? Closure or something?”

“It's the last place I want to be.”

“So, come on then, get those sexy shoes off and packed.” He grabbed his phone off the bedside table, and I sat like a stone on the mattress. “I'm going to call for the plane, but if you want to stay, we'll stay.”

Did I care if there was a two-person gap at the reception? People would probably say I couldn't face it and they wouldn't be wrong. I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for Beck and the design job. If Beck was offering me a get out of jail free card, why shouldn't I grab it? “Are you sure? You're so close with Henry?”

“I think we both need to escape right now.”

“If you're sure, then—”

“Stella, it's almost as if you're waiting for me to change my mind. You never know—walking away might be the push that Henry needs.” He held the phone up. “Say the word.”

I didn't want to stay here. I didn't want to watch Matt marry Karen. I wanted to be in the air, and on the way back to London. I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to the flat Matt and I had shared or the job I'd taken to pay the mortgage, but I knew being here was worse. “Let's go.”

I jumped up, adrenaline licking at my skin, and began to strip out of my wedding-appropriate outfit as I scanned the room for my jeans. “Are we really doing this? It feels wrong somehow.”

Beck picked up the phone. “Joe, I'm going to need the plane today. We're going to be leaving the hotel in about ten minutes, so we should be at the airfield in half an hour.” Beck hung up and turned to me. “Yes, we're doing this. Finally, you're going to do what's best for you, rather than what's best for Matt, your friends, and even me.” He grinned at me and then pulled me toward him, placing a kiss on the top of my head. “It's about time.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Stella

Out of the back window of the car, I watched the hotel disappear and fade away into the gray, Scottish skies. I had to be sure we had gone. “It’s like I’m leaving my past behind,” I said. “Literally. Figuratively. It’s all back there.”

“Are you okay with that?” Beck asked.

I turned back to face forward in the passenger seat next to Beck. “It’s a relief. To get it done. And to not have to go to the ceremony. I doubt I’ll ever see Matt and Karen again.”

“But you’ll see Florence and Gordy?”

“Sure. Florence has been amazing through all this.”

Beck stayed silent.

“She’s been a great friend,” I added. “I don’t know what I would have done without her.”

He shrugged.

It was weird because I knew Beck well enough to know he wasn’t just disinterested in what I was saying. He was disagreeing with me but trying to hold himself back from saying so.

“You don’t like Florence?”

He tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel. “I don’t like the fact that she’s still friends with Karen after what she did to you.”

I reached for his arm. It was sweet that he seemed invested, but he’d gotten it wrong about Florence. “Florence isn’t friends with Karen.”

“She’s at her wedding. And honestly, I don’t know Gordy very well, but he seems like a nice bloke. I don’t understand why he didn’t put his foot

down and refuse to come.”

I had to push down a giggle. “Put his foot down? I’d like to see him try and tell Florence what to do. But for your information, Florence promised to come to Scotland if I came. She didn’t want me to go through it alone. She wouldn’t have come if I hadn’t needed her here.”

Beck took a long, slow breath. “Good,” he said. “That makes more sense. And Gordy just went along with it?”

“He’ll do anything to make Florence happy. You can stop judging them now. Even though it’s kinda nice that you’re being so protective.”

“The character of a person is important to me. You know that.”

In many ways I knew a lot about Beck, considering the short amount of time we’d spent in each other’s company. But these days I knew better than to assume I knew anyone. After my conversation with Matt, the lack of confidence I had in my own judgement of people was reaching boiling point.

“I don’t understand why you were with Matt for so long, or friends with Karen since you were five. The pair of them deserve each other from what I’ve seen. Neither of them merit a friend like you.”

It was easy to look on as an outsider and see things that weren’t right. But when you were in the middle of them, they were easier to overlook. “No one is ever entirely one hundred percent to blame,” I replied.

We turned onto the main road, Beck revved up the engine and we picked up speed. “If that tool successfully made you feel like him running off with your best friend was somehow your fault—”

“No, it’s not that. More that when you’re in a relationship, the aim is to be happy and that means compromising and accepting you’re not right all the time.”

“And that’s what Matt did?”

I’m not sure I understood Matt’s aims at all, which made me feel all the more stupid. I’d been blindly trundling along, expecting everyone to have good hearts and me to be granted my happily ever after at some point. “They weren’t Matt’s core skills while we were together,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t have good intentions.”

“That’s the point though, isn’t it? You had good intentions and he didn’t give a shit.”

Matt cared about me. At one point. He must have done. “We were happy for a long time.”

“And when you stopped being happy,” he said. “Did you walk away?”

My stomach roiled. I hadn't stopped being happy. Even when he'd ended things, I'd loved him and thought it would work.

I'd been such a fool.

Even with a little distance from Matt, it was clear that our relationship was far from perfect. Looking back, he was controlling and demanding and more than a bit of a snob.

Beck was right. I'd seen what I'd wanted to see—ignored the bad and created the good in our relationship. My rose-tinted glasses had been lasered on.

My fear now was that my twisted vision wasn't limited to Matt and Karen but that I wasn't capable of seeing reality. Was I only seeing the good things about Beck? It seemed real between us; it seemed like he'd do anything for me. But I'd been wrong before.

"I'm not looking back. I'm focused on the future. On the Mayfair project."

"If we get it," Beck said.

"You'll get it."

He grinned and grabbed my hand, linking his fingers through mine. Was this just pretend? "Thank you for your confidence. But I've decided. I want it without the name or not at all."

At that moment, a call came through on the Bluetooth and Henry's name flashed up. He should have been at the ceremony.

"Henry," Beck answered.

"If you've got any sense, you've whisked the lovely Stella away from this ridiculous parade. The dear girl shouldn't have to sit through such a palaver."

"Agreed. We're headed to the airfield now, and we're going to make our way back to London."

"Very good," he said. "Anyway, I called because we didn't finish our conversation back at Fort William."

Beck cleared his throat. "Yes, sorry about that. I—"

"No need to apologize. You did quite the right thing," he replied. "It actually got me thinking about family and loyalty. There have been plenty of Dawnays who haven't displayed the character you did to me in that moment when you intervened in the situation between dear Stella and Matt. In fact, between you and me, the cousin I inherited the building from wasn't the best man I've ever met. I'm thinking that perhaps the Wilde name deserves to be the only one on your development."

I squeezed my hands into fists in the hope it would hold in the squeal of delight pushing to get out.

“I appreciate that.” Beck shot me a grin—it was the look of a man who knew a victory when he won one.

“You said fourteen fifty a square foot?” Henry asked.

“That’s right,” Beck replied.

It seemed like a lot of money, but Beck had said it was fair for the location, and after doing some research I’d worked out Beck could put over a thousand per square foot on that if I did my job properly.

“If you can go to fifteen hundred, then I’ll sign,” Henry said.

“If we get documents executed by Thursday, I can do that price.”

“Then I suggest we light a fire under our lawyers,” Henry said, chuckling. “And you and Stella will come to dinner a week on Saturday to celebrate.”

Beck turned to me and without thinking about it, I nodded enthusiastically. Henry’s agreement couldn’t have come at a more perfect time. I had something to look forward to, to work toward.

“We’d be delighted,” Beck said. “I’ll let you go and get straight on to your lawyers. Enjoy the wedding, sir.”

“You got your building,” I said, beaming at Beck. “I knew you would.”

“And you got your project,” he replied.

“My future.”

He reached across and cupped my face, sweeping his thumb over my cheekbone. “We should celebrate when we get back to London.”

My stomach swooped and slid down to my knees. I’d deliberately not allowed myself to think about Beck and me on the other side of the Scottish border. But we were about an hour away from being back in England.

If he *was* suggesting a date, then I wasn’t sure what to say—Matt had taught me I had to be more careful with my heart.

“That’s the idea of Henry’s dinner,” I replied.

“Yes, but I’d like to celebrate just with you.”

He removed any doubt to what he was saying. My pulse began to thud in my wrists. I wasn’t sure if it was excitement or fear that was the cause. “It’s certainly something to celebrate,” I said.

Beck getting the Dawnay building was something to celebrate.

Standing up to Karen was something to celebrate.

Escaping the wedding was something to celebrate.

There were plenty of good things happening in my life I could raise a

glass to. But doing that with Beck?

Was I brave enough to trust myself? Was it possible for me to see how things really were rather than how I wanted them to be?

The last week with Beck had been wonderful. But the two of us had been living a lie. Just like Matt and I had been doing. At least I was in on the deception with Beck, but it was still not the truth. It was still messy and complicated.

Matt showing me how different reality was to the life I thought I was living had pulled the rug from under me, and I needed to dust myself off and learn to walk again.

“You want to still pretend we’re dating for this dinner with Henry?” I asked. We hadn’t discussed what we were doing. We were pretending to be dating and sleeping together. Did that mean that we were really dating?

Beck shot me a look, his eyes narrowed. “You’re pretending? It didn’t seem that way last night in bed.” A wide grin curled around his lips. “Or this morning in the shower or—”

“Okay, I get it. It’s just, you know, Scotland was . . . Scotland.”

“I don’t know what ‘Scotland was Scotland’ means.”

I didn’t know what I was saying either. The fact was we hadn’t discussed dating in real life. I guess that’s what we were doing now—discussing what happened when we got back to London.

“You want to call it quits when we get back to London?” he asked, his voice a little colder and more distant than it had been just seconds before.

I gnawed at the inside of my cheek. Did I?

I liked Beck. I *really* liked having sex with Beck. And he was funny. And cute when he was serious. And seriously cute when he was in work mode.

He’d rescued me from Matt and suggested we didn’t attend the ceremony today.

Beck seemed like a good guy. But so had Matt.

I needed to figure out if I had some fundamental flaw that only allowed me to see the good things in people.

Florence had pointed out how selfish Matt had been and how I’d given in to him all the time, but I’d never seen it like that.

I needed time to let my focus readjust. Or retrain my instincts or something. I needed to fix the part of me that was broken and didn’t see things how they really were.

What I didn’t want to do was jump from the frying pan into the fire.

My stomach churned as I realized that Beck and I were probably a horrible idea. History showed that my instincts were off. If it felt right, it must be wrong. Surely he would agree when he thought about it. “We’re going to be working together. Maybe it’s not a good idea to be mixing business with . . .” I wasn’t sure what he was suggesting. I was half hoping he’d agree, half hoping he’d talk me around. No doubt he’d talk me into whatever he had in mind. “You know, sex.”

Beck turned away from me and stared straight ahead. “Okay, we’ll keep it professional.”

That was it?

I’d expected him to present a counterargument. That was his MO, right? I’d assumed I’d have to at least put up a fight. I’d seen Beck in action. When he wanted something, he didn’t stop at anything.

Looked like he didn’t want me. Enough.

I guess my judgement wasn’t so wonky after all. My doubts around him were well founded.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Beck

All I'd wanted to do was focus on my work, but since leaving Scotland, it was as if my brain had been dunked in a black fog which I just couldn't find my way out of. It had only been days but it felt like weeks—months.

I drummed my fingers on the black, glossy table, skirting the edge of my pint glass.

"Is that water?" Dexter asked as he arrived, wincing as if I were nursing a pint of battery acid.

"With a wedge of lime. Got a problem with that?" Alcohol was the last thing I needed. I wanted my head to be less fuzzy not more.

He slipped his jacket onto the back of his chair and nodded at the barman. "Where did you develop your mood? A car crash?"

"Fuck off, nothing's wrong with my mood," I snapped.

"Right," he said, leaning back and thanking the barman as they slid a glass of whiskey in front of him.

"You're a tit for paying for this place." I never understood why people paid memberships to get into what was essentially a bar and restaurant. I glanced around Dexter's club—the ceiling was a reflection of the table we were sitting around, and gold streaks shot out from the circle of dark glass like the sun trying to escape an eclipse. It looked like the kind of thing Stella would point out to me. "There are a thousand bars like this in London." That wasn't quite true. This place was nice, but I expected Dexter to be more frugal.

"Okaaay," he replied. "Are you going to tell me why you look like your

dog just died?”

“Nothing wrong with me. I’ve just been waiting for you lot to arrive.” I hadn’t been able to focus in the office, which wasn’t like me, so I’d taken myself off to the gym, then come straight here. I’d been hoping the exercise would clear my head, but nothing was working. All I could think about was Stella. Where was she? What was she doing? What was she thinking about? Who was she with?

“And you’re not flirting with the waitresses, which means you either lost a shitload of money or you didn’t get your own way on something important. Which is it?” he asked.

Jesus, did this guy think he was my therapist? “Neither, Madame Zelda. Stop trying to read my mind or fortune or whatever.”

“So, how was Scotland?”

What was with the twenty questions? “You want me to fill in a questionnaire for you about my life?” I asked.

Dexter burst out laughing. “I take it you have your period.”

“Don’t be a sexist fucker,” I said. I might go. Dexter was irritating me tonight. Everything was irritating me tonight.

“Oh sorry, I forgot you were the bastion of political correctness.”

“Not being a dick isn’t being politically correct—it’s not being a dick.”

Dexter raised his eyebrows. “Fair enough. So, you don’t have your period because you’re not a woman, not that being a woman is a bad thing and having a period must be great, but seriously, mate, what the fuck is the matter with you?”

I slumped back in my chair. “Just got some stuff on my mind, that’s all.”

Over at the hostess’s table, Tristan was chatting up a member of staff. “That guy needs to get laid,” Dexter said.

“Clearly,” I replied as Tristan approached our table.

“Christy,” he said by way of explanation. “Hot, right?”

“Doesn’t mean you have to bang her,” Dexter said, as if he were telling a four-year-old not to go near the fire.

“Doesn’t mean that I *shouldn’t* shag her either.”

Tristan was going through a phase. It was just a phase that had lasted about five years.

“Is it just the three of us tonight?” he said.

“Gabriel might join us later but he’s working late,” Dexter said.

“How was Scotland?” Tristan asked. “Did you get the building?”

I exhaled. It should feel like more of a victory than it did. Perhaps it would be different when the documents were finally signed. “Price is agreed. Survey done. Just waiting for the contracts to catch up.”

“Wow, that’s great news . . . isn’t it?” Tristan said.

“So what?” I barked. Without Stella, the Dawnay building didn’t seem so important.

“His dog died,” Dexter said, trying to explain why my expression didn’t match up to the news that the deal I’d been waiting so long for and working so hard toward was finally about to happen.

“My dog is fine.” I shook my head. What was I talking about? “I don’t have a fucking dog. No one died. No one’s sick. I’m just . . . pre-occupied.”

I didn’t miss the look Tristan shot Dexter, one that said I was teetering on the brink of mental failure. Which I might just be.

“With what?” Tristan asked.

“Just stuff. Work and things. And then Dexter was being a dick and irritating me.”

“Apparently, I’m sexist,” Dexter said.

“That goes without saying,” Tristan said. “But it’s not news.” He took a sip of the drink that had just been put in front of him. Clearly flirting with the hostess hadn’t been just about getting her number. “Scotland worked out. Work’s good. No one’s dog died. How’s Stella?”

Fuck him. I hated Tristan at times. He was a nosey parker. How was he still a member of our circle? “Fine.”

Dexter and Tristan both sucked in a breath at the same time.

“What?” I asked.

“This bad mood is Stella related.” Dexter said.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” If I could just stop thinking about her everything could get back to normal.

“Yup, it’s definitely Stella related. Did she say no to your *very* weak game?” Tristan asked.

“My game isn’t weak. And of course, she didn’t say no.” I groaned inwardly. I’d just given them an in.

“Ahhh,” they both chorused.

“I thought by that hangdog expression it was women trouble,” Tristan said. “Not that I’ve ever seen it on you. This is interesting.”

I didn’t have women trouble. Stella and I weren’t dating. We weren’t even talking.

“You slept with her,” Dexter said. “Then what happened?”

“Nothing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But there’s an *it* that you don’t want to talk about,” Tristan said. He was really getting on my nerves.

“Shut up,” I said.

“You two need to stop it before a fight breaks out,” Dexter said. “But seriously, what happened with Stella? I’ve never seen you like this. You’re defensive and bad-tempered. We’re not laughing at you—we’re laughing with you.”

“I’m laughing at him,” Tristan said. “But you can have Christy’s number if it will help.”

I needed to leave, or Tristan and I were going to end up at the end of each other’s fists. I might be in a bad mood, but he was unnaturally chirpy.

“Shut up, Tristan,” Dexter said.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I just ordered a new car and I’m feeling pretty pleased with myself. I’ll shut up.” He waved his hand over his face and resumed a normal expression. “I was being a dick. Tell us what happened?”

“Nothing’s up. I just . . .” I just wasn’t sure what had gone wrong. “I suggested she and I celebrate getting the Dawnay building, and she didn’t seem that keen. Said it was best to keep it professional. That’s all.” I didn’t get it. We’d had a completely great week. Amazing. Why wouldn’t she want to celebrate? But whatever. I was over it. Not that there was anything to get over.

“You like her, Beck,” Dexter said. “I’m not sure what they’re putting in the air up there in Scotland, but whatever it is has you brooding over a woman.”

“I am not brooding.” I was just irritated.

“You wouldn’t normally care what anyone thought of you, but Stella’s opinion obviously matters,” Dexter said. “If it makes you feel any better, I thought she was great. Gave as good as she got. And she was hot, wasn’t she, Tristan?”

“I’d bang her,” Tristan replied.

“Hey,” I warned. I didn’t like the idea of Tristan thinking of Stella like that.

“That’s not saying a lot coming from Tristan—it would mean more if he wouldn’t bang her,” Dexter said.

“Well, the point is moot,” I replied. “Even if I did like her, which I’m not

saying I do, we haven't spoken since we got back."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "Persistence pays off. Look at me and Christy. I've been trying to get her number for three months. You just gotta work at it."

"I don't work at getting women," I replied. I didn't work at having people like me. Not for anyone. And especially not Stella. She was too used to just going along with what other people wanted. She needed to figure out what made her happy.

"Sometimes it's worth it," Dexter said. "You don't want to regret anything. And from your mood, it seems like Stella is important."

"I liked her. That's all." I thought she'd liked me too. But, I guess that's how it went. It just needled. I'd thought we were on the same page.

"That's all?" Tristan asked. "I've never heard you say you like a woman. I rarely hear you *mention* a woman."

Tristan was exaggerating. As usual.

"I just don't get it. We were having a great time. I read the situation all wrong."

"From what you told me on the phone from Scotland, her very serious boyfriend married her best friend. The girl's going to assume that everyone's trying to screw her over for a while. That kind of stuff messes you up."

I took in a deep breath and tried to process what Dexter had said. I wouldn't describe Stella as messed up, but he had a point. It can't have been easy for her to watch Matt and Karen play the happy couple, even if Matt seemed like a bit of a cock. "Yeah well, I get that." She must have been concerned that I couldn't be trusted. "But I'm not wasting my energy on a woman who was happy to walk away."

"She'll come around. Stella's a sensible girl," Dexter said.

"Funny, too," Tristan said. "If you're going to fuck things up with her, then can you let me have her number?"

Christ, Tristan was annoying me tonight. "What's the matter with you? You can't find your own woman, so you have to try for mine?"

He fixed me with a stare. "Your woman? Sounds serious. Sort it out. Because if it's not me, some other guy will swoop in and this mood of yours will be permanent."

A cold shiver ran through my body. Tristan was right—some other guy would swoop in. Stella was a fucking prize. The same swirl of dread that I had when I thought I was going to have to give up the Mayfair project

gathered in my stomach, except this time it was sharper, more pressing and urgent.

“Yeah, well there’s nothing to be done. She doesn’t want me. So, that’s the end of it.”

The corner turned up on Dexter’s mouth. “She’s probably afraid. It won’t be that she doesn’t want you. You get that, right?”

It was Dexter who didn’t get it. She *didn’t* want me. There might be a reason, but it all boiled down to the same thing.

Dexter drained his whiskey. “Tristan, will you go and get me another drink?”

“It’s waitress service. And for your information, I’m not the waitress,” he replied, all the while his gaze fixed on his phone.

Dexter sighed. “Okay, will you fuck off for a few minutes so I can talk to Beck privately?”

Tristan looked up and grinned. “You just had to say.” He slid out of the booth and inevitably headed toward Christy.

I sat back, ready for whatever it was that Dexter was about to tell me. He’d been through a lot in the last few years. Losing his parents. The shit his brother put him through. Building his business from scratch. But he always kept a clear head, and I admired him for it. He never for a moment doubted his destiny.

“I don’t want to go all deep and shit on you,” he said. “But have you considered that you don’t get close to people because of what happened with your biological father?” It was a testament to how well Dexter knew me that he didn’t refer to the man who’d gotten my mother pregnant as my dad or ever just my father. He knew me better than that.

“You think I don’t get close to people because I never knew my biological father?”

“You experienced a fundamental rejection from the moment you were born and it’s bound to take its toll.”

“I’m not as naïve as you think I am,” I said. “It’s definitely affected me. I’ve just spent God knows how long chasing down the Dawnay property.”

“I’d hate to see that be the reason you lose someone who could make you happy,” he said.

I wasn’t sure what Dexter was trying to say but he had my attention.

“Your biological father was an arsehole,” he continued.

“Clearly,” I replied. “But what’s that got to do with Stella?”

“Stella is running because she’s scared. Not because she’s an asshole.”

“I don’t think she’s an asshole.” I thought she was wonderful. Special. All those things they wrote about in poetry and love songs. I felt them all when I looked at Stella.

“Sometimes you have to chase after the things that are important.”

Stella had nothing to be afraid of with me. She knew that. Dexter had this wrong. “She’s not afraid of me.”

“No, I bet she’s afraid of being hurt. Look what she went through. This isn’t about her not wanting you, it’s about her not wanting to let *anyone* in.”

Dexter had a point. I could definitely see that Stella would be reticent about getting involved with someone again after Matt, but I wasn’t proposing or suggesting we move in together. “I just suggested a drink. If she’s not interested, then—”

“Mate, she’s interested. I saw it when she was in the pub with us that night.”

“In the pub? We hardly knew each other then.”

“Trust me. I know what a woman looks like when she’s into a guy. And you were taken with her as well. There was something about the two of you. You just fit together.”

Dexter described exactly how I felt—it was like we were two sides of the same coin. But the feeling clearly wasn’t mutual. I shrugged. “You know what I’m like. I’m not a good boyfriend anyway.”

“You know what I’m going to say to that,” he warned. “You’re not a good boyfriend because you don’t care about the women you spend time with.”

“So, if your theories are correct, if Stella had been the right woman, I’d have chased after her.”

“No, you’d be sitting in the pub, nursing a pint of water, brooding because you got knocked back and it’s the first time it’s ever happened.”

I picked up my pint, hoping he’d continue but not wanting to ask him to explain further.

“I’ve never seen you in a bad mood because a woman turned down an invitation to dinner or drinks or whatever.”

I couldn’t remember it ever happening.

“It’s bound to have happened before, but I bet you don’t remember because you never gave a shit before. But with Stella, it’s different. I can tell.”

I didn't want to say he was right, but Dexter was right—she was different. Stella seemed to get me. Know me. Not just because she knew my mother's occupation and how I liked my steak—she knew my soul. “I can't make her date me, Dexter. She said no.”

“She doesn't trust herself. Doesn't trust you. You need to woo her. Keep showing her what a good man you are, and she'll come around.”

“I shouldn't have to convince someone to date me.” I'd seen how Stella could go along with things to make other people happy. I wanted her to really want me. To actively choose to be with me. I didn't want to have to persuade her.

“This isn't about how she feels about you. It's all about how she feels about the world. Be the guy who makes the world safe for her. If Stella's the woman for you, then it's your job to give her what she needs. And she needs to know she's safe with you. She needs to understand you're not going to fuck her over. And take it from me, every woman needs to know that she's worth fighting for.”

She definitely deserved all of those things.

“If she's as important to you as I think she is,” Dexter continued. “Don't let anything stand in your way. The man who sired you turned his back on you, but that's not what Stella is doing. She's not rejecting you—she's protecting herself.”

I let Dexter's words settle. When something was important to me, I worked to get what I wanted, to prove that I was worthy. I tapped the edge of my pint glass. But I hadn't fought for Stella. Hadn't even stated my case. Dexter was right—it was because I didn't want to risk being rejected. Again.

I knew I didn't want to lose someone as important as Stella was, just because *I* was scared. I wasn't going to let my past dictate my future. Henry selling me the Dawnay building was the end of that chapter in my life.

And Stella London was in my future. Of that I was certain.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Stella

I was going to show Beck Wilde. The interiors of the Mayfair project were going to be the talk of London. They would win awards and have people whispering at parties about how fabulous they were. I just needed to be inspired, find suppliers, and hunt down things that had never been seen in London before.

“That’s the third time you’ve yawned in the last seven minutes,” Florence said, tipping her head to the side and staring at the underside of a table. The cute interiors shop just off Marylebone High Street was one of my favorites. It had a mixture of antiques and new pieces—furniture, art, vases, pots, rugs. It was like visiting an overstuffed London mansion owned by someone who had great taste but not enough space. “Why are you so tired? Has Beck been keeping you up?”

“I think I’m going to have to make a few trips abroad,” I said, swerving around her questions. I’d taken the week off in Scotland so there was no way my dragon of a boss would let me take more holiday. My job was next on my to-do list—after *forget about Beck* and before *sort my life out*.

“For what? With Beck?”

“For suppliers.” I wished she’d stop bringing him up. “Unless I go for an entirely British interior. Make it a feature that everything has been crafted by artisans in this country. It could be a selling point.” But would it be luxurious enough? I wanted some kind of theme other than opulence and luxury. I needed to find an edge. I was going to do whatever it took to impress the hell out of Beck. Maybe then he’d realize what he’d let slip through his fingers.

“It feels like you’ve got your mojo back a little,” Florence said. “Do you think you got some closure last week?”

I flopped down on a green damask settee. “I’m not sure if closure is the way to describe it.” Beck being there had pulled my focus. He’d been a complete distraction.

“It does seem like you’ve moved on. Hopefully, you can get your design business back up and running, leave that recruitment consultancy, and forget about Matt and Karen. Especially now you’re seeing someone else.”

“I’m not seeing someone else,” I said. “Beck and I . . . It’s nothing. And now we’re back in London, so . . .”

“What?” Florence asked, finally pulling herself away from the Chinese basin she’d been eyeing up and joining me on the settee. “What happened? You both seemed so into each other.”

I’d been into him. Too into him. I’d gotten so caught up in it—the sex, the way he held my hand as if he wouldn’t let go for anything. The way he looked at me when he thought I wasn’t looking. We’d been fast-forwarded into the honeymoon stages of a relationship and all of a sudden we were home and our relationship had been annulled. “I guess we put on a good show.”

She nudged me. “Come on, we both know it was more than that. What happened?”

“I’ve just learned that I’m way too trusting. I’ve got to toughen up. Assume the worst. See things how they are and not how I want them to be.” I stood and started scanning the room for more inspiration.

“Stella, what on earth went wrong?”

“Nothing. But Beck—I barely knew him. And one thing’s for certain. I’m not jumping from the frying pan into the fire.”

“No, there should be no jumping into any fires. Did he end things between you?”

“Things? There were no things to end. It was just casual—something to pass the time.”

“So he didn’t bring up seeing you again in London?” she asked.

“Kind of. I mean, hardly.” I swallowed, trying to get rid of the disappointment I’d felt when he hadn’t even tried to convince me we could combine the professional and the personal.

“So he did?” she asked.

“He said something about celebrating him getting the building.”

“Right,” Florence said. “And what did you say?”

“Nothing much. He didn’t seem too bothered. I said something about how because we’d be working together, we should be professional.”

“He asked to see you again and you said no.” Florence rolled her eyes and pushed herself up from the settee.

“No. This wasn’t me. I . . . When Beck wants something, he goes for it. Fights for it. And I just wasn’t ultra-enthusiastic about his idea of a celebration, and he agreed and went cold. He clearly wasn’t that bothered. I gave him an easy out.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “He seemed pretty smitten to me.”

“Yeah, well I thought Matt was smitten.” I shrugged. “People can’t be trusted. No, wait—*men* can’t be trusted.”

When she didn’t respond, I glanced over at her. Her nose wrinkled like someone was making her sniff sour milk. “We’re friends, right? And friends tell each other when they’re being idiots, agreed?”

My stomach sank to my knees.

“Matt couldn’t be trusted. He was an asshole. Doesn’t mean Beck will be. Keep Matt behind you. Don’t let him ruin your future. Don’t let him take what you and Beck have.”

My heart spluttered in that same way it did when I thought I’d fucked up at work or when I’d inadvertently made a friend cry. “Wait, no,” I said. This wasn’t me. “Beck didn’t want me. It was obvious. I might not have jumped at his idea of a celebration, but he didn’t seem bothered. Not at all. I know what he looks like when he’s determined he wants something.”

“You’ve seen what he looks like when he wants to buy a building,” Florence said. “Not when he’s asking a woman on a date. The biggest egos are the ones most easily crushed.”

The idea that I’d crushed Beck’s ego was ludicrous. “I’m sure he has plenty of women willing to kiss him and make him feel better.”

“Maybe not the one he wants, though,” she replied.

I folded my arms and headed over to the window. I needed to think—get my head straight.

“I don’t want to make the same mistake again,” I said as Florence came up beside me. “I don’t want to be the fool who thinks her boyfriend’s in love with her and is the last to know I’m not the person he wants to marry.”

“You weren’t the last person to know. Everyone thought you and Matt would get married.”

“I didn’t want to read the signs wrong—think Beck was into me and then figure out it was just about sex. I need to be moving on, not having history repeat itself.”

“I get it. When Beck came along . . . You were still—”

“Reeling. From shock, betrayal, pain. I can’t go through it again. It’s time to move on,” I said, pulling back and nodding resolutely.

“I think that sounds perfect. And having seen you two together last week, I’d say Beck Wilde is the man to move on with.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just because I’m moving on doesn’t mean I have to jump the first guy who comes along.”

“Agreed. But don’t run away from a guy who might just be perfect for you because you’re scared. It’s understandable that you’re suspicious of him, but if you like him, you should give him a chance.”

“And what? Wait until he hurts me? Matt was right, looking back, there were signs he wasn’t thinking long term with me. I mean, why in the hell did he talk about marriage so much but always say it wasn’t the right time? I wasn’t even putting pressure on him to marry me and he always—”

“Don’t torture yourself by looking back. Just because you didn’t spot any so-called signs doesn’t mean you have joint culpability.”

“Matt thought it was more than joint. He thought the entire thing was my fault.”

“Well of course he did. He’s a spoiled, selfish child who doesn’t want to have to be accountable for his own actions.”

“But if I hadn’t been so clueless, I could have avoided being hurt.”

She tilted her head, challenging me without saying a word.

“Okay, maybe I was always going to get hurt,” I said. “But at least I wouldn’t have felt so freaking stupid.”

“I get that. But the only way to not risk being hurt is not to fall in love again. Beck, or whoever it is, won’t come with a cast-iron guarantee.”

“True,” I replied. “But at the same time, if the warning bells go off—”

“Your warning bells are on a hair-trigger at the moment.”

Maybe she was right. Perhaps I’d overreacted, but the fact was Beck wasn’t tearing down my front door, telling me how desperate he was to be with me.

“I want a man who really wants me. Who sees me as a prize. A guy who wants to convince me that we should be together.”

“Do you feel that way about Beck? Do you really want *him*? See *him* as a

prize? It's not just up to Beck. You need to decide what you want, and it can't just be someone who likes you. I swear, you never asked *yourself* if you were happy when you were with Matt. You just carried on because that's what he wanted. You're always so focused on everyone else, you never stop to ask yourself what *you* want."

It wasn't the first time someone had described our relationship along those lines. "I did love Matt," I said. "I would have left him if I hadn't."

"Really?" she asked. "Or were you just used to him, didn't know any better and making the best of it?"

"I wanted to marry him," I said. I wouldn't have stayed with someone for seven years making the best of it. I'd thought we had a future together.

"You wanted to be married to him or you thought that's what was next?"

"I loved him, Florence."

She sighed. "I know I'm being harsh. I just want you to be happy. The next man in your life should be so special you can't live without him. I don't want you ending up with someone just because they pick you."

Maybe Matt and I were no Anthony and Cleopatra, but I was happy. I took a breath, thinking back, trying to remember what being with Matt had been like. It was only months we'd been apart, but the memories were so hazy now. I had been happy but there was something missing. Being with Beck had showed me that. Beck listened to me, trusted me, took my advice. And I believed in him and thought he felt the same.

"There were things that weren't right with Matt. And I probably did just go along with things. I wanted to make him happy."

"But what will make *you* happy, Stella?" she asked.

I tried to hold back a grin as I thought about Beck slowing down in the rain for me, holding my hand, whisking me away from Matt but not making a scene because he'd promised not to. And then that body and the things that it could do to *my* body. "I do like him," I said in a small voice.

"Beck?" she asked.

"I just don't understand why he wasn't more persistent," I said. "And although I like him, want him, think he could make me happy—I can't be with a man who doesn't want me enough to fight for me."

"I get it. But something tells me that Beck's relationships have been all about his dick up until you. He's probably as confused as you are. Maybe you need to let him know you're ready to be fought for."

"Maybe," I replied. Now that I'd let myself think about him, I couldn't

wait to see him.

“Weren’t you meant to have dinner with Karen’s godfather?” she asked me.

I nodded. That was this Saturday. Just two days away.

“Maybe that’s a good time to let him know.”

“Let him know what?” I asked.

“That you’re ready. To be fought for.”

Maybe I’d been too quick to label our relationship a holiday romance, as something that couldn’t be real. Because it felt more than real to me. I’d tried to convince myself I wasn’t the right woman for him, but the longer I spent without him, the more I couldn’t shake the feeling he was who I was meant to be with.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Stella

As I knocked on my boss's door, I couldn't decide if I was the world's biggest idiot or just a fool pursuing my dreams.

"What is it?" she barked.

I opened the door.

"What now, Stella? I have a lot to get through and unless you've made this month's target, so do you."

At least she hadn't suddenly become pleasant or I might have felt a little bad. I wondered whether she was always a bitch or if this awful job had made her that way.

"I won't take up much of your time. I just wanted to hand you this in person." The nerves in my stomach sloshed as I placed the sealed envelope on her desk. I was doing the right thing—I knew it. It was time to take a leap of faith.

"What is this?" she asked, as if I'd just delivered up a turd on a spade.

"My resignation. Let me know if you want me to work my notice." Instantly it was as if someone had tied balloons to my body and I was ten tons lighter. I turned and headed out.

"Your resignation? What the hell are you talking about?"

At the door I turned and grinned. "I'm leaving." I wasn't a recruitment consultant. Not in my heart.

"Who are you going to? Whitman and Jones? They are complete bastards to work—"

"I haven't got a job to go to. I'm going to concentrate on establishing my

own design business.”

“No job?” She rose to her feet and leaned across her desk. If I were a little closer, I might be worried she’d lunge at me. “Haven’t you got bills to pay?”

Paying the mortgage wasn’t enough anymore—I wanted to be happy.

“I’m selling my place.” I didn’t want to be in the flat that Matt and I had moved into together, surrounded by broken promises and bloody awful taste. “In this market, the agent said they’d have a buyer for me by the end of the week.” I was planning to use the equity in the flat to tide me over until my business got up and running. If it took longer than my money lasted, I’d get a part-time job—one that didn’t consume my soul.

“Well, good luck to you,” she spat as if she was wishing a tropical disease on me rather than luck. “Clear your desk. I don’t want to see you in the office again.”

My grin hadn’t faded one bit as I headed out, my balloons leading the way.

I was free. And at the start of a new life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Stella

I rotated my ankle, looking at my new shoes from every angle. The red satin straps hugged my foot and perfectly matched my nail polish. They were the highest heels I'd ever seen and beyond sexy. If these heels didn't hint that I was ready to be fought for, then nothing would.

I figured Florence was right—I was guarded and still a little bruised, so Beck needed to know I was ready. For him. Because I was. He might not be able to give me what I needed, but I owed it to myself to find out.

I'd decided I'd lay my cards on the table, tell him how I felt and what I needed from him. He'd have to be all in or all out. I wasn't going to just be one of a pack of girls he was dating. Beck might say no, but I knew I couldn't date him knowing he wasn't as committed to me as I was to him.

I needed a man who wanted me and no one else. If I was giving away my heart, I wanted another in return.

The door buzzed and my breath caught. This was it. I'd missed him. The echo of his absence had been getting louder. Knowing he was on the other side of the door was like the tide had rushed in and filled up my heart.

I hitched up my bra—off the shoulder was the perfect blend of demure and sexy but strapless bras and I would never be friends—and turned to the side to check that the bottom of my long, black dress wasn't stuck in my knickers, then grabbed my clutch and headed out.

A wave of heat chased up my body as I answered the door and came eye to eye with Beck.

Even in a few days his hair seemed to have grown, and I wanted to push

my fingers through it so I could see his pretty eyes more clearly.

“Hi,” I said, my pulse vibrating across my skin.

His gaze didn’t leave my face. “You look beautiful.”

Perhaps I didn’t need to spend so much time on the dress, shoes, or perfect shade of nail polish.

“You too,” I replied, trying to resist the urge to slide my hands up his chest and lay my cheek against his heart.

“Are you ready?” he asked, knocking me out of my own head.

I nodded, and he slid his hand into mine and squeezed just like we were back in Scotland. I bit down on my bottom lip as we headed to the car.

“We should talk,” he said as he got into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

“Talk?” I asked as if that wasn’t exactly what I’d been about to suggest.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I have things I need to say. A lot of things, actually.”

“Me too.”

He shot me a glance.

Anticipation and impatience tickled at my fingertips.

“We’ll discuss everything later,” he said. “But first we’ll have dinner.”

“This is just Henry and us, right?” I asked. “You’d tell me if it were a welcome back from honeymoon party for Karen and Matt, right?”

“No, I would have declined the invitation.”

Beck didn’t look at me, just pinched his eyebrows together, making his frown sterner.

“I never should have been invited to the wedding—they should have been too ashamed, and they should have been worried I’d turn up and burn the place to the ground. Not that I ever would, but I shouldn’t have been so predictably polite about it. You know what I mean?”

“I do,” he said, his expression neutral as he navigated the heavy traffic.

“I’m done with being polite to people who hurt me.” I exhaled as I stared out of the window. London had so many amazing things to offer. Life had so much to grab. I wasn’t willing to sit by anymore. “Do you mind if we turn the air conditioning down and open the window?”

“Not at all,” he said, pressing a button on the steering wheel. The fans stopped whirring and the windows opened.

“That’s better,” I said.

He glanced at me and grinned as if he knew something I didn’t.

“What?” I asked, wanting to be in on the secret, too.

“Nothing,” he replied. “Later.”

“We’re going to talk about me wanting the window open later?”

He paused as if he was considering whether he was going to elaborate. He nodded. “Later. Let’s do dinner. Then after that, our deal is done.”

Later felt like a long way away.

We passed endless streets of wrought-iron railings. Gazing out the window, I wanted to get behind them and discover what was inside. I couldn’t wait to get back to designing. To sourcing materials, researching suppliers. “I resigned this week,” I announced as we continued to drive toward Henry’s townhouse.

“Permanently?” he asked.

“Yeah. Handed my notice in on Tuesday.”

“That’s amazing, Stella. How do you feel?”

Warmth settled in my belly at his enthusiasm. “Nervous but relieved, I think. I don’t have many savings, but the flat is on the market and there are five viewings set up for this weekend. I’m hoping I can use the equity to live while I’m getting back on my feet.”

“You’re going to focus solely on interior design?”

“Absolutely. I don’t know how I stayed doing recruitment for as long as I did.”

“So you’re figuring out what you want and going for it,” he said, almost to himself. “Good for you.”

With every word I’d spoken, Beck’s grin got bigger and bigger. Was he just happy for me? Was that how this worked? I wanted to dip inside his brain and figure out what he was thinking. Was he seeing us as colleagues, friends, boss and employee? Or did he want me to join his little black book of women that he leafed through whenever he wanted company?

I didn’t like any of those options.

“I know you said later, Beck. But—”

“Here we are,” he said, pulling into a gated driveway. “They must have been expecting us.”

“Can we just have five minutes before we go in?”

“Let’s get this Henry thing done. And then everything after that’s real. If it hasn’t been already.”

Before I could ask him what he meant, he’d switched the engine off and climbed out of the car.

Everything after this dinner was real? How much had he been pretending?

Later better bloody hurry up.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Beck

I'd had the builders work overnight to make sure everything was ready. I'd never had to talk about my feelings, and I wasn't convinced that me *just* talking was going to change her mind. I wanted something tangible I could show Stella—to demonstrate how I felt.

Stella was a once-in-a-lifetime woman and this was my one chance to convince her I was the man for her. I had to get it right.

"Dinner was nice," Stella said from the passenger seat. "Henry's so charming." I was so on edge, so amped up over what I was going to say that I'd almost forgotten she was next to me.

"Yes. Nice."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I wasn't sure I was. My palms were sweaty. I couldn't sit still. I thought I'd wanted Henry's signature on the contract for the Dawnay building badly, but it didn't compare to the need that coursed through me knowing Stella wasn't mine. "Fine," I replied. I'd feel better when we got to my office and I showed her what I'd done.

"You're heading east," she said. "I can get the tube home if—"

"I'll take you. Just need to pick up something from the office." *Wooing* women, as Dexter put it, wasn't something I was practiced in. I'd never had to convince a woman to give me a chance. Never had to explain how I felt. And now, without any experience, I had my one shot.

I'd make it work. I had to.

I drew up outside my building.

“The City’s always so quiet at the weekend,” she said, glancing around. The streetlights highlighted her cheekbones and her full, soft lips. It had been too long since I’d been able to properly touch her.

“Will you come up?” I asked.

“To your office?” She raised her eyebrows as if she didn’t understand, but without further questions, she unclicked her seatbelt and opened the door. That was the thing with Stella—yes, her ex had left her mistrustful, but underneath that, when the people unworthy of her were cleaned away, there was an open, beautiful woman who would do anything to please someone she cared about. She just needed the right man to care about.

I took her hand as I joined her on the pavement, and she tipped her head back and smiled.

“We are due a conversation,” she said. “I have things I need to say and you said you did, too.”

I led her through the sliding doors and inside toward the lifts.

“You’re right,” I replied. “I’d like to go first if you don’t mind.”

She nodded, and I squeezed her hand, silently thanking her for her patience.

“It seems like an age since I was last here,” she said as the lift doors opened onto my office floor.

It felt like a different lifetime to me. I led her toward the glass wall with the view of St. Paul’s.

“It looks great lit up at night,” she said, gazing up at the cathedral that had stood there for nearly four hundred years. “Did you know that in order to get such an audacious design built, Sir Christopher Wren pretended he was building a more modest church and then he whipped off the scaffolds and surprised everyone?”

I grinned. Perhaps subconsciously I’d taken inspiration from the architect of St. Paul’s. I’d gotten Stella up to my office under false pretenses. “Is that right? There must be something in the air around here,” I replied.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Without answering her, I headed away from my office to the other side of the floor and came to a standstill outside the second glass office on the floor that I’d just had created.

“What?” Stella asked.

I nodded toward the pink neon sign behind the desk. “I think your new business needs an office.”

She stepped closer and peered inside, her nose almost pressed up against the glass.

“We can go in—I kinda own the building.” I pulled open the door and led her inside.

“I don’t get it. The sign says London Designs.” She let my hand drop and made her way toward the desk.

Jesus, I knew I’d be bad at this. “Yeah. I didn’t know how else to—I wanted to show you how—I need you to know . . .”

Bollocks. Dexter said I had charm, but it had all escaped me now.

“Stella, I know you’re worried about us working together and mixing business with pleasure—but we’ve done that from the start. And we do it so well together.”

“I don’t get it. You want me to work from your office?” she asked.

“I want us to be partners.”

“Business partners?” she asked.

“No.” Christ. How could I be so bad at this? “When we made our deal, I had no idea that pretending to be your boyfriend would result in what we have—what I feel for you. It might have started off as pretend but what I feel for you is as real as it gets.”

She blushed and leaned against the desk I hoped she would accept as hers. My heartbeat thumped in my chest like a clenched fist pounding on a door, waiting for her response.

She didn’t speak. Had it been enough?

“If you still have to work through your feelings for Matt, I’m prepared to be patient. To win you over. To make you see that he never deserved you. If you have doubts about us being able to work and be together then I’ll erase them for you. Give me a chance and I’ll prove to you how much I’m in love with you.”

Stella gasped as the strength of my feelings hit me like a fist to my throat. I loved her.

She was all I wanted.

She stepped toward me. Close enough for me to touch her but somehow, I held back. I wanted to hear clearly, and I wasn’t sure I could concentrate if I was touching her.

“I don’t have feelings for Matt that I need to work through. And yes, I’m a little nervous about working together if we’re in a relationship. But really, most of all, I’m scared.”

“Of me?”

She pressed her hand to my chest and I relaxed instantly. Her warmth was like coming home—it was belonging. Wherever she was, I was meant to be.

“I’m terrified of being hurt,” she replied. “Of being made a fool of. But most of all I’m afraid of how I feel about you. It’s so powerful that even after a few weeks, I know you could devastate me forever. You’re capable of hurting me far more than Matt ever could have because of what I feel for you. I wouldn’t be able to live through you breaking my heart.”

I slid my hands around her waist. “You won’t ever have to.”

“But after Scotland, you didn’t seem bothered if we saw each other again—I said about us working together and you sort of shrugged as if it didn’t matter.”

“Stella, I was floored. I’d assumed that things would continue between us and when you seemed so unsure, I was on the back foot. Unprepared.”

She nodded, fiddling with the button on my shirt. “I thought you’d convince me. I’d seen you when you want something, and you gave in so easily I thought I wasn’t important. And after what’s happened—I need to be important to someone.”

Of course she needed that—deserved it. She needed me to have fought for her—and I hadn’t. I just hoped it wasn’t too late. “No one’s ever been *more* important to me,” I said.

She looked up at me as if she was trying to gauge if I was telling the truth.

A thousand words clambered up my throat, fighting to get out. “It’s why I brought you here,” I said. “I want us to be together—whether we’re at home or in the office. I want you to do what you love—to be happy—and if I can help then I’ll do whatever I can. I want to support you and your business.”

She glanced around. “Twenty-four hours a day?” She giggled, and it was such a delicious sound, I knew I’d be working to hear it as often as I could for as long as I lived.

“You don’t realize how different you are for me. I’ve never felt . . . The idea of losing you causes me actual, physical pain. I didn’t realize that was a thing, but I’ve been walking around with a tightness in my jaw and a headache that won’t go away but disappeared the moment I laid eyes on you tonight.” She reached up for my face. “I want to wake up with you every morning, not just when we’re in some castle in Scotland. I want us to work together so we don’t have to spend the day apart. We can talk all day. Discuss

business projects. Jesus, I want to know what color underwear you're wearing every morning and why you're pissed off after a phone call.

"I want it all.

"I want to love you. If you'll let me."

I took a breath. It was all I had. I just hoped it was enough.

She paused and it was as if every nanosecond was strung out and had become an hour. Finally she spoke. "Being with you in Scotland shifted things for me," she said. "I came back, and I knew what I wanted. I handed my notice in, put the flat on the market—I just knew."

"And do you know about us?" I asked, impatient as ever. But she was so resolute about everything, why hadn't she reached out? I'd not heard from her at all since Scotland.

"That's the final piece of the puzzle. You say you want me, and I know I want you. I came here to give you a speech about how I wasn't prepared to be just some girl you're dating."

"You'll never be just some girl I'm dating. You're the woman I want to spend every waking hour with, want to tell every thought in my head to. You're the only person I'll take sartorial advice from and the only human being on this planet I'd let share my office. You'll never be some girl. You're my woman. Fuck Matt, fuck every other man on the planet."

She placed her finger over my lips. "I need to be clear with you now—I was hurt by what Matt did. Devastated even. But he never made me feel like you do. I feel strong, not weak, with you, like my opinion matters, like I'm smart and sexy and cared for when I'm with you. Don't ever compare yourself to anyone and especially not Matt."

The tension in my muscles eased. I'd needed to hear that from her more than I'd let myself believe. For me it was simple—I'd never had a relationship with a woman worth mentioning—but she'd thought she would spend the rest of her life with Matt. I hated him for having that part of her before I could, but I also wanted to shake the prick's hand for being stupid enough to let her go. Because that meant I got her.

"You're incomparable to anyone," I said.

"So, we're doing this?" she asked.

I chuckled. "We are. But you might need to use your pumice stone on me as we go on our journey. I have some rough edges and I'm pretty sure I'm going to fuck up left and right. You'll have to tell me."

"Oh, I will, don't worry."

I cupped her face in my hands. “I know you will.” And I’d enjoy every second of her setting me straight and explaining exactly how I should love her.

I’d love her any way she needed and every way I could.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Beck

I slid my hands up her thighs, taking her skirt with me. “You know what this calls for.”

“I know you’re trying to get into my knickers,” she replied leaning back on the desk and opening her legs.

I was trying. And I wasn’t hearing any complaints.

“But I don’t know what occasion you’re referring to.”

“You mean apart from the fact I just told you I loved you and you apparently love me back, apart from the fact we’re alone for the first time in days, and apart from the fact I’ve dreamt about the feel of your skin under my fingertips every night since we left Scotland?”

She grinned in response. This woman’s smile had the power to end me. I felt it deep in my gut—like I needed it to function. I’d never stop yearning for, working for, dreaming of it.

“Apart from all those things,” she said, tipping her head back as I pressed more and more urgent kisses up her throat.

“We have to christen your new office. That way, every meeting, every telephone call, every thought you have in here, will have me as a backdrop.”

I started to unbutton her blouse but she stopped me. “Beck, the whole of London can see us.”

“Not unless they’re standing on the dome of St Paul’s—” She went to interrupt me but my amusement must have shown on my face and she stopped. “Before you say something about people watching from the Golden Gallery or the Stone Gallery—the place is closed.”

I finished unbuttoning her blouse. “And if there was some private function or an interloper, hidden away after closing . . .” I dipped and placed a kiss between her breasts. “Then I think they deserve a show.”

I reached up between her legs, pulled off her knickers, and she gasped as I trailed my fingers across her pussy. “Wow, you’re sensitive.”

“Don’t tease me,” she pleaded. “Not tonight.”

I plunged two fingers deep into her and she groaned. “I promise. There will be no teasing.”

Not teasing exactly. But the things for which you work hardest, taste the sweetest.

I withdrew my hand and straightened out, tasting her as I licked my fingers clean. “Just like honey,” I said.

She sat up, reaching for my belt, and I took a step back, took off my jacket, and hung it on the coat stand behind the door.

“Beck,” she implored.

I took a breath. I didn’t need to rush. We had the rest of our lives to do this—for me to . . .

Make her beg.

Make her come.

Make her happy.

I was going to savor every moment.

Undoing the cufflinks on my shirt, I slid them onto a glass side table and rolled up my sleeves. Stella’s groan suggested to me that, despite her protestations, she liked a little bit of torture.

She was my perfect woman in every way.

“You’re so impatient. What *am* I going to do with you?” I asked.

“Anything you like,” she replied.

Like I said—my *perfect* woman.

I didn’t reply and just stood watching her, watching her beautiful bare pussy, ripe and ready for my fingers, lips, and cock. She groaned and reached to touch herself.

In a flash, I had circled her wrist with my fingers. “Not unless you ask me first. That’s mine to play with.”

I took her hand and placed it over my fabric-covered cock. “And this is yours.”

She fumbled to undo my zip and then wrapped her fingers around it.

So fucking eager.

So fucking perfect.

And mine.

I gritted my teeth, but I couldn't resist and I pushed into her hand. Fuck, even her fingers were better than the best I'd ever had until Stella.

"I don't think you'd be able to hold back," she said. "Even if you wanted to."

"You want to test that theory?" I asked, stepping away from her.

She shook her head, panic slicing across her face.

"Yeah, I didn't think so." I pushed her down onto her desk, one side of her lit up by the streetlights, the other shadowed but all beautiful.

I spread her knees apart, bending to inspect her pussy. Talk about beautiful—all curves, contours, and softness but hot and needy at the same time. And it belonged to me now.

She squirmed under my inspection, not out of embarrassment but desire. Fuck, how did I get so lucky? "Please, Beck."

She was right. I couldn't hold back—didn't want to. I pressed the head of my cock at her entrance and tried not to explode at the searing heat of her. Fuck, I'd missed this. Missed us. Missed feeling that I had everything I needed.

It was only when she left that I realized she was so much more than I could ever have imagined.

She was everything.

I took a deep breath and slid into her, watching her as she watched me. And it was just as I remembered and more. Being as close to another person as it's possible to be seemed to take on meaning with Stella, like our union had been foretold a millennium ago by an omniscient god or was written in the stars when the universe exploded into existence.

We were meant to be.

I'd never been surer about anything than I was about her. About us.

"I didn't know it was possible to feel this way about anyone. It feels like more than love," she whispered, echoing my thoughts.

I folded my body over hers. "I know." I began to move in and out, feeling our fate surrounding us, binding us stronger. The push and pull of our bodies sinking me further into our destiny.

She caught my jaw in her hand, her fingers pressing into my stubble, and brought my lips to hers. She plunged her tongue into my mouth, her groans shooting vibrations of pleasure down my spine.

Breaking our kiss, I braced myself, hands flat on the desk either side of her and took a breath. It was too much. This woman was too fucking much for me.

Her hair splayed on the glass desk, the reflection of her body everywhere I looked from the glass windows to the chrome legs of the table, she surrounded me and it was overwhelming and perfect and I wanted it to last forever.

But I needed to fuck her. I needed to come. And when we were done, I needed to do it again and again and again.

A lifetime of this woman wouldn't ever be enough.

I was two seconds away from giving up, from surrendering to my orgasm, but I wanted her pleasure more than my own, and by some force of will, adrenaline seared through my limbs, giving me the strength to keep going, to keep chasing away the ache in me that she created. For it was only her who held the cure.

“Beck!” she cried out.

The desperation in her eyes told me she couldn't take anymore, and I understood.

“Come, Stella. Come for me.”

She sighed, thankful and longing, and her body silently erupted beneath me. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen and I was gone. I was lost to her and I pushed in again, gasping at the fierce rumble of my orgasm that gathered into a roar when it reached my chest and exploded.

I wasn't sure I could withstand the power of my climax, the pleasure I got from being with her.

After a moment of blackness, I opened my eyes to find her gazing up at me. Panting, I lay my head on her chest and tried to find my voice. “Tell me what you want?” I asked, my breath heavy against her skin.

“You,” she whispered. “I want you. I need you. It's only you. Ever.”

Since I met her, whether I'd known it or not, those were the words I'd been waiting to hear from Stella. Hearing it calmed me. As if the final piece of the jigsaw had been found. And I needed nothing but her—not buildings or developments, not acceptance from a section of society that had so resolutely rejected me. I didn't need anything but to be with the woman who had changed how I saw myself. She was the woman who healed my wounds, faded my scars, and showed me my future.

EPILOGUE

Six months later

Stella

Was it wrong to feel a sexual connection toward a slab of stone? I took in the thin, gray veins of the white Statuario marble and shivered. *So beautiful.*

“Stella? Are you drooling?” Florence appeared at my side.

“Maybe. What are you doing here?” Had I been too engrossed in fixtures and missed a lunch date?

“I called by the office and they said you were down here.”

The last time she’d called by my office, it had been a different office, a different job—an entirely different life that I was leading.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, sweeping my hand down the cold, smooth surface and turning away in case I got tempted to lick it.

Florence winced and I guided her out of the penthouse unit we were working on and toward the lift. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I wanted you to hear this from me,” Florence said as she stepped inside.

“Oh God, will you stop starting sentences like that?” I laughed. “At least this time, I know you’re not about to tell me that Karen’s running off with Beck.” There was never a day that went by that I doubted Beck’s love for me. He was a man who believed that love was a verb and found every way he could to show me how he felt.

He’d taught me what real love was.

“Well, no, but you won’t believe it when I tell you what she’s done now.”

The goods lift hit the floor with a thump.

“What?” I asked.

“Well, she’s walked out on Matt. Left him.”

For all Karen’s faults, I didn’t think she’d walk out on a marriage that was only six months’ old.

“Apparently she found him with his hand up one of her mother’s friends’ skirts at their housewarming. And they were snogging each other’s faces off. Of course, he blamed it on the booze.”

I laughed although it wasn’t funny. I’d never thought Matt was a cheater. He might have cheated on me, but I didn’t think that’s who he was in his DNA. But perhaps that’s how he was wired. “Are you sure that’s not just the story Karen made up to deflect from something she’d done?”

Florence shrugged. “I heard it from Bea who heard it from Karen.”

“Are they trying to make it work or is that it? The D word?” I asked.

“From what I heard, Karen’s already moved on.”

We headed across the road to the bench where Beck and I sat and had our lunch on days we were on site.

Beck was right—those two really did deserve each other.

“How do you feel?” Florence asked. “I wondered if you’d be a bit upset.”

“Upset?” I asked. “I don’t feel anything other than relief that I’m not part of the drama. And grateful it wasn’t me that found him. That he ended things when he did and he didn’t come back to me in the months before the wedding when I might have taken him back. Him marrying Karen was awful but it led me to Beck, and I can’t be sad about that.”

I grinned as Beck waved from the entrance to One Park Street. He strode over to us.

“Christ, he’s so good looking, Stella.”

“He is. But it’s his heart and his humor that make me love him more every day.”

“What are you two gossiping about?” Beck asked as he bounded over.

“I was just telling Florence how much I love you,” I said and that grin he wore when things went his way crept across his face.

“Not as much as I love you,” he said, dropping a kiss on the top of my head.

“You two are ridiculously perfect for each other,” Florence said.

“Just as you and Gordy are.”

“Which is the other reason I’m here,” Florence said. “Gordy proposed

and I said yes.”

I jumped up and threw myself at Florence. “Yes! I’m so happy for you.”

“I want you to be maid of honor. Gordy wants a huge wedding. I’d prefer to elope but, you know, he doesn’t often put his foot down.”

“I’m excited.” I turned to Beck. “Isn’t this great?”

“I wish you were this excited when I propose to you.” He rolled his eyes.

I had to stifle a giggle. Beck proposed on an almost monthly basis. And each time, I said maybe or no or not yet. He took it in his stride, but I could understand why me being so excited smarted a little. “It’s different. Florence and Gordy have been together forever.”

“Just like we will be,” he replied.

“Right. So who cares if we get married?” I’d been so sure that I’d marry Matt, that somehow I didn’t want to cheapen what Beck and I had by wanting to get married. A ceremony that everyone else could have wasn’t enough somehow. I didn’t see the point.

“I’ll wear you down eventually,” he said.

I laughed. If it was important to Beck, then one of these times he proposed, I’d say yes. But I knew he loved me and that was all I needed. Beck’s love, adoration, respect, and time was more than I could ever have hoped for and I had it all. He was all I’d ever need.

Twelve months later

Beck

I stared up at the newly renovated, soon-to-launch, One Park Street. The red brickwork had been cleaned, repointed, and repaired and looked as good as it no doubt did when it was built over a hundred and fifty years ago. The arched windows were lit up, hiding the beautiful interiors Stella had completely transformed. Tonight, we launched the sales of the first units on a strictly invitation-only basis.

“You did it,” Stella said as she stood next to me.

I slid my arm around her waist. “We did it.”

“But this for you . . . It’s more than just another development. How does it feel?”

“Different to how I expected,” I replied. “Looking back, I was a maniac

—giving you the interiors on this job was insane. But I was desperate.”

“Hey.” Stella thwacked me in the stomach and laughed.

“You did a more than amazing job—far better than any designer I’ve ever worked with. But seriously, I didn’t know you from Adam. I should never have agreed to you leading this. I wanted the Dawnay building whatever the cost.”

“Do you feel free now? Like you’ve conquered your past?” she asked.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d given my biological father a second thought. “Yeah, but I’m not sure that’s got anything to do with the building. I think that’s about you and the life we have together—the future we’re going to have.” I loved that I could still make her blush. I hoped that never went away, even when we were ninety and hitting each other with our walking sticks. “The thought of five baby Wildes in our new place makes everything else seem ridiculous.”

“Less of the five,” Stella said. “And less of the Wildes. They will be London babies.”

“But after we’re married, they’ll be Wildes.”

“No, after we’re married, I’ll still be Stella London. You’ll still be Beck Wilde. Our babies will be London-Wildes or Wilde-Londons.”

“That’s ridiculous. We’re not having kids with a double-barreled name.”

“Then they’ll be Londons,” she said.

I grinned—partly because she knew I’d give in to just about anything she wanted. But mainly because she hadn’t told me how she had no intention of marrying me.

Because she usually did. Every time I asked her. And I asked her a lot. Stella was a prize I’d never give up fighting for.

A familiar hand gripped my shoulder. “Not bad, mate. Not bad at all,” Dexter said as he came up behind us.

“Not bad? You want to see the interior,” I said.

“It’s incredible,” Stella said. “It’s the real estate equivalent of a diamond.”

“You got that wrong,” Dexter said and the gleam in his eye meant only one thing—he’d found a stone he’d been chasing.

“You deal in coal,” I said. “I prefer bricks and mortar.”

“Stop teasing Dexter,” Stella said.

“You keep hold of this one,” Dexter said. “She’s special. Women like Stella don’t come along more than once in a lifetime.”

“I know, mate. It hasn’t happened for you, yet. But it will.”

Dexter smiled and nodded—clearly not wanting to get into it but not believing me either.

“I have a feeling that this time next year, we’ll be double dating,” Stella said. “I mean, any girl would be lucky to have you—funny, handsome, and millions of pounds worth of diamonds at your fingertips on a daily basis.” She turned to me. “If this guy hadn’t tricked me into falling in love with him, I’d be first in the queue.”

My heart almost stopped every time she told me she loved me. Even now. Over a year since we met.

“I shouldn’t complain,” Dexter said. “It’s not like I’ve never had what you guys have. I was just stupid enough to fuck it up. Just this once, don’t follow my example.”

Dexter believed in love but that it only happened once a lifetime. But being with Stella had shifted my perspective on a lot of things. Dexter was right. Loving a woman was important and I wouldn’t believe that my mate was going to go the rest of his life on his own.

“I’ll try,” I said, for once not wanting to mock him. “As soon as she finally says yes, you’ll be my first call. We’re going to need a rock of a ring.”

“I don’t need a rock,” Stella said and I bit back a grin. So she’d thought about the ring she wanted. Interesting.

I bent and pressed a kiss on her lips. “You deserve a rock.”

“Can’t you two keep your hands off each other for even a second?” an annoying voice said from behind me.

I turned to find Tristan and Gabriel coming toward us. Gabriel was supposed to be in Miami. He must have just stepped off the flight. He knew tonight was important to me—so it was important to him to be here.

How did I get so fucking lucky? Friends who would stand in front of a bullet for me and a woman I’d stand in front of a bullet for. No wonder my past had dissolved into the air. Life didn’t get any better than right now.

“You boys are looking gorgeous,” Stella said to the two of them and I tightened my grip. She was now a regular at our Sunday night drinks and the guys adored her. It was like a woman had been initiated into our group.

“Not as beautiful as you,” Tristan said, taking her arm and placing a kiss on the back of her hand.

“Knock it off,” I said, pulling Stella back, and she laughed.

“Now I know Stella’s taken, I think I can safely say, I’ll never marry,”

Tristan said.

He was full of shit. But it was exactly how I would feel if Tristan was with Stella—there wouldn't be any point looking for anyone else when the woman who was meant for me was already taken.

“So this is One Park Street,” Tristan said. “Looks decent enough but if it's that nice, then why aren't you two moving in?”

Stella had suggested we take one of the two penthouses, but I'd been a bit reticent. I wasn't sure how I'd feel living somewhere with such a strong connection with the Dawney family. But now, after the block's transformation, after being with Stella and working so closely with her on this building, I couldn't think of a better place to live.

“Actually,” I said, pulling the keys to the penthouse from my trouser pocket. “I've been thinking about that. As it's launch night, maybe we should take a tour and look at it from a buyer's perspective.”

Stella lifted up on her tiptoes and her eyes lit up. “Really? I've been hoping against hope that you might have a change of heart when you saw the place.”

“Excuse us, gentleman, go help yourself to champagne. We're going to go and look at the flat where we're going to bring my first son home from hospital,” I said, guiding Stella into the building and toward the private lift for Penthouse A.

“Are you serious about this?” she asked.

“Which bit? The son thing? The hospital or the penthouse?”

She grinned. “I meant the penthouse but all of it, I guess.”

We stepped out of the lift and directly into the lobby of the best apartment in W1. The marble floors, the crystal chandelier, the inlaid brass detailing on the door frames. It all looked perfect.

“I'm serious about everything to do with our future,” I replied, striding toward the entrance to the living space, but Stella didn't move and when I turned, she was biting the inside of her cheek like she did when she was nervous.

“Well, if that's the case, then I have a question,” she said.

“Ask me anything,” I replied.

She fumbled in her handbag and pulled something out. “How about we wear these?” she said, presenting a black velvet box to me. I recognized it as one of the jewelry boxes Dexter used for his clients.

Was my woman proposing to me? After all these months of me asking

her to marry me—she was finally saying yes? I couldn't take my eyes off her. Tonight was the perfect night—just when I thought life couldn't get any better. But that was life with Stella. Just as I thought we reached the pinnacle, she went and set a new standard in happiness.

When I didn't take the box from her, tentatively she opened it to reveal two rings, side by side—one a band of diamonds and one plain platinum.

I hoped this woman would never stop surprising me.

I grinned and she rolled her eyes.

“So what do you say?” she asked.

Okay so it might not be the most romantic proposal I'd ever heard, but I wouldn't want it any other way.

“Sure, I'll wear the ring.”

“Beck!” she said.

“What? I can't answer a question you haven't asked me.”

She laughed. “You're impossible. But I love you. Will you marry me?”

“You're perfect. And I love you too, and I'll marry you every day of the week for the rest of your life.”

I took the box from her and pulled the diamond ring out and got on one knee. “You're the most gracious, kind, funny, sexy woman I've ever met, and I love you so much sometimes it frightens me. My entire life, I've been searching for something, needing to fill a missing void in my life. For years I thought the Dawnay building was the answer. But all along it was you I was waiting for.”

Stella stepped forward, tilted her head to the side, and pushed her fingers through my hair.

“Marry me,” I said. “And I'll never stop working to make you happy.”

She sat on my bended knee and clasped her arms around my neck. “I love you, Beck Wilde. Now. Tomorrow. Forever. It's as if my life didn't really begin until I met you. And you've got a deal.”

Being with Stella London wasn't just a one-off, deal of a lifetime. It was a daily win, and nothing would ever compare. It didn't matter what happened in life—good or bad—as long as Stella was by my side, everything was perfect. Searching for a closed door on my past had opened the heavens and brought me Stella, and I'd never look back.

Keep reading for Dexter's story.

MR. KNIGHTSBRIDGE

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CHAPTER ONE

Dexter

She was the kind of beautiful that could send a man straight to the asylum. Just a glimpse of her had the hairs needling the back of my neck and my fingers stiff, desperate for a simple touch.

Exotic. Glorious. And bloody expensive.

“Very pretty. You should be extremely proud,” Gabriel, one of my best friends, said while staring at the display case in the middle of the Dorchester’s ballroom.

“She really is glorious,” I replied. I hadn’t seen her for a long time, but you didn’t forget beauty like hers.

“You know that’s a headband thingy and not a woman, right?” asked Tristan, another of the group of six of us who had been friends since we were teenagers.

“Tiara,” I corrected him. To Tristan, it was just something women wore on their heads. To Gabriel, it was a collection of pretty stones. But to me, the tiara was beauty, life force—it was my fucking legacy.

“Right,” Tristan said. “And your parents made it?”

“My mother designed it. My father made it.”

“For the queen?” Tristan asked.

“The queen of Finland. She wore it on her wedding day.” As a child, sprawled in a heap of Lego underneath the display cases in their shop on Hatton Garden, I’d felt like the only thing my parents did was work on this design. Hearing about the tiara was the soundtrack of my childhood. Though their lives were dominated by the tiara for just one summer, it consumed

them entirely. Seeing the piece again now, for the first time since their death, I understood why they had been so consumed. It was gorgeous, an audaciously modern design still classic enough to be regal.

My parents' passion for their work had percolated through the air I breathed, and I grew up in the enviable position of knowing exactly what I was going to do with my life—follow in their footsteps and be a jeweler. But when my parents died and my brother sold their shop without me knowing, my desire to become a jeweler wasn't enough. For them, for their memory, I wanted to be the best in the world at what I did. I wanted their name—my name—to be known internationally for the most beautiful jewelry in existence. It was what they deserved.

"I still don't understand why we're in London and not Finland," Tristan said.

"The princess is marrying a British man, so they're holding the competition to design her jewelry here. It's raising a lot of money for charity. Pockets are deeper in London."

"Makes sense," Gabriel said.

Tristan pushed his hands into his pockets and nodded. "Well, it's nice stuff."

I grinned. Tristan might be clueless at times, but he didn't flinch when I asked him to come tonight. Far more comfortable in jeans, in front of a computer, he put on a dinner jacket without hesitation because he was as loyal as you could want in a friend. He needed a drink. I caught the eye of a waiter with a tray of champagne. He came over and we all grabbed a glass.

"To diamonds?" Tristan offered in toast.

"To your parents," Gabriel corrected. He had been the dad of our friendship group since we were seventeen, long before he was actually a dad—wise, measured and always armed with the right thing to say.

"Thanks, mate," I replied, clinking my glass to his. "To my parents. And to winning this bloody competition."

"I predict that if you do, you'll open your first store in London. It would be a great way to burst onto the scene," Tristan said.

I took commissions in London, and our workshop and design studio were based here. But I had yet to open a Daniels & Co storefront in the UK. My flagship store was in New York, with locations in Paris, Rome, Beijing and Dubai. We'd just opened in Beverly Hills and Singapore.

But not London.

In London, I existed in my own tightly controlled bubble. I lived and worked here, but didn't interact with the local industry. There were too many memories from the bleakest part of my life—my parents' Hatton Garden store that no longer existed. Sparkle's shop, which only survived because of my parents' designs. And David, my brother, the man who destroyed my parents' legacy and gave Sparkle theirs. There was too much here to forget.

I was asked about a London offering all the time, but continually dodged the questions and kept quiet. A Daniels & Co London shop wasn't going to happen. I believed in moving forward, not looking back. There was no need to dredge up the past when it could stay properly buried and undisturbed.

"And cheers to being mate dates," Tristan said. "I'm quite enjoying being on your arm. Just as long as you don't try to kiss me at the end of the night."

"You should be so lucky," I replied.

"I've been that lucky—that weekend in Prague, remember? I don't want your wandering hands near me again," Tristan said.

"Shut it," I replied, only half concentrating on Tristan as my gaze caught a woman in a white dress, strands of treacle-colored hair tumbling down her back. She was carrying a glass of champagne and an old-fashioned reporter's notebook, though she was focused on neither as she squeezed by us, nearly tipping alcohol over Gabriel's very expensive jacket. "It was fifteen years ago and I was asleep," I said as the woman passed. I tracked her as she headed toward one of the display cases, where her face lit up with a huge smile as she took in a pair of earrings my parents had produced to go with the tiara. Happy at the thought of someone else enjoying my parents' designs, I tuned back into the long-running debate with Tristan.

Tristan rolled his eyes and nodded. "So you say. But asleep or awake, you tried to spoon me."

Gabriel was a man of few words but Tristan had enough for both of them. How the three of us, plus Beck, Andrew and Joshua had managed to remain friends all these years was a miracle. We were brothers more than friends.

"The six of us should go back to Prague," Gabriel said.

"Definitely now we can all afford our own rooms, and I don't have to sleep with this guy," Tristan said, nodding his head toward me. "I'll look into it."

A break with my best mates sounded like a great idea, but not until I'd won this competition. I had a lot of work to do over the next few months. Putting together the designs for the princess of Finland's wedding collection

wasn't going to be enough. The quality and rarity of the stones, plus cutting and setting them, was going to set us apart. My contacts with stone suppliers were the best in the business, and I was going to need the best of the best. There would be no taking breaks in Prague or anywhere else for a while.

"We can make it a celebratory trip when Dexter's won this competition," Gabriel said, once again guessing my thoughts.

Tristan shrugged. "If you like. I still don't get why you have to enter some stupid competition. It's not like you need the work. Or the money. Do you?"

Tristan was right. I didn't need the money or the work.

But I *had* to win.

Partly for my reputation—it would be more evidence I was the best at what I did. But mostly for my parents. To win the competition a generation after they had was what they would have wanted—proof that their passion had been passed through their genes—and I was carrying on the torch for them.

"I'm not knocking on the door to the poor house, don't worry," I said.

"Pleased to hear it. But at the same time, if you want to offload that DB5 of yours at a knockdown price, I'd be happy to pay cash."

"Find your own Aston Martin and stop trying to buy mine," I replied. I turned to Gabriel. "If you ever find me dead under suspicious circumstances, point the police in this guy's direction," I said, nodding toward Tristan. "No doubt they'll find him with my car keys in his grasp."

Tristan shrugged as if it would be a fair assumption. He'd borrowed my car too often for me to count. He didn't need to bump me off for it.

"You know we're huddled here like Macbeth's witches. You should mingle," Gabriel said.

It was probably true. I was here to prove to the industry that contrary to popular belief, I didn't think I was too good for them. I scanned the room for a safe place to land—ideally, a small group of people who wouldn't immediately bombard me with stories about my parents. And of course, I had no desire to run into anyone from Sparkle. A conspicuous trail of empty champagne glasses led to the woman in the white dress, who was standing in front of the earrings my parents had produced for the queen's wedding. "Okay. I won't be long," I said, heading in the direction of the earrings. The woman in white seemed to be the only person in the room focused more on jewelry than socializing, and by my standards, that meant she was someone

worth getting to know.

As I passed the entrance, a list pinned to an easel caught my eye—the names of the attendees. Primrose, my head designer, would be keen to see who was here tonight. I pulled out my phone and took a picture before trailing my finger down the alphabetical list to find my name. I pulled away abruptly, as if the board had emitted an electric shock. I'd expected to see my name there, but there were two "Daniels" on this list.

David was here.

The brother who'd tried to destroy my parents' legacy. The brother I'd vowed to have nothing to do with. The brother I hated.

Heat flushed through me and I turned quickly to survey the room. He couldn't be here, could he? Would I even recognize him fifteen years later? At thirty-seven he might have lost his hair, like dad. Or—

"Dexter Daniels!" An avuncular stranger in his mid-fifties grabbed me by the elbow and thrust his palm against mine, shaking my hand vigorously and effectively pulling my thoughts from the black hole they'd been circling. "Gosh, you make me feel like an old man," he said. "If Joyce McLean hadn't said it was you, I never would have believed it." He grinned at me as if I should recognize him, but I was sure I'd never seen him before in my life. "The last time I saw you, you had a bottle of vinegar in one hand and tissues in the other, cleaning the glass in your parents' shop."

I exhaled and imagined an invisible shield surrounding me, stopping his words from penetrating, from reaching the places I'd spent so long protecting. This was why Tristan and Gabriel were here tonight. Sure, Tristan liked free booze and the chance to mingle with a ballroom full of women, but he and Gabriel both were here because I'd asked them to be my buffers. "They were good people," I replied. This was why I'd avoided situations like this for as long as I had. I knew how great my parents were. I didn't need strangers to remind me, to poke at the open wound created by their absence.

"Talented. And kind. It was a long time ago but the industry still feels their loss."

"You're right," I said. "It was a loss on a personal level but their talent and hard work meant it was a loss for jewelry more generally." My rehearsed response emerged automatically, not for the first time tonight.

Usually this short, polite exchange would end with a handshake here, but the man, whoever he was, wasn't going anywhere.

"Do you know what I miss most about them?" he asked. "Your father's

rather rare laugh.”

I smiled—a real smile, not the forced one I’d been wearing all night. My father had been a serious man at work. But not around his family. Our house was full of tickles and laughter.

“It was your mother who was always able to coax it out of him,” the man said.

I nodded, remembering how she’d tell him jokes in the shop, trying to get him to lighten up. “They were a good team.”

“She would say how his stern face made it look like he was being possessed by his father, your grandfather.”

I’d forgotten that. She’d chase me around the shop making scary noises, and inevitably my father’s stern expression would give way to something softer, more familiar.

“You know all the big houses were after your mother—Bulgari, Harry Winston—they queued up to offer her design roles. She could have written her own check. But she only ever wanted to work with your father.”

I tried to keep my surprise from showing. I’d never heard her mention how she’d been offered other roles. I guess it hadn’t been important to her. The only person who ever mattered was my father—and her boys, of course. “My mother was very talented.”

I’d been dreading coming here tonight. I hadn’t wanted to hear the sorrow and sadness in people’s voices when they discussed my parents, or be constantly reminded about how much I’d lost. But hearing about them from someone else’s perspective was gratifying, and reigniting beloved memories was deeply comforting. I’d pushed so much of my past away to stop it from hurting me that I’d lost some of the memories that were important.

“She was. And from what I’ve seen, the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree. I’ve followed your career.”

I still didn’t know who this man was but he seemed to know me well enough. “Can I take your card?” I asked. Perhaps I might have reason to do business with this man at some point in the future.

“Of course,” he said, flipping open his wallet. “You’ve not shown your face much around London.”

“No, sir,” I replied. “I go where my clients are.” It was a lie but a believable one.

“Yes, I was surprised your brother never went into the industry,” he said, holding out his card.

The warmth that had gathered in my belly at his words about my parents turned to ice when he mentioned my brother. The realization that David was here tonight, enjoying the champagne, no doubt at the Sparkle table, pulled the air from the room. I needed space. I needed to breathe in the goodness my parents brought to this room, not the betrayal my brother did.

“Would you please excuse me,” I said, shaking the man’s hand once again. “I’ve just seen someone over there I must speak to.” The girl with the treacle-colored hair was in the corner, looking at one of my favorite pieces.

CHAPTER TWO

Hollie

I glanced over my shoulder to check I was going unnoticed in the ballroom full of men in tuxedos and women wearing dresses that cost more than our trailer back home in Oregon. I'd only ever seen scenes like this in movies, yet here I was, one of the guests.

I didn't belong here.

My new colleagues had disappeared as soon as we'd entered this vast room, and given the number of people here tonight, I'd probably never see them again. That was okay. The bus to take us back to the office was leaving at eleven, which meant I had limited time to study the incredible royal jewelry on display.

A tall waiter thrust a tray of drinks under my nose, like being offered free champagne was just completely normal. I'd never tasted champagne before, and was determined to keep a clear head, but if my sister, Autumn, was here, she'd tell me I shouldn't miss out. I took a glass and headed toward one of the displays of jewelry from the Finnish royal family. I was here to work. Learn. Invest in my future. My three-month internship was my one shot—my opportunity to escape the life my parents had led, a trailer-park existence I was ready to quit.

"Wow," I said out loud as I came to the first of the display cases dotted throughout the room. I took in the two-tiered tiara, not quite believing what was right in front of me.

I'd seen it online. The queen of Finland had worn it on her wedding day. Seeing it up close and personal was an entirely different thing. It was almost

overwhelming, there was so much to look at. The bottom layer was a headband of huge solitaire diamonds, each one as big as my knuckle. The top was like a string of bunting of alternating rubies and diamonds. From a distance, just the bigger stones were visible, but as I got closer, I could see a top string of small stones that had been strung together with even smaller stones. It was so unusual I wanted to pull out a sketch pad and start to make drawings. I had a notebook and pen stashed in my bag, but I couldn't see anyone else writing anything down and I didn't need to draw attention to myself tonight. I stood out as it was. If I didn't keep my head down, I'd probably get arrested by the plain Jane police likely patrolling here tonight. I was wearing a cheap, slightly too big A-line white dress my sister had loaned me. I'd sewn a line of black sequins around the collar in the hope of passing it off as cocktail attire. I'd even borrowed Autumn's slightly too small shoes and had newly formed blisters to prove it.

Blistered feet were a small price to pay for being in this room. I was the intern for a jewelry house that had a real chance at winning the competition. The sheer luck of it all was enough to dull any pain I might otherwise have felt.

The thought of being part of the team that would bejewel the princess of Finland on her wedding day was the cherry on top of the cake. I'd have been happy with three months' experience with one of the most successful jewelers in London. This was the push I needed to get a job in New York at one of the big jewelry houses. A dozen job applications had sent the message loud and clear—no experience, no job. But a letter of recommendation from Charles Ledwin, CEO of Sparkle, would open every door that had been slammed in my face. It was my ticket out of my dead-end life in Oregon.

I glanced around at the display cases dotted throughout the room before clocking the burly security guys at every exit point. There was a lot of money here tonight. A lot of talent. It was intimidating and completely exhilarating at the same time. It felt as if I was about to start a supermarket sweep of knowledge. I'd have three months to grab as much as possible and then the buzzer would sound and my fate would be sealed. Hopefully I'd have done enough, seen enough, learned enough to change my future.

Why wasn't there a line to see this tiara? It was so freaking beautiful that I wanted to shout at the top of my voice for people to come see. I guess this way I had it all to myself. I glanced around to ensure no one was paying any attention to me—of course they weren't—abandoned my champagne glass on

a nearby table, pulled out my notebook and scribbled down some ideas.

The next display case contained a silver hair comb incrustated with pavé diamonds. Another tall waiter hovered next to me with a tray of champagne. Jiminy Cricket, I must have left my glass behind at the tiara display. I never even got to taste it. Could I just take another one? I glanced at the waiter but he wasn't taking any notice, so I swiped another glass and turned back to the display.

The comb must have been Victorian, from the date written on a card placed discreetly beside it, but the design was so simple it seemed much more modern. If I'd been to art school or any kind of college, perhaps I'd recognize the jeweler. I'd done my research these last few years, but I barely had time to make and sell the few pieces I could afford to make—let alone find time to study the history of jewelry design. The designs I'd come up with had started as doodles in my break time at the factory. At some point I'd found a soldering kit on eBay, and when I drew something I loved so much I couldn't just leave it on the page, I saved up for some silver and made my first piece. When I hung that first pendant I'd made—a silver oak leaf—around my neck, something took hold of me. For the first time in my life, I had a goal that was just about me—not making sure my parents made the rent on their trailer or my sister's tuition was paid. This was a desire for me and me alone. Jewelry was *my* thing.

I made a few notes and sketched out a couple ideas. I knew Sparkle wouldn't consider any of my designs for the competition, but I wanted to learn how to create my ideas on the company's specialty software.

This room was full of inspiration, and I wanted to soak it all in while the opportunity lasted. I'd missed out on a lot by not going to college, but I was determined to get as much of an education as I could out of my time in London, squeeze out every last drop of experience.

I ducked and weaved through the canapes, crystal glasses and cummerbunds to the next case, and then the next and the next. If heaven turned out to be just like this, I wouldn't be surprised.

As I circled a display containing three bracelets, I overheard a group of people standing to my left, whispering about Dexter Daniels. Daniels entering the competition had been a huge deal. He was a virtual recluse and as famous for not having a London store as he was for being incredibly successful despite his youth. He was one of the favorites to win and, I'd heard, devastatingly handsome.

He'd obviously inherited the family genes—his parents had designed the tiara I'd been ogling. Meanwhile, my family business was dodging landlords and skipping out on rent. To have come from a family who made their mark in history by designing jewels for royalty . . . Dexter must be so . . . Did he even know how lucky he was? To grow up with all this? No wonder he was so successful.

As I sketched in my notepad, someone on the other side of the display case nudged her friend and stage-whispered, "Over there by the bar. The tall one. That's him. Dexter Daniels."

I glanced up and followed the woman's pointed finger as a man on the far side of the room turned in our direction. His furrowed brow and pained expression came as a shock. What on earth could make someone so miserable on a night like this, in a place full of beautiful things? He pinched the bridge of his nose, the exasperation of being uber-successful obviously too much to bear.

He was the most handsome man in the room.

Perhaps the entire city of London.

His thick, wavy, almost black hair was the perfect length—long enough to thread fingers through, but not so long it could be tied in a ponytail or even worse, a man bun. He seemed to be the only man in the room who wasn't wearing a tie with his suit, the open shirt displaying a bronzed v at the notch in his throat. He stood out but not because he lived in a trailer park or was wearing borrowed shoes a size too small. It wasn't how tall he was, or how confidence seemed to radiate from him, or how his jaw was shadowed by a couple days' worth of stubble. He stood out because rather than looking like he was among colleagues, he looked like he was a client of the jewelers in this room. He seemed like the guy who could throw a couple mill' down on a necklace for his wife and pick up something for his girlfriend at the same time. Someone came up to greet him and the pain drained from his face, replaced by a wide grin. It was a smile that could close a deal, make someone feel like the most special person in the room and no doubt had panties falling to the ground.

Not my panties though. Mine were staying firmly on. I dropped my gaze back to the bracelets and resumed sketching.

I finished off my notes and scanned the room to see if there were any display cases I'd missed. In the far corner there looked to be a smaller case I could have sworn wasn't there earlier. I wasn't sure how I could have

skipped it. I checked my watch—still a few minutes before I had to meet the bus.

As I got to the case I froze and nearly dropped my notepad. Inside was the most beautiful ring I'd ever seen. Far simpler than most of the pieces here tonight, it boasted a large emerald flanked by baguette diamonds. While most of the jewelry on display had demonstrated original designs or brilliant engineering, this ring did neither. It was a classic design with a straightforward setting, but it was quite simply stand-out gorgeous. It must have been an engagement ring. But it was huge. I put my hand next to it to get some perspective on its size. The contrast was almost alarming—my rough hands, subjected to a home manicure, and this elegant, dignified, perfectly polished ring. A week ago, I'd been home at the Sunshine Trailer Park, with an Etsy shop that brought in a couple of necklace orders a month. Now I was across the world, surrounded by beautiful people and more-beautiful jewelry, at the start of a three-month internship for one of the best jewelers in the world. Even if hands like mine would never be graced by jewelry this fine, I could still use them to make something beautiful.

CHAPTER THREE

Hollie

I needed to leave the party to make sure I found the bus on time, but I just wanted to steal a few more moments with this ring. I shoved my notebook and pen back into my bag and circled the display case again. When was I going to get another opportunity to see jewels like this, with this kind of history, demonstrating this kind of talent and creativity?

It was only now I understood Lord of the freaking Rings. I could happily suspend my disbelief for wizards and hobbits, but I'd never bought into the idea that some mystical band of gold could inspire such risk to life and limb. Looking at this emerald, though, I totally and completely understood how it might be worth a trip to Mordor. There wasn't much I wouldn't do to put that ring on my finger. Again, I held my hand alongside it. The stone was big, but that was part of its charm. You wouldn't see anything else when this ring was in your eyeline. My smudged manicure and hand-me-down dress would go unnoticed with this gem on my hand. I might even fit in with the other guests in this ballroom tonight. All it would take was a multi-million-dollar ring.

"It suits you," a man said from behind me. His gravelly voice sent an involuntary shiver racing down my spine, as if someone had run a finger across the bare skin of my back.

I snapped my head around to find the impossibly gorgeous Dexter Daniels grinning at me, his eyes twinkling in amusement. If I'd thought he was handsome from across the room, being face-to-face with him didn't disappoint. He was broad, filling up the entire space in front of me, and so tall I had to tip my head back to look him in the eye. He was standing close,

as if we were already sharing secrets, and a faint woodsy scent came from his custom suit. A curl of shiny black hair fell onto his forehead, and I couldn't help but wonder how it would feel to push it back into place.

I turned away, unsure if I would be able to form a coherent sentence if I was looking at him. "Sadly, it's out of my price range," I said, flattening my hand on the glass case.

"I'm not sure it's for sale," he replied. "But if it was, you should have it."

"Right," I said. "I also deserve a castle in Scotland, but that's not on this week's grocery list either."

I looked up at him, waiting for a response, but instead he just stared right back at me. When he finally spoke again after a too-long beat of silence, he said, "Your eyes are quite the most beautiful shade of green and have the most glorious flecks of blue, just like a Zambian emerald."

I wanted to giggle at his straight-up crazy mixed with a hunk of cheese, but before the corners of my mouth had turned up, he stepped back and his cheeks reddened as if he was embarrassed by what he'd said. As if it had been a slip of the tongue.

"God, sorry, I sound like I'm coming on to you." He pinched the bridge of his nose and instinctively I reached to remove his hand.

"Don't be sorry. I treat cheese as its own food group. I'm a fan. My name's Hollie."

He chuckled. "Dexter Daniels, and I swear I'm not usually so cheesy. Some people have even accused me of being too smooth." He narrowed his gaze. "But your eyes are really quite extraordinary."

"Yeah, Zambian-emerald extraordinary. I get that all the time, whatever it means."

"Wait. You've not seen a Zambian emerald?" he said, pulling his cell from his pocket. "Are you not in the gemstone business?"

I shrugged. "Just an intern."

"We all have to start somewhere."

"Right," I said. "This is just the first step." I thought my Etsy shop would be the first step and in many ways it had been. I just didn't have the time or money to make enough pieces to turn a profit. My online shop was a hobby, but one that had ignited hope in me, a belief that there was a life for me outside the trailer park once Autumn graduated.

Dexter handed me his phone, which displayed a huge emerald on it.

"It's not as pretty as this," I said, handing back the phone and nodding at

the ring in the display case.

“Or your eyes,” he replied.

With a face that pretty and a body that hot, surely this man had women throwing themselves at him left and right. Why was he over here, talking to me about my eyes? Sure, he was gorgeous, but I didn’t need gorgeous unless it could cut glass. I had to stay focused on my internship. I wasn’t in London for a holiday romance.

“Sorry, more cheese,” he said. “So apart from the ring that goes with your eyes, did you see anything else you like?”

“What’s not to like? I’m from Nowheresville, Oregon. It all looks good to me. What about you?” I asked.

“The tiara.” He thrust his fingers through his hair as if he were uncomfortable all of a sudden.

“It’s very beautiful,” I replied. “The settings for that top layer are genius.”

He nodded but didn’t elaborate. It was as if his mood had flipped. Maybe he was thinking about the tiara and how hard it would be to design and produce anything as stunning.

“It sets the bar for this competition pretty high,” I said.

“I was born for the challenge,” he replied. His mood flipped again and he grinned widely. “My parents designed and made that tiara.”

“I heard that. So, winning this competition is your . . . destiny?”

“More like my responsibility.”

That hadn’t been what I was expecting him to say. I was starting to see that beneath the near-offensive level of hotness and the oh-so-relaxed attitude, Dexter Daniels had hidden depths. And the longer I stood here, breathing the same air as him, the more I wanted to know.

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it,” I replied. “Holy Hercules,” I said, catching a glimpse of Dexter’s watch. “I was supposed to meet my ride fifteen minutes ago out front.”

“Let me walk you out,” he said, putting his hand to the base of my spine and making me shiver again as he guided me out.

I hoped the bus would wait. I didn’t have money to splurge on cab fare and I hadn’t figured out the subway yet.

“Who’s lucky enough to be taking you home?” Dexter said. “Jesus, everything I say to you sounds positively fondue-like. What is it with you?”

I laughed. “You think it’s me? I’m cheese-inducing? That’s like the best compliment ever,” I said as we reached the entrance of the hotel. I craned my

neck but couldn't see the bus at the promised pick-up point. Would they just leave me? Weren't the British too polite to do something like that? "I was meant to be meeting my colleagues." I was stranded. I didn't pick up my UK phone until tomorrow, and my thousand-year-old flip phone with an American number and no international roaming plan was back in my room at my short-term rental. It wasn't like I'd swapped numbers with my new Sparkle coworkers anyway. What use did they have for the intern's phone number?

I needed to find a way home, but not before I cut Dexter loose. He'd already distracted me and made me miss my ride. God knew what would happen if I let this go on even one minute more.

I held out my hand. "It's been good to meet you, Dexter Daniels."

He grinned as he gripped my hand with his.

"But if you'd point me in the direction of the subway, I'll be on my way. These Zambian eyes need their beauty sleep."

"Please," he said as a car pulled out in front of us and he opened its back door. "I'll drop you. Where are you going?" He gestured for me to get inside.

"This is your car?" I asked. "My mom warned me about getting into cars with strangers." Of course, that was a lie. It was the kind of thing *I* warned my sister about, but that my mother would have positively encouraged if it meant we saved on bus fare.

"We're friends now, though, aren't we?" he asked. "Not strangers."

Silently I weighed my options. Get into the car with the most handsome man in Europe, who would either take me safely home or he'd chop me into tiny pieces and feed me to his dog? On the other hand, I could wander the streets for the evening and end up meeting a murderer anyway. Seemed like even odds on getting home or getting axe-murdered. "You promise me you're not a serial killer?"

"Scout's honor," he said, holding up three fingers.

The way his eyes twinkled as he said it suggested Dexter was about as far away from Boy Scout as it was possible to be. But I was lost in a big city, and whatever decision I made would be a risk.

I took his hand as he helped me into his car. When the door shut, the man at the wheel said, "Good evening, ma'am."

He probably thought Dexter was taking me home. Which he was, but not like that. No siree. I wasn't shopping for distractions.

"Where are we going?" Dexter asked as he got in beside me.

I leaned forward to give the driver my address and Dexter chuckled from behind me. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said as if he’d just discovered a secret about me I didn’t know I’d revealed.

“You want me to tell you my address so *you* can tell the driver? Do you have control issues you need to discuss with your shrink?” I teased, grinning. I just hoped he was a guy who could take a joke. “You may be surprised to learn that in America, women can give out their addresses without any male assistance.”

“Across the pond, but an entirely different world,” he said, unable to contain an answering smile.

After I gave the driver my address, I settled back into the plush leather seat.

“So how long have you lived in London?” he asked.

I counted on my fingers. “Six days. Well, six and a half, if you count the time difference. I arrived last Saturday morning.”

“Oh wow. Not long. Is it your first time in England?”

“Yeah. I didn’t even have a passport before this trip.” I wasn’t about to tell him I hadn’t made it out of Oregon until a week ago. He was a super-successful, sophisticated guy who no doubt travelled all the time. I bet he’d never met someone before who’d never made it out of state, let alone lived in a single-wide trailer.

“And how do you like it?” he asked.

“Mostly it’s amazing, though some of the guys are a little cheesy.”

He nodded, pressing his lips into a thin line. “Positively fondue-like, I’m afraid.”

“To be honest with you, I’ve never had fondue,” I replied. “But I’m guessing it’s something close to heaven. I think the next three months are going to feature a lot of firsts for me. Let’s hope fondue is in there somewhere.” There had already been more first-time experiences than I could have imagined. Tonight had more that I could count on both hands. It was the first time in the ballroom at some fancy hotel. First time drinking champagne. The first time seeing millions of dollars’ worth of the most gorgeous jewelry up close and personal.

The first time being driven home by a handsome stranger who also happened to be one of the most successful fine jewelers in the world.

“Well I’d be delighted to make sure it is. It seems only fair, considering

my cheesiness distracted you from meeting your colleagues this evening. I should make it up to you.”

He had nothing to make up. But he knew that already.

“Like on a date?” I asked.

“A cheese date,” he replied.

It had started raining, and I traced one of the raindrops trickling down the other side of the window so I didn’t betray how I beamed inside at his invitation.

For most women, it was an invitation too good to pass up, but this guy had already distracted me enough. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I like to talk cheese with you,” he said, looking at me as if he was unpeeling the dress from my shoulders. “I want to take you to dinner.”

I wasn’t asked out on dates often. And when I was, I rarely wanted to say yes. Fondue with Dexter sounded great, but felt wrong. It seemed self-indulgent and stupid. I was already in London on my dream internship. That was enough fun, wasn’t it?

Back in Oregon, I was used to making sure there was enough money coming in to pay the rent on mine and Autumn’s trailer, and my parents’ trailer, along with tuition payments for my sister’s college and then gas and food. Grilled cheese was a staple, and anything creative we could figure out with that week’s sale produce. I spent a lot of my life worrying, adding up the *out* column and making sure it wasn’t bigger than the *in* column. London should be enough without dinner dates, period. I didn’t even want to calculate the karmic cost of spending more time with Dexter Daniels.

We turned onto my street and my heartrate began to pick up. I didn’t want to say no, but I didn’t see how I could say yes.

“Can I think about it?” I asked him.

He chuckled. “If that’s what it takes. Let me have your number.”

“Actually, why don’t you give me your card.” I didn’t know what my UK number would be, and there was no point in giving him my US cell, which I was afraid to turn on for fear of incurring massive charges.

He pulled his business card out from his inside pocket. Even if I never called him, I’d have a memento of him asking me.

We pulled to a stop outside my flat and before I had the chance to say goodnight, Dexter had slipped out, rounded the trunk and was opening the door.

“Thank you,” I said as he helped me out of the car. “For the ride. And the

offer of cheese.”

He chuckled. “I hope you call.” He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to it.

Despite my brain telling me I never would, another part of me, the part that believed anything could happen, hoped I did too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dexter

I'd never been one of those businessmen glued to his phone. Like my father, I believed business was personal and better done face-to-face. But this morning, I must have checked my mobile a thousand times.

"Are you waiting for a call?" Primrose asked as she sat opposite me and pulled out her tablet.

"No." I slid my phone into the top drawer of my desk. Perhaps not having it in my hand might be a start at ignoring it. "How are the designs coming along? Seeing the wedding tiara last night was a reminder of how good we have to be."

"I was sorry to miss the reception. How was it?"

"Sorry?" I asked. "Don't be. It was an awful industry event. You did the right thing to escape." In many ways it hadn't been as bad as I had expected it to be. Remembering things I'd forgotten and hearing things I didn't know about my parents—like how my mother had been courted by all the high-end jewelers but had stayed working with my father—was both wonderful and reassuring. If I hadn't gone last night, I would have missed out.

But seeing David's name, and worrying about running in to him? That was beyond uncomfortable. I had no idea what he was doing on the list of attendees. As far as I knew, he was still working the back office of a bank. Why would he attend last night?

Then there was Hollie.

Meeting her had been an experience. I eyed the top drawer of my desk. I needed to get a grip. Even if she called in the next few minutes, she could

wait. I was in a meeting.

The fact was, I'd expected her to call by now. Frankly, I was pissed off with myself for not insisting on taking her number.

"It was my thirty-third wedding anniversary—I wasn't escaping. I heard you ran into Ben Lewin."

Ahhh, the chap who liked my father's laugh. "Yes, he was one of several people I talked to. How the hell do you know that?"

Primrose tapped the side of her nose. "You might have been avoiding London jewelry circles all these years, but this old bird knows most things that go on in this town."

Primrose had been born in the same month as my mother. She lived for this business in the same way that I did, the same way my parents had. It wasn't work. It was passion. And that's why Primrose felt like family. She was built the same way.

Unlike my brother.

He couldn't wait to be out of the family business after our parents died, so why was he going to industry events?

"I didn't see a single person from the organizing committee. There was no need for me to have gone at all," I said.

Primrose sighed. "Do we have to go through this again?"

"I don't see why we can't just design the shit out of some jewelry. Pick the best stones in existence, cut them like motherfuckers and win this award."

"Dexter," Primrose said, her voice deep and chastising.

"Sorry, cut them like the best in the fucking business." Primrose tolerated my bad language, but *motherfucker* was where she always drew the line.

"We are going to do all those things," she said.

"Then why all the cocktail parties and dinners and charity luncheons?"

She laughed. "For the first time in your life, you're going to have to play by someone else's rules. You've snubbed this industry your entire career. You're going to have to use some of that charm of yours and play the game if you really want to win."

"And I do," I replied, "really want to win."

She nodded. "Me too. So, during this competition, you'll shake hands, swap small talk, play nice with the other kids and not look like you thought you were too good for these people all these years."

Primrose knew as well as I did that the reason for staying away from London was nothing to do with being arrogant, however much that

accusation was thrown around.

It had everything to do with not looking back. With looking to the future rather than the past.

“Okay, so let’s talk designs. What have you got to show me?”

Primrose pulled up images of the earring designs she’d been working on. “I’m not sure I’ve quite got the effect of the snow yet,” she said. They were the shape of a snowflake and covered in a kind of pavé, but with larger, more exaggerated stones.

“I like this version though. The smaller stones are better. And not so small that they don’t look special.”

“Absolutely. I think sourcing the stones and making key parts of the jewelry is important,” Primrose said. It had taken a while to accept that design and production had to work together on what Daniels & Co put out. At first Primrose felt it was too much pressure. Over the last fifteen years, she had started to see my perspective.

“It’s how we’ve been successful up until now.” Beautiful jewelry designs weren’t enough. I had to find the stones and have them carved into the right cuts before I could be sure a design would work. Oftentimes, we changed the design to bring out the best in the stone. Some things that looked beautiful on the page, or even in a 3D render, just didn’t work if the stone wasn’t right. Understanding how to bring out the natural beauty of each stone in our designs would give Daniels & Co the edge.

The first stage of the competition was focused on design. It wasn’t until after the three finalists got picked that any actual jewelry was submitted. Because it was so expensive to make these pieces, the other jewelers would hold off production as long as possible, focusing on the design in case they didn’t get through to the next rounds. But we were cutting the stones and making parts of the pieces even as the designs continued to take shape. It was the only way to know how strong a design was before it was submitted. We would pick designs not because of how they looked in theory, but how the stones brought them to life.

“I’ve also been thinking about sourcing the emeralds,” I said. “I think if we can find good Zambian emeralds, that’s how we should go.”

“Really?” Primrose said. “Why wouldn’t you go Colombian?”

Hollie’s eyes last night really had been spectacular.

“Because of our theme. Colombian emeralds are thought to be the best because of the intensity of color.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“But what we’re trying to recreate is the feel of Finland.”

“Yes,” Primrose replied, elongating the word, which either meant she thought I was stupid or she was growing impatient.

“The color saturation of the northern lights isn’t intense. They’re ethereal. Green but blue, full of patterns and movement, light and dark. They’re mysterious and otherworldly and uniquely fascinating.” I wasn’t sure if I was describing the northern lights or my encounter with the mysterious and fascinating American I’d met last night. Both maybe, but when I went to sleep last night, all I could see were those eyes—layers on layers of color. I wanted to find that in a stone. “Mystery and romanticism, that’s the northern lights. That’s what we’re trying to achieve.” I’d thought of nothing else since I’d come face-to-face with Hollie yesterday. I’d noticed her earlier in the evening and hoped I’d get a chance to speak to her, but being up close, looking into those eyes—she drew me in.

Fuck, I should have got her number.

“Well you know your stones better than anyone,” said Primrose. “So, if you say so.”

“I’ve got to find a supplier. Zambian emeralds aren’t as consistent in color, so we’ll have to be picky.”

Primrose let out a laugh. “Well, picky is your middle name. Sounds like a job for you.”

I’d never apologize for being difficult to please. As far as I was concerned, it was a huge part of what made me successful. Good enough wasn’t good enough.

“If you didn’t enjoy last night,” Primrose said, sliding her tablet back into its sleeve. “Did Stacey at least?”

For a second, I had to think who she meant. “Oh, didn’t I say? Stacey and I broke up a few months ago.”

“Dexter! What happened?”

She was acting like it was a big deal. “Nothing. Just came to the end of the road, I guess.” I tried to remember who had actually ended it. Her, I think.

“The end of the road? She was such a nice girl and so supportive.”

“Yeah. She was great,” I replied, glancing at the top drawer of my desk and wondering if Hollie had called. If I’d not been so distracted last evening, I would have remembered to get her last name.

“So, if you admit she was great, why aren’t you together anymore?”

Primrose was looking at me as if I had some bomb I was about to drop, but really, it was the same story as it had been with the last few women I'd dated. They wanted things to "progress" or to "take our relationship to the next level" or began suggesting we move in together. I was always content to stay in the early, less-intensive phase of relationships, but the women I was with always wanted more. I knew I couldn't give them more, but I wasn't the guy to lead them on, either.

"Do you think you ever got over Bridget?" she asked.

I leaned back in my chair. "Bridget and I had something great, and I messed it up. It's that simple. I couldn't make it work with her, so why would I think I could with anyone else?" When I'd tried to make things right with Bridget, she'd already moved on to someone more worthy of her. Last time I heard, she was happily married. At least that had been closure.

"It was a long time ago," Primrose said.

"Yes, but a mistake is a mistake. The important thing is, I'm not repeating it." My mum always used to say the same to my brother and me—messing up is to be expected. It's part of life. What's important is that we learn from the mess.

"So you cut these women loose as soon as they hint at wanting more from you, instead of trying to make it work."

I didn't want to talk about this with Primrose. She just wanted me married off to whoever was around. She'd liked every girlfriend of mine she had ever met. And I got it. She wanted to see me happy. But I wasn't the guy to get married and have a family. Bridget had been the only chance at that kind of life. And if I couldn't manage it with her, I wouldn't be able to give any woman what she needed from me. "I think you're almost there with the earrings. I can't wait to see one actually made. But let's progress the others in case these are too on-the-nose once they're made. When do you think you and Frank will have something for me?"

Primrose sighed and stood up, knowing better than to push the issue. There was nothing more to be discussed between us on the subject of my dating life. "By the end of next week."

"I really want to get tiara drawings with the Zambian emeralds in place of the Columbian tomorrow. Is that possible?"

"Of course. I can put that change through on the three designs we're still working on," she said as she opened the door to leave.

I waited exactly three seconds after Primrose left before I yanked my desk

drawer open and pulled out my phone.

Nope. She still hadn't called. Bloody hell. I was acting like a teenager. And what was the point anyway? We'd just end up dating and eventually come to the end of the road, just like I had with everyone who'd come after Bridget. I probably shouldn't have even given Hollie my card. Better to imagine what might have been than to disappoint her like all the rest.

Who was I trying to kid? I wouldn't rest until I saw her again.

I flipped to my messages. Nothing.

Maybe attending all the competition events wouldn't just be about showing people I didn't think I was too good for the London jewelry trade. Maybe I'd get to run into Hollie again, and maybe this time I'd convince the new-to-London American to share fondue with me. The next event was a charity luncheon next week, and for the first time in a very long time, I was looking forward to some small talk and warm wine.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hollie

Everyone had left the office some time ago, leaving me in the dark with just the glow of my monitor lighting the way to understanding the specialty design software. At some point I'd have to master my new company smartphone as well.

I'd been over Sparkle's designs for the competition again and again. They were . . . nice. I was sure they had qualities I didn't fully appreciate, but at the same time, to my untrained eye, they seemed kind of . . . dull. I got that a design fit for royalty would have to be conservative. The tiara Dexter's parents had designed set the bar for an innovative but classic piece, timeless and elegant but forever in style. Sparkle's entries were definitely on the classic end of the spectrum, and I had yet to be convinced of any innovation. I had some ideas and wanted to see if I could use the computer to bring my design to life instead of relying on my trusty notebook.

The longer I sat at my desk, the more error messages I saw. I was worried I was about to blow the entire computer to pieces.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when my new smartphone began to ring.

Propping the cell on a stack of stationery, I pressed the accept button.

"Hey, you did it," Autumn said, beaming at me from the screen.

"I just had to move my finger, Autumn. It wasn't that hard. I wish I could say the same thing about this computer program. This stuff is so complicated." I needed to be proficient at the program, which all the big houses used. Adding the skill to my resume would be important during my job hunt.

“You’re smart. You’ll figure it out.” Easier said than done. Despite the fact that I worked in a semi-conductor factory, I wasn’t great with technology. In preparation for doing an internship, I’d spent the last twelve months getting familiar with my sister’s old laptop, so at least I knew the very basics. I probably should have bought a smartphone before coming to London, but those things were just so expensive. I couldn’t justify it when there were so many bills to pay.

“Speaking of smart,” I said, “how are your classes? You don’t have long to go so you need to get—”

“I know, get my head down, get the work done and get out of this town. You’ve been telling me the same thing since I was eight years old. I’m just as motivated as you are.” Hearing how Autumn was keeping things on track was almost as gratifying as my internship at Sparkle. Knowing my sister was destined for something more than the Sunshine Trailer Park was something that kept me going when I was working double shifts at the factory to pay her tuition at Oregon State. I’d been determined for as long as I could remember that she and I would not end up stuck where we weren’t happy, just because that’s where we’d been born. Autumn was smart—so smart she’d gotten a scholarship for half her tuition and most of her textbooks. Some months I had to juggle—take on extra shifts, pray for a necklace sale on my Etsy site, even do a spring clean for Mrs. Daugherty across the street. But Autumn would graduate this summer and it was as if I were graduating too. Since I was four years old and my mom had brought Autumn home from the hospital—a bundle of limbs and peepy eyes—I’d vowed to take care of her. Her graduation would be confirmation that I’d done what I set out to do. After that, I just had to get her to leave Sunshine and make good on all her amazing potential. She would do something spectacular with her life—if her boyfriend didn’t make her want to stay right where she’d always been.

“How’s Greg?” I asked.

Autumn laughed. “You know I can see your gritted teeth when you ask me that because you’re on video.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m trying to be supportive.”

“No, you’re not. You were just hoping I’d tell you he’d been crushed by his dad’s muscle car.”

“I’m not a monster. I don’t want Greg dead. I just don’t want him . . .”

“Anywhere near me.”

I couldn’t lie. I would be very happy if Greg disappeared from Autumn’s

life. Not because Greg was a bad guy—he wasn't. But I could guarantee he was going to spend the rest of his life living within a hundred yards of his current home, which just happened to be the Sunshine Trailer Park, managed by none other than Greg's dad. I wanted something better for Autumn. I dreaded her getting pregnant or announcing she and Greg were getting married or something. She was almost twenty-two and I wanted more for her. Or I at least wanted her to have options. If she took a job in Portland or New York or something and decided she was happier at the trailer park, that was one thing. But not having a choice? I couldn't live with myself.

"Don't sweat it," Autumn said. "Greg does whatever I tell him and it's convenient. It's no big love affair."

"How are Mom and Dad?" I asked. Keen as I was to change the subject, I was just jumping from the frying pan right into the fire.

"Okay, actually."

"Have they asked you for money yet?"

"I gave Mom twenty yesterday but it's no big deal."

I sighed. I'd begged Mom not to ask Autumn for money.

"It's not a big deal. She seemed okay actually, talking about applying for a job at Trader Bob's."

"Really?" I said, wondering if I'd heard her correctly. I couldn't remember the last time my mom had been interested in working. Occasionally she'd get offered something through a friend, but it never lasted long. She'd shoot her mouth off or lose something important. She never lasted more than a week. But I covered their rent and gave them money here and there. I just didn't want Autumn to have that burden. It wasn't fair.

"Yeah. Her friend is working there or something. We'll see how long it lasts."

"How's Dad?" It had only been a week since I'd left but if Mom was job hunting, maybe Dad had taken up lion taming. Apparently anything was possible.

"No idea. Mom says he has a cold."

Maybe I was overreacting. My dad took to his bed with a cold most months. It was an excuse to watch a lot of TV and not clean up after himself.

"But enough of boring old Oregon," Autumn said. "Tell me about last night. How was the dress? Did you get to try on any jewelry?"

"You know." I sighed dramatically. "Another evening, drinking champagne and rubbing shoulders with the beautiful people." I grinned. "I

didn't get to try on the jewelry, which is just as well because I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have wanted to take it off again."

"You look so happy," she said. "I bet you looked beautiful."

"Well I didn't get thrown out because my dress wasn't expensive enough, which at one point, I thought was a real possibility. I even got to drink the champagne." That wasn't quite true. I'd tasted it, but I kept putting down my glass and forgetting about it. The jewelry had been all-consuming.

"You were born to drink champagne," Autumn said. "I'm glad it's not just work, work, work. I know what you're like. I know you're there to learn but try and have some fun too."

"Actually, I got asked out on a date," I said and then immediately wished I hadn't.

Autumn scooted closer to the phone. "Tell me everything. A British guy?"

Not just a British guy. *The* British guy. Anyone who was anyone knew Dexter Daniels. I still wasn't sure why he'd singled me out. "Of course a British guy."

"Tell me you said yes."

"I took his number."

Autumn groaned. "I suppose that's better than a straight no."

Except that I had no intention of using the number, so it wasn't much better.

"You should enjoy yourself," Autumn said. "You can work hard *and* go out for drinks with someone you know."

It was tempting. Dexter had been sweet. And although he couldn't have been as good looking as I remembered, he was undoubtedly handsome. But he had thrown off my concentration long enough for me to miss my ride. God only knew what the man was capable of during the course of an evening of fondue.

"You don't need to worry about me. I'm in London. I'm having more fun than you could possibly imagine." Compared to life in Oregon, the past week had been a kaleidoscope of fresh, exciting experiences.

CHAPTER SIX

Hollie

Jiminy freaking Cricket.

I'd convinced myself he couldn't possibly be as good looking as I'd imagined, but sitting across the other side of this gigantic room from Dexter Daniels, it was clear I'd just been delusional. And it wasn't just how he looked. It was the way he carried himself. It was as if he were the sun and we were all orbiting him, our only option to surrender to his gravitational pull. He was so confident and relaxed, as if nothing could faze him. What would happen if I went up behind him and tickled him under his arms?

He'd probably forgotten about me by now and moved on to Gigi or Bella. Or some other tall, leggy supermodel who didn't have one boob half a cup size bigger than the other. I glanced down at my chest. Autumn swore she couldn't tell but she also told me I was the best jewelry designer in the world, so she was clearly full of it.

There was no doubt he was gorgeous, the kind of man who was every girl's type. Was there such a thing as being universally handsome? His suit was blue—not navy—and the color emphasized the black of his hair. His voice was deep with a hint of roughness, like the sound a five-o'clock shadow would make. His hands were capable and strong. We didn't get many men like Dexter at the Sunshine Trailer Park. Or maybe in all of Oregon.

Out of nowhere everyone started clapping and the plates that had held our lunches were being whisked away from in front of us.

Our table was the eight-member competition team of Sparkle. Most other jewelry houses had their own tables, and some had even filled two. We all

shifted to see the two people standing behind the lectern at the far end of the room.

I glanced over at Dexter to see if his attention had also been captured, only to find him looking right at me. The corners of his mouth twitched as we locked eyes, as if he'd just been told a dirty joke in his grandma's house. I quickly looked away.

I tried to resist covering my heating cheeks, knowing the movement would just draw attention to my embarrassment. I pretended to be engrossed in what was happening behind the lectern. While the two women in front of us were speaking, I tried to stay focused. In the end I pulled out my notebook and started making notes, just so I'd be forced to follow what they were saying, which wasn't very much. Something about having the honor of hosting the competition. How the best of the best were all in the same room. They were looking forward to unveiling the designs. Then someone else was welcomed on stage. A tall, slender guy with a shock of white-blond hair. I'd missed who he was, but he looked like he'd be in the airport, welcoming everyone to Finland. When he started talking about his mother and his soon-to-be-married sister, I figured out we were in the presence of royalty. *Actual* royalty, and I'd nearly missed it because of darned Dexter Daniels. We'd only had one conversation and already I was missing vital pieces of information because he was so distracting.

That was it. I was determined not to look in his direction again. I wouldn't even think about that chiseled jaw, those blue eyes and large hands that fit so deliciously in the small of my back. No siree.

I scribbled furiously for the rest of the presentation, completely focused on what was being said. The prince talked passionately about Finland and the environment and how the charitable causes being supported through this competition were important to his entire family.

As he stepped off the podium, everyone stood and applauded.

While I was clapping, there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned and found myself face-to-face with Dexter.

So much for pretending he didn't exist.

"Hollie," he said. "Good to see you again."

"Hi," I said as breezily as I could manage. "Great speech, right?"

"Inspiring," he said, grinning at me as if I'd said something hilarious.

I glanced around, checking that no one from Sparkle was scowling at me for fraternizing with the competition, but no one was paying any attention to

me. I turned back to him, staring at his Adam's apple as if looking him in the eye would turn me to stone—mush more likely. “So, I didn't call,” I said, feeling awkward at our closeness and slightly ridiculous not meeting his gaze.

“I figured you must have mislaid my card,” he said.

I rolled my eyes, irritated at his arrogance, and finally looked him in the eye. This guy didn't have the power to turn me to mush. He overestimated himself, just like most men, and I wasn't going to indulge him. “Nope. I know it's hard to believe, but there are women in this world who actually don't want to have dinner with you.”

He paused, his grin never faltering. “I can think of a number of women who fit that description. But you're not one of them.”

Was this guy for real? I'd refused to give him my number, for crying out loud. And I hadn't called him. Why would he assume I wanted to have dinner with him? “It must be the way I keep calling and texting you that has you thinking like that,” I said, folding my arms.

He chuckled, and a voice in my head told me to turn and walk away. This guy was trouble. Not because he was cocky but because he was right. I did want to have dinner with him. And I didn't like that he knew that.

“Nope. Not that,” he replied.

“Is it the way I sent you panties in the mail?”

“They were from you?” he asked, and I had to bite back a smile when I rolled my eyes this time. “I've not quite worked out why you didn't call, but I know it's not because you don't want to have dinner with me.”

“Actually, I don't,” I replied. A pit started to form in my gut at the prospect of him taking me at my word, and finding some other woman to badger about going to dinner.

I liked being that woman.

“I don't find you attractive. I'm not into British guys.”

He nodded as if he were carefully considering my words. “Give me your phone.”

I pulled out my brand-new company *mobile*. I swear, I had never touched anything that expensive. I bet Dexter was going to check if I'd saved his number—to use that as proof I really did want to go on a date with him. “Here,” I said, having unlocked it.

He scrolled through my four contacts, and I waited for him to hand it back with his tail between his legs when he saw he wasn't listed. His phone

started to ring and he ignored it, then passed me back my phone. “There,” he said. “Now I have your number and mine is saved in your phone. This way I get to convince you to have dinner with me.”

Well, he wasn’t lacking in confidence.

“Have you heard of the Me Too movement?” I asked. “You know no means no.”

He pulled away from me just a fraction and, holding my gaze, blinked once. Then twice. “Hollie, sexual harassment is something to be taken seriously. If you’re uncomfortable, tell me now and I’ll delete your number and walk away. If we’re flirting, having fun, and for some reason you’re a little scared to come to dinner with me and need some convincing, then that’s another matter.”

My head buzzed with heat. I needed to flee from this place as if it were on fire. Dexter had an answer for everything and seemed to have the measure of me. More reasons to run for the hills. I kept telling myself I didn’t want to be distracted by some guy in London, but the truth was, I had a sinking feeling Dexter wasn’t just *some guy*. “A lot of convincing,” I corrected him. Darn. I hadn’t meant to show him a chink in my armor. I’d meant to tell him I was absolutely not interested in him and that I didn’t want him to call.

But the way he looked at me as if he wanted to uncover all my secrets and tell me all his . . . The way his hand felt as he’d helped me out of the car—as if he could protect me from anything. And the way he said my name like he’d never heard anything quite so exotic. It was all too overwhelming. Despite the logical side of my brain telling me to run far away, the thumping in my chest and the pulsing ache somewhere far below it overruled my head. Like it or not, I wanted him to convince me to go to dinner with him.

“Challenge accepted,” he said, before turning to disappear into the crowd.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dexter

Hollie Lumen. She'd finally confessed her last name. It had only taken two days and God knows how many messages. She was a challenge indeed.

"Have you fallen victim to Fortnite?" Beck asked me as I set his water in front of him.

"What are you talking about?" I replied and slid my phone onto the table and went back to the bar for my whiskey.

"You've looked at your phone about ninety times since I said hello three minutes ago," he said as I pulled out the stool and took a seat. Beck and I were almost always the first to arrive at our weekly mates' night. It gave us a chance to catch up before everyone else arrived.

"No, I haven't." I *had* been kind of caught up with my phone in the last few days, but Hollie was funny. I looked forward to her messages.

"Yeah, you really have. Is work okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine. How's Stella?" I knew mentioning the love of his life would be the best way to throw him off the scent of the phone obsession I didn't have.

"Oh, you know. She blows my mind every day."

"You know if you say things like that, it's almost mandatory that I have to make an oral sex joke."

"Why? Because you're fifteen? Or you've turned into Tristan?"

"You just make it so bloody easy. It's ridiculous." He'd left the door open, true, but we both knew Stella was the best thing that had ever happened to Beck. I was pleased for him. I knew what it was to find the love of your

life. I'd been there. And Beck had done better than me. He'd hung on to his and was living their happily ever after.

"You need a woman who blows your mind," he said. "That's your problem. It's all about the sex for you, but there's more to a relationship."

"Sorry, did you just become my mother?" Ever since Beck had finally sorted it out with Stella, he'd become the world's biggest proponent of serious relationships. I got it. But he needed to understand—I wasn't looking for Mrs. Daniels. That ship had sailed.

"You talked sex with your mother? I just want to see you happy."

That's why I couldn't even stay mildly irritated at Beck. All he wanted was for all of us to be as happy as he was. Judging by the grin on his face, that was pretty bloody happy.

"So, what's going on?" he asked. "You stressed about the competition?"

"No, that's not it," I replied. I had nothing to hide. And maybe if I threw him a bone, he'd get off my case. "I've actually been messaging a woman I want to take to dinner. She's funny. And . . . pretty." I couldn't help but grin like a ten-year-old who had been given a United season ticket as I thought about her.

"This is news. You never talk about women."

"I'm not talking about her. I'm just explaining—"

"I'm not complaining. Who is she? Do we get to meet her? I have to tell Stella."

He grabbed his phone from where it lay face down on the table. Before he could start to gossip with Stella, I pulled it from his grasp. "None of your business and no. We've not even been on a date yet. Put a hold on that hat."

"Wait, what do you mean you've not even been on a date? You lost your bollocks and haven't asked her?"

"When I lose my bollocks, you can take an ad out in the *Times*."

"So why haven't you been on a date?" he asked.

It was a good question. We had chemistry. And I didn't normally have trouble getting a woman to have dinner with me. But there was something about Hollie that made her scared to say yes. That only made me more intrigued about what lay beneath her beautiful surface—what had made her so scared. I wanted to take her to dinner more than ever. "I'm not sure."

"So, you've asked her?"

"Yeah. She said no and then confessed that she'd wanted to say yes. We're messaging back and forth." I'd thought about calling her but I didn't

want to spook her. I couldn't tell Beck that, because Beck would ask me why I cared—and I wouldn't have an answer. I also wouldn't have an answer if he asked me why I was checking my phone incessantly in case she messaged me back. I wouldn't have an answer if he asked me why my stomach flipped whenever a message finally came through.

“The thrill of the chase,” he said. “I was never like that but—”

“It's not that.” I had never been into the chase. “That's Tristan, not me.”

Beck nodded, and I could tell by the controlled movement he was dying to ask more questions.

“I don't know what it is,” I said. “She's American. And . . .” I had dated American women before, so that wasn't the reason I liked Hollie. It was more that she managed to be both wide-eyed innocent and devilishly suspicious at the exact same time. She was direct enough to refuse to give me her number and to ask for my card, but not so open that she'd tell me why she was refusing to have dinner with me

“Maybe it's because you like to torture yourself a little,” Beck said, fishing out the lemon from his water and placing it on the table. “Bloody lemon.”

“I like an easy life. That's why I end things whenever they get heavy. I'm not into self-torture at all.”

“That's total bollocks,” Beck said. “I can't let you get away with that, mate.”

“What?” I said, offended. “I like women. I like sex with women, friendship with women, but I'm not into torture. I'm not a masochist, physically or emotionally.”

Silence echoed off him in waves. Beck rarely held back telling me what he thought. None of us did. Meeting when we did—facing the challenges we'd faced together—had created an intimacy between us that meant we were brutally honest with each other, and as open as it was possible for six guys to be.

“You don't agree?” I asked him.

“What about Bridget?” he asked.

“What about her?”

“You like to torture yourself about her.”

“I blame myself. That's not the same as torture.” I'd been young when it had all fallen apart, but that was no excuse.

“I'm not sure about that. I think you two breaking up has become almost

mythical to you.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? It is what it is. We were together. We were happy. We were in love. I screwed it up by ending things over some stupid argument. When I finally got my head out of my arse and tried to get her back, she’d moved on. I’m an idiot. That’s not self-torture. That’s facts.”

“Well they’re not the facts as I see them.”

I liked Beck. Loved him. Not just like a brother, but as my best friend and confidante. Tonight, though, he was pissing me off. I checked the time on my phone. Where the fuck was everyone?

At that exact moment Gabriel swept in. “I swear to God, if I was ever gay, it would be Gabriel I’d have the hots for,” I said, watching him as he strode over to the table.

“Is this your coming-out party?” Beck asked.

“You’re gay?” Gabriel asked, looking at me as if he’d just asked me whether I was enjoying my water.

“Nope but if I was, I think you’d be my type.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes and pulled his pint of Guinness from the small circle of drinks in the middle of the table. “Good to know.”

“He’s trying to distract us because I just told him some home truths.”

“Interesting,” Gabriel said, taking a seat beside Beck. “Go on.”

“No, you didn’t. You just floated some ridiculous theory about me enjoying self-torture.”

Gabriel’s gaze flitted between us like he was at Wimbledon.

“Because of the Bridget thing,” Beck said as if that explained everything.

“Oh, right, yes,” Gabriel said as if he completely understood.

“What do you mean, yes? Beck is being ridiculous, right?”

“Look, mate. I just got here—you two keep your playground fight between yourselves. I’m going to sit and enjoy my Guinness until some sane people arrive.”

“You’ll get splinters sitting on that fence,” I replied. “Beck just said I like to torture myself about Bridget and I said stating facts wasn’t the same as self-torture.”

“I’m not sure it’s self-torture,” he said, giving Beck a look that said *don’t be so dramatic*, “but it’s weird how you just write yourself off as never being able to find happiness because things didn’t work out with the girlfriend you had at nineteen.”

It took all my effort not to stand up and walk out. Was he serious? These

guys knew me inside out, or at least I thought they did. Maybe they didn't at all. Maybe I knew them. Understood how each of *them* ticked, what their strengths and weaknesses were, but perhaps that knowledge wasn't reciprocated. Because I *wasn't* torturing myself about Bridget. I was accepting responsibility. I wasn't bitter or broken by what happened. I just understood that I'd messed up and would never be in love again. "What we had was special and that doesn't come along twice in a lifetime. I'm completely at peace with that. No torture. No drama."

Gabriel started to chuckle. "Yeah. No drama at all." He raised the back of his palm to his forehead. "I'll never love again. It only happens once in a lifetime."

Beck began to copy him. "She's the only woman in the entire world—Jesus, mate, you were basically a kid. Get over yourself."

Harsh.

I leaned back in my chair as if pinned by a sudden g-force. Honestly, I thought I'd been the opposite of dramatic as far as Bridget and I were concerned. And it wasn't as if I'd sworn off women or anything. I'd rarely been single in the last decade.

I looked up to find Tristan glancing around our silent table.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

"We're giving Dexter shit," Beck said.

"I think we should stop," Gabriel replied, shooting me a sideways glance. "If you want to torture yourself, that's your business. We're here for you whatever."

"So, what's your solution to me being dramatic about Bridget? I barely talk about her . . ."

"We're talking about Bridget again?" Tristan asked before collapsing on his stool. Gabriel pushed him a pint of beer.

"You make it sound like I'm mooning around, constantly talking about her—"

"No, you don't talk about her," Gabriel conceded and I gave him a nod in appreciation. "It's just that the women you hang out with—your relationships are all a reaction to Bridget. Still."

"That's a good way of putting it," Beck said. "They're a reaction."

"You assume you'll never meet anyone to be with long-term—commit to, fall in love with—*because* of Bridget."

Well that was true. "I'm not complaining. I'm not heartbroken." I was an

idiot, that I could accept. But it's not like I was pining over lost love.

"Doesn't mean you're over her," Beck said.

"No," Gabriel corrected. "Getting over *her* isn't the solution. You need to get over your *relationship*."

I was pretty sure that was a distinction without a difference. I'd had enough. I'd come out tonight to relax and kick back, not to suffer a character assassination.

My cell buzzed in my hand.

Okay dinner. But only if it's fondue. And you must not distract me at competition events. We're strangers if we ever bump into each other outside of cheese. Agreed?

Finally. And even though I didn't understand her terms, I didn't care. I needed to be distracted from thinking about whether I was still hung up on Bridget.

"Did I tell you that David was there at the launch of the competition?" I said in a final ditch effort to stop these guys going on about Bridget.

"David who?" Tristan asked. It had been a long time since I'd brought up my brother in conversation, so Tristan's confusion could be forgiven.

"Your brother?" Gabriel asked.

"Apparently," I said. Seeing his name on the list of attendees had reignited the anger inside me. "I guess he and Sparkle are still colluding. Fifteen years later, they're still making money by rereleasing and rehashing my mother's designs. I guess they have a lot to be grateful to him for." Maybe he'd taken some kind of shareholding in the company when he sold them my parents' business? Were we competitors now?

"Sparkle? You think he took additional money from them?" Beck asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me. He has the moral compass of an alley cat. Why else would he be there? I looked him up. He still works at a bank. Not in the industry."

"Wow, that's low," Beck said.

"And fraud," Gabriel pointed out, ever the lawyer. "Potentially. If he was offered an incentive to sell to Sparkle and didn't tell you about it."

"He didn't tell me about any of it," I reminded Gabriel. I hadn't gotten a say in what happened to my parents' business. David had made all the decisions and had taken the opportunity to betray me in the process.

When I'd entered the competition, I'd every intention of winning. I'd wanted to carry on my parents' legacy—to link my business with theirs by

bejeweling the next generation of Finnish royalty. But now winning wasn't enough.

I was going to have to destroy the competition.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hollie

I'd never cared what I'd worn on a date before. Tonight was different, not just because I was going on a date with the best-looking man I'd ever seen, but because we were in *London*. People here were *sophisticated*. They went to the theater and spoke a thousand languages and read books I'd never even heard of. I was going to give myself away as some trailer park chick as soon as I rocked up wearing my favorite skinny jeans and a blue shirt that looked like silk even though it was one hundred percent rayon. Actually, it wasn't my outfit that would give me away—my shirt really did look like silk, and it seemed that in London there were fewer rules about what you could or couldn't wear than in Oregon. But I hadn't gone to college, my favorite book was *A Woman of Substance*, and the only language I spoke was English, with an American accent.

I rubbed my pendant between my thumb and forefinger, trying to get up the courage to go inside Urban Alpine, the restaurant Dexter had sent me the details of yesterday. He'd offered to pick me up but I told him I'd meet him here. Now I was hovering on the step, wishing I'd said yes to a ride. At least that way, there would be no chickening out at the last minute.

It wasn't that I was nervous. It was more that I just felt out of my depth. Dating wasn't my forte, but it was much easier when you didn't want to strip the guy naked in public and take shots off what I just knew would be deliciously hard abs. It would be much, much easier if he didn't make me laugh so darn much, even by message. And the way he was so completely sure that I'd eventually say yes to dinner and that it didn't seem to faze him

that I'd kept him waiting as long as I had. It was annoying because he was so freaking attractive, and spending time with an attractive man wasn't on my list of things to do while I was in London. And I had a long list.

"Here goes nothing," I said out loud. I gripped the door handle and pulled with such force that it smashed into the wall, and the few tables nearest the door all turned to look at the lunatic who apparently didn't know her own strength.

I grimaced. "Sorry," I said. I immediately caught Dexter's eye. He was grinning at me from a corner table on the far left of the room.

I couldn't help smiling back, despite the fact he was probably laughing at my ridiculous entrance.

Awkwardly, I grunted at the hostess and pointed at Dexter. She let me make my own way over to our table.

He stood as I approached and leaned in to kiss me on both cheeks. I was getting used to the two-kiss thing, and managed not to accidentally turn it into a kiss on the mouth.

"So," I said. "Fondue."

"*Finally*, fondue," he replied. "You look beautiful."

"So do you," I replied. Weird thing to say to a guy maybe, but I wasn't about to get arrested by the truth police. He looked freaking phenomenal. Just the way he sat—arms stretched along the top of the booth, taking up as much space as possible, like he was the King of London—had my heart racing.

He chuckled. "Okay."

I sat at the v-shaped booth, him on one side, me on the other, our knees almost touching.

"So, what's good?" I asked, picking up the menu.

"I heard the cheese is amazing."

I laughed. "Well if it's not, I'm off. I'm all about the cheese."

"Don't I know it. I think if I'd suggested any other type of place, I'd have got a hard no. It was difficult enough to get you to say yes to cheese."

He was looking at me like he knew I thought he was as hot as Hades but was happy to play along with my I'm-not-that-into-you routine. And gosh-darn it, that just made him all the more attractive. No doubt he'd gotten more female attention than he would know what to do with his whole life, yet here he was. With me.

"Yeah, well, I'm not in London for the guys." Although it would be the place to come.

“Certainly not. You’re clearly here for the cheese.” He beckoned the waitress over, and after checking with me, ordered fondue and wine.

I wasn’t sure if it was just that he was supremely confident or whether he was just the first grown-up man I’d ever gone on a date with, but tonight felt different from any date I’d had before. “I’ve never had a date order for me,” I said, tearing a piece of bread from the board in front of us. I wondered if Autumn would approve or think he was an overbearing jerk.

“Do you mind? I know you don’t like me giving your address to my driver.” He raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t think I do. I mean, you checked with me first. If you hadn’t, I think it would have been weird.”

“Given we’ve only met twice before.”

“Right,” I said. “But I kinda liked it, and I figured maybe you majored in hot cheese at college or something.”

“What a relief.” He smiled as if it wasn’t a relief at all. As if he’d known all along that I’d like it. That it would make me feel looked after. Special. “I like that I get to hear your inside thoughts. On the outside.”

I swallowed down my bread. Was that the British equivalent of “bless your heart?” Was it meant to sound like a compliment but was actually a ginormous put down? “What do you mean?”

“You’re open. Direct. Say what’s on your mind. And I get it in real time as you’re thinking it.”

Hmmm, he was kinda right. The filter I had was in need of repair in places.

“Mostly,” he added. “I can’t wait to uncover the rest.” He raised his glass. “I’ve never worked so hard to get dinner with a woman. Let’s have a great evening and not worry too much about anything but cheese.”

It was as if the bits I was hiding, he had discovered anyway. He knew exactly what to say to put me at ease. And that was amazing and horrifying. Part of me had agreed to this dinner so I could get to know his flaws, find something irritating about him. This wasn’t going to go well if he just got *more* attractive.

“That’s a pretty necklace you’re wearing,” he said.

My fingers went to my throat. “Thanks. It was the first piece I ever designed.” My oak leaf was plain silver. No stones or fancy settings, but it was priceless to me. “I have an Etsy shop,” I said. There was no point in pretending to be anyone I wasn’t. This guy was as big as anyone could be in

the industry. Nothing I said was going to impress him. “No diamonds or Bolivian emeralds.”

“Zambian.”

“Those either. No emeralds of any kind.”

He grinned at me, his eyes fixed on my face as if he couldn’t quite believe his luck that I was his date. “You make your own stuff for the Etsy shop or do you get it made?”

“I make it myself.” He didn’t have to know I had a couple of orders a month.

“I like the leaf. Is it you? Away from home, looking for a place to land?”

I took a breath before I answered and popped a chunk of bread in my mouth, trying to give myself some extra time. But even those additional seconds didn’t give me an answer. “I don’t know,” I said. Maybe I was. I wasn’t connected to the trailer park in any sentimental way, and although home should have felt like anywhere Autumn was, at the moment, I didn’t know where I belonged. I wanted more than I had in Oregon. Being here, in London, gave a sense of freedom I hadn’t expected. Sometimes I felt the pull of home, but I hadn’t been homesick. The feeling was usually accompanied by a rush of worry about what was going on when I wasn’t around to clean up after my parents or look after my sister. “When I think of an oak tree, I think of strength,” I said without thinking.

“Yes,” he said, an intense look on his face. “I like that.”

He didn’t elaborate and seemed much more comfortable in the following silence than I was.

“Do you design things?” I asked, wanting to shift him away from whatever it was he was thinking about.

He shook his head. “I leave that to more talented people.”

“So you’re the business brains?”

“I like to think I’ve got an instinct for what will look good when it’s translated from paper into reality,” he said. “I see myself as an editor—a curator of the design, if you like. And of course, I love stones. When I see an uncut stone, I can see the gem it will be. I can picture it when it’s cut and polished and in its setting.”

He had creative vision. With business brains. Argh. Why couldn’t he have been a bean counter? I guess that’s what made him one of the most successful people in the industry.

“I haven’t worked with stones. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m not sure you’ll find any in the fondue.”

“Whoever told you that you were funny was lying.”

He laughed, perfectly satisfied with his joke.

“That’s why I’m here *in London*,” I clarified. “More experience. I want to turn a hobby into a career.”

One side of his mouth began to curl upward as if he was enjoying listening to me speak. Maybe it was my accent.

“So, if jewelry is just your hobby, what’s your career now?”

“I have a job, not a career. It pays the bills. Let’s not talk about it.” While I was here, I wanted to imagine that this was my only life now. The less I had to think about the worries that awaited me back home, the better.

A hint of a frown crossed Dexter’s forehead and I longed to reach across the table and smooth it down.

“What about you? What would you have done if you hadn’t been a jeweler?”

“There was no other path for me,” he answered without hesitation. “I was born to do this.”

“Because you love it or because it’s what your parents did?” It was amazing to me that anyone could be so sure about what they were meant to do with their lives.

“Most definitely both,” he replied. “What do your parents do?”

I groaned. “Not a lot.” I really didn’t want to talk about life back in Oregon.

Our fondue arrived just in time to save me from the question. The waitress placed a small saucepan on the burner in the middle of the table, with an array of bread, meats and vegetables alongside. I hadn’t thought this through. This blouse was rayon, but that didn’t mean it would wipe clean. Who came to a fondue restaurant for a first date?

“Who knows you best in the entire world?” I asked, desperate to steer the conversation away from my life in Oregon.

He offered me the bread basket and I stabbed a cube with my long fork.

“I have five best friends—we’ve been close since we were teenagers.”

“Nice,” I said. “Like a pack?”

“They’re human. Not wolves.” He growled, low and deep, and I swear I was a second away from pulling a Meg Ryan. Only I wouldn’t have been faking.

“You tell them your deepest, darkest secrets?” I asked.

“To the extent I have any. I’m pretty much an open book.” A hint of the frown again and my fingers buzzed with the urge to press it away.

“I read a thing online about you,” I confessed. “Because, you know—” Obviously I was going to google a guy before I shared cheese with him. “It said you had ‘shunned the London jewelry industry’ for years. That true?” I didn’t need an internet search to tell me that—his reputation preceded him—but he didn’t need to know that.

“Yes and no,” he replied.

I waited for him to elaborate but he just dipped a mushroom into the cheese, popped it in his mouth and chewed.

“Well, that’s not an answer.”

“No. That was me saying I don’t want to answer.” His lips curled around his words and he scanned my face before adding, “In British.”

I laughed. “I’m not fluent yet.” I met guys who kept things secret, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever met a man who was completely open about what he was hiding.

“You didn’t tell me which one of my competitors you’re interning for,” he said, clearly trying to change the subject.

“Sparkle,” I said, still proud I’d managed to secure an internship at such a well-renowned firm. Daniels & Co were arguably a better brand, but Sparkle wasn’t far behind.

Dexter froze, his breathing shallow and his eyes fixed on me. It was as if he had an invisible gun to his head and he was trying to warn me to run. And then all of a sudden, he was back to normal—all smiles and easy charm.

“Rewind there for a minute.” Okay, so it was a first date and he didn’t have to tell me why he’d stayed away from London or what his mother’s maiden name was, but we had to have some kind of exchange of information, something deeper than cheese talk. “What was that?” I asked. “When I mentioned Sparkle?”

“What?” he asked, stabbing a piece of pepper.

“Put down the vegetable and tell me why you looked like you’d seen a ghost when I mentioned who I was interning for.”

“No ghosts,” he said, setting down his fork and taking a sip of wine.

This date had only just begun and already it was full of negatives. I was avoiding telling him things, and he was clearly holding his cards close. “You know what I think?”

He paused and looked at me, waiting for me to go on.

“I think we’re doing a dance,” I continued. “I think you’re not saying some things. I’m doing the same, even though you said you like it when *I’m* completely open and you said you were an open book. We’re skating on the surface and it’s nice and all. I mean—you’re great to look at, and fondue is a riveting topic of conversation, but what are we doing here if we’re both trying so hard not to share who we are?”

He blinked but didn’t move. I wasn’t sure if he hadn’t liked what I said or he wanted me to elaborate.

I sat back and pushed my glass away. “I’m trying not to give away that I live under a gray sky in a single-wide trailer and work in a factory. And that I’m wearing a one hundred percent rayon shirt. You?”

There—I’d thrown down a challenge. He might walk out, but just like Dexter had known I wanted to say yes to dinner despite saying no at first, something told me he wouldn’t balk at my invitation to tell the truth. These three months in London would come to an end all too soon, and I wanted to make the most out of every second, including tonight. I had to have the truth, because I didn’t have time for lies.

“It’s all connected,” he said, as if that made perfect sense. His gaze scanned the room, like he was checking for exits or perhaps deciding whether or not he was going to open up. “My parents died in a car crash when I was nineteen.”

This time, I couldn’t hold back—I had to touch him. I leaned and slid my hand over his.

“And my brother sold their business to Sparkle, right out from under my nose. I had no rights under the will because I wasn’t twenty-one. Dealing with the estate was all up to my brother. I lost my parents and their business to Sparkle. All in one.”

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry.” I squeezed his hand.

“Sparkle had tried to recruit my mother—over and over—as a designer. And had poached other members of staff. My parents’ business was small but it produced beautiful jewelry. Sparkle had wanted to own them for years. When they died . . .”

“Sparkle pounced.”

The warm, flirtatious smile had disappeared and the ridge between his eyes was deeper now. I wanted to fix it. I wanted to make it better. “They took advantage,” he said. And I’d bet he’d spent his entire life making sure no one else was ever going to take advantage of him again.

“What did your brother say? Was he sorry?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t know. We haven’t spoken since.” He flipped my hand over and linked his fingers through mine.

I couldn’t imagine going a single day without my sister, let alone years. “Wow. And did he start his own jewelry business like you did?”

“Last I heard he worked in the back office at one of the banks in the City.”

His brother should have been protecting him, not selling off the family business. “I bet that’s a huge motivation for you. Creating Daniels & Co and being so successful.”

“A little,” he replied. It was just two words, but they unlocked a lot about the man in front of me. I couldn’t imagine what such a betrayal by a member of my family would do to me.

Dexter’s brother wasn’t the only one who had betrayed him. Sparkle shared the blame. I was working for the enemy. “I bet you want to beat Sparkle in this competition, huh?” I asked.

“A little,” he repeated. “I want to kiss you more.”

I bit back a smile. He was lying. But I could live with that. “What are the odds, do you think?” I asked, thinking out loud.

“Of me kissing you? That’s up to you. What do *you* think the odds are?”

“Hmm, well, given your form, I’d say . . . three to ten?”

“Three to ten?” he asked, his brow crinkling in confusion. “That’s specific.”

“I have no idea what I’m talking about,” I confessed. “I’m not a girl who makes bets.”

I liked this guy. Against my better judgment, I was here at dinner with him. “It would be complicated, wouldn’t it? Me on the Sparkle team and everything?” I had my reservations about Dexter. He was devastatingly handsome and I wasn’t in London to be devastated. And I wasn’t exactly the ideal woman for him. I hadn’t had anything to do with taking over his family business, but I was working for the people who had.

He sighed and sat back a little in his seat, cold air filling the distance between us. Despite myself, I wanted him to kiss me. And that was the problem. Because I couldn’t remember ever being on a date and wanting so badly to be kissed. First dates were all about thinking about whether the date would end in a kiss. Until tonight, the answer had always been *absolutely not* or *maybe it wouldn’t be so bad*. Once or twice it had even gotten to *you never*

know, it might be amazing. But the idea of kissing Dexter didn't make me think. It made me feel a thousand feelings—the fluttering swirl in the base of my belly, the shiver at the bottom of my spine, and the pulsing heat under my skin. I couldn't *wait* for him to kiss me.

He glanced up at me as if trying to weigh the pros and cons.

“It's not like you were the one who bought my family business. We just won't discuss the competition,” he said, nodding as if it were the easiest answer. I'd suggested the same thing, hadn't I? It was the only way I could justify sitting here tonight. Work was work. This was . . . not work. And even if I was in London to lay the foundations for the rest of my life, Autumn would be quick to tell me I couldn't work one hundred percent of the time. I needed time to recharge. That's what Dexter would be for me—a trip to the spa, but in male form.

“I'm not the enemy?” I asked.

“You don't look much like the enemy,” he replied, leaning forward, closer than before, the air between us thickening.

The clatter of the restaurant faded into the background, and all I could focus on was the rise and fall of Dexter's chest, the way his lips parted and his gaze burned into me.

He slid his hand around the back of my neck and dropped a kiss on the side of my mouth.

I shut my eyes, as if blocking out at least a part of Dexter—the sight of him—would make this moment more manageable. Otherwise, I ran the risk of being completely overwhelmed.

“I'm not your enemy,” I whispered as he pressed his lips on the other side of my mouth.

He growled and I opened my eyes to find him shifting away from me.

“The things I want to do to you,” he said, his voice raw and coarse. I reached out to him, stroking the five o'clock shadow covering his jaw. I ached to know how the rough stubble would feel between my legs.

“Tell me,” I said. I wanted details, to know what he was thinking. I knew that whatever it was, in that exact moment, I would have said yes. To anything.

CHAPTER NINE

Dexter

“I can’t wait to meet this woman,” Beck said, craning his neck to survey the bustling room as if he had a clue what Hollie looked like. He was overly invested.

I’d been light on detail when he’d pumped me for information about my date with Hollie. Partly in an effort to throw him off the scent and also because it had taken me by surprise. Yes, she was fun and warm and so beautiful. But the way she’d called me out—us both out—for hiding things on our date, the way she’d confessed what she’d been trying to hide and had me do the same . . . It wasn’t what I’d expected, which made her all the more intriguing. I’d thought she’d just be another date, just a bit more of a challenge. And I suppose I thought she’d be funny, given her messages after we’d first met. But I hadn’t imagined her to be so . . . beguiling.

I never talked about what my brother had done, conspiring behind my back to sell off everything my parents loved to a predator. As much as I’d like to put it down to the cheese, I knew differently. She’d been right when she’d accused us both of dancing around secrets and half-truths, but we’d been on a date at a restaurant that pretended to be tucked into the Swiss Alps, not on a psychiatrist’s sofa. You weren’t meant to confess your deepest, darkest secrets on a first date. Hollie hadn’t got that memo, and apparently, I didn’t mind too much. There was something in those green-blue eyes that made me want to tell her whatever she wanted to know.

“You’re not going to meet her tonight,” I said. “This is a work thing. We’re here to find out which five jewelry houses are through to the finals.

You're supposed to be moral support."

"But she's here?" he asked. "In this room?"

God, why did I have to bring Beck? He needed to accept that what he'd found with Stella wasn't for everyone.

"Focus, Beck. Moral support. Remember?"

He snapped his head around. "What? Are you worried or something? Of course you're going to make it to the finals." He looked at me as if I'd just told him I was worried about losing a leg bowling, or crashing my car in an empty car park. He had complete faith in me. That's why he was my brother.

"So how many events like this are there?" he asked. "You seem to have had a lot of man dates recently." Today's reveal of the finalists was a buffet lunch overlooking the Thames.

"A lot," I replied. "They're trying to raise a ton for charity. I said to Primrose I'd much prefer to write a huge check than turn up at all of them but —"

"No, you need to show your face," he said. "You don't want to piss off the organizers and have them think you think you're too good to mix with your peers."

"It's not that. I'm just antisocial." It wasn't just that. And Beck knew it.

Beck chuckled. "I know. But they don't. Sometimes you've just got to play the game."

He sounded like Primrose. But the people I surrounded myself with all had my best interests at heart and that's why I was here. "That's why I have so many man dates."

I spotted Hollie across the room and the tips of my fingers twitched with a need to touch her. It was difficult to miss her. She was all tumbling pre-Raphaelite curls and pale skin, like she belonged in a different century.

My gaze slid from her to who she was talking to and my stomach began to churn. Charles Ledwin, CEO of Sparkle and a face I'd never forget. He'd aged, but his face young or old was burned into my memory. The first time I saw him he'd dropped into my parents' shop on Hatton Garden as if he were a customer. Only instead of trying to buy a ring, he offered to buy the place. My father had barked out a laugh and sent him on his way, but he'd appeared a couple more times. It was as if he were circling the place, waiting for his prey to weaken. When my parents died, I told my brother we shouldn't accept the offer, that we should run the place together, just as our parents had wanted. But David had been selfish and greedy, and he'd taken Sparkle's

money.

Even now, thinking back to what he'd done, the wound was still fresh. How could he have cared so little for me?

A microphone squeaked across the room, catching everyone's attention. The head of the environmental charity being supported by the lunch made a short speech before thanking the room for their donations. Despite each event being voluntary, every jeweler who'd entered the competition had written a check in support of the charity being spotlighted. It was smart of the Finish royal family to design a mutually beneficial arrangement—the jewelers all got publicity and the charities received generous donations.

“And now down to business,” the host said. “It's time to announce the five finalists whose designs will be produced ahead of final judgment.”

“Wait,” Beck said. “There's no actual jewelry been made yet?”

“Not officially. We've submitted the designs.” I'd been able to source most of the stones already and the pieces were all but finished. The only thing I didn't have was the emeralds, because of my change of heart from Columbian to Zambian.

“These guys are judging off plan, I see.”

“Yeah. It's not like a building though. A piece can be made or broken because of the stones.” I understood why the organizers with the Finnish royal family had decided to break the competition down like this. They wanted the maximum number of entrants at the beginning because that would generate the most publicity and money for the charitable causes being supported. And it wouldn't be fair for some of the less-established jewelers to make the pieces unless they were going to have a fair chance at winning. It would be a huge financial outlay to make a collection for a royal wedding. I understood all that. I just didn't agree with it. It was possible to get a feel for a piece when you saw it on paper, but it didn't tell you everything about the final ring or bracelet or tiara.

Someone else took over the lectern—I had no idea who. For years I'd kept my focus on me and my business, not taking too much notice of what was going on in the industry. It worked for me. I hadn't gotten bogged down in gossip and politics. And I'd found a path from which I could honor my parents without hearing the condolences and constant comparisons.

The first name was announced—Garrard. No surprise there. Conservative and steady choice. Then Graff, followed by Cartier.

Two slots left.

I glanced over at Hollie. I'd never seen her anything but smiling, but now her jaw was tense and her expression steady, as if beneath the soft curls and wide smile a layer of steel hid.

"The fourth finalist to go through is Van Cleef and Arples," the emcee said.

Hollie turned toward me and gave me a forlorn look that conveyed a mutual understanding—at least one of us would leave this room disappointed. I had no idea she'd seen me.

"And the last finalist is . . . Daniels & Co."

I took a deep breath as Beck clapped me on the back. "Knew you had it."

I glanced over at Hollie, who looked back with an expression of shock and dismay. I really wanted to go over and comfort her but didn't want to risk bumping into any of the people from Sparkle. Besides, I'd sworn I'd not greet her in public.

Shit. I pulled out my phone.

"You are a shitty date," Beck said. "Aren't you going to get me drunk?"

"Hang on a minute," I replied, typing out a short message to say I was sorry to Hollie.

I stuffed my phone back in my pocket and watched as she read my message.

She looked up and gave me a forced smile.

I should be delighted that Daniels & Co was in this final without Sparkle. But I had no sense of victory.

CHAPTER TEN

Hollie

And the hits just kept on coming.

I stepped out of the Sparkle office and onto the raindrop-splattered pavement, and glanced up into the sky. Of course it was raining. When I'd first arrived in London, the rain was comforting and familiar, but now it just reminded me I'd be home sooner than I wanted to be.

I'd known this internship was too good to be true. I didn't fit in this kind of life. I'd been stupid for thinking I could exist outside the Sunshine Trailer Park.

How was I going to tell Autumn I'd been fired? She'd believed in me, wanted the win for me almost as much as I wanted it for myself. I was letting my sister down on top of having all my dreams come tumbling down on top of me all at once.

I'd never lost a job in my life before. And now the only job that could lead to something, could lead to a life I wanted, had been ripped away from me. How was this fair? I tipped my head back, letting the rain fall on my face as if it could wash away the despair rising in my chest.

All that money on flights and renting my studio—all gone. My stomach churned at the thought of how many thousands of dollars I had wasted on a couple of weeks in England. I didn't have enough experience for it to count on my resume, I hadn't secured a letter of recommendation, and I wouldn't have any savings left once I'd paid to get back to Oregon early.

I'd had my shot and it was over.

At least Pauly had kept my job open at the factory so I had something to

go back to.

And Dexter? I'd never see him again, never get to feel the scrape of his chin against my thigh. We'd had one dinner, but I'd never had such a perfect date. He was meant to be the icing on top of the London cake. My fun. My spa in male form. He'd been the first man who made me laugh out loud, the first man who I looked forward to kissing, the first man I ever wanted to have a second date with. Now none of that would happen.

What a disastrous mess.

I slumped on a bench and my phone buzzed in my hand.

Shit, I was meant to leave the phone. That would be Sparkle's office manager, demanding it back.

I turned the phone over in my hand to reveal the caller. Dexter.

I slid the green button across. "Come and get drunk with me?"

"You going to help me celebrate?" he asked and despite my cloud of misery, I could still picture his relaxed smile. I knew he hadn't called to crow. It wasn't his style.

"Yes. And you can help me commiserate."

"Sparkle will let you go early? I was going to suggest dinner."

"Yeah, Sparkle let me go early. That's what you're going to help me commiserate about."

"What? They let you go early today . . .?" He elongated the question like he knew the answer but didn't want to put it into words.

"I got fired," I coughed out. It hadn't occurred to me they'd just get rid of me if they didn't make the finals of the competition. They said they needed the desk space now they weren't in the competition, which made no sense to me but I guess it didn't need to. I'd been so excited about this opportunity. I'd talked incessantly to Autumn about it, as if this was me going to Harvard or something. But this was *my* Harvard. My chance to focus on me, to have a career, a different life. *Jiminy Cricket*.

Now I was going to have to spend money to change my flight and go home to . . . what?

"Hollie? Did you hear me?"

"What? Sorry? I was just—"

"Where are you right now?" Dexter asked.

I hadn't taken much notice. I looked up for a sign and just saw the Sparkle awning down the street. I hadn't made it far. "I'm getting to the end of Hatton Garden."

“Which end?” he asked. His voice was muffled. “North or south?”

How should I know? “The end with the guy on the horse.” I hadn’t even had time to figure out why the statue at the end of the street was there. And the plaque on the wall outside our office. I kept meaning to read it but hadn’t gotten the chance. Two weeks in London wasn’t enough.

“Holborn Circus end?” he asked.

He’d been drinking already. “Nope. There’s no sign of a circus. Not a clown in sight.” Having to deal with a clown would really be the cherry on top of the most darn-awful day. “Just a gazillion traffic lights and cars everywhere.”

“Yeah. That’s Holborn Circus. Stay right there,” he snapped. “I’ll be ten minutes. I’m coming to get you.”

I’d been joking about him taking me drinking, but if he had the afternoon off to celebrate, I wasn’t going to complain if he wanted to help me drown my sorrows at the same time.

I changed direction, headed back to Sparkle, dropped the phone through their letterbox and retraced my steps toward the circus that wasn’t a circus. I wandered halfway across the street to the pedestrian island separating the cars going in opposite directions, which was where the statue of the man on the horse was. I might not have had a chance to go to the British Museum, but I could at least check this guy out.

The statue was high above me, mounted on a huge block of granite that made it all the more difficult to see it. Why in the hell was this raised high above the ground, overlooking all the traffic?

A car horn behind me made me jump, and I snapped my head around to find Dexter’s head poking out of a car stopped at the lights. “Jump in.”

Despite my mood, I couldn’t help but smile. He was here. I wasn’t sure why or how but I was just pleased he was. It made things a tiny bit better.

“Hey,” I said as I climbed in the passenger seat. “You skipped out of class early?”

“I had the head teacher’s permission.” He paused. “How are you feeling? Those bastards at Sparkle are lower than a snake’s belly.”

“I feel kinda numb.” But being here with Dexter was nice. More than nice. Just sitting next to him dulled the pain and frustration. More time with Dexter, even if it was just a couple of hours, would make this London trip memorable even if it all ended up being a waste of time and money.

“Did they at least pay you until the end of your internship?” he asked.

“It wasn’t a paid thing. I saved—” I didn’t want him to think I was bummed about the money. The money was an issue, but it was the lack of experience and opportunity that was the worst of it. My future felt bleak—an endless parade of trailer park living, factory work, and dreaming dreams that would never come true.

Dexter’s jaw tightened. He wove through traffic before pulling up sharply by the side of the road. “Come on,” he said, opening the door. “Let’s get drunk.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dexter

“Do we have the same drink?” Hollie asked, holding up her glass and squinting as if she were trying to spot a koi carp swimming in her glass.

“You have vodka,” I replied.

She slammed her glass down. “Well that was a bad idea. I’m seeing lots of things . . . everything—there’s two of everything.”

“Vodka was what you asked for.”

“You should never listen to me. Ever,” she said, dramatically shaking her head. She was a cute drunk. And cheap. She was only on her third drink, albeit each one had been different. She’d started with whiskey. “I have terrible brain ideas.”

“Brain ideas?”

“Like coming to London.” More head shaking. “Should have saved my money.”

Charles Ledwin was a shit. I hated him for making Hollie wish she’d never come to London. Sparkle hadn’t even offered to pay her air fare home. And then it hit me—if she was out of a job, there would be no reason for her to stay. She’d be heading back to the US before we’d even got to know each other properly.

“I thought it was the start of something, you know?” She pinched her brows together, earnest in her drunkenness.

I knew exactly what she meant. If she’d stayed the extra few months, I’d have liked to have hung out with her more. She was sexy and fun and sagely naïve. And I hated that she felt bad.

“You’ve still had the experience though, right? You’ll still get something out of it.” I was grasping at straws, trying to say something that would help.

“We shouldn’t talk about it.” She craned her neck toward the bar. “We should drink more. What’s this?” She held up her glass.

“Vodka.”

“Right. I think maybe wine would be better.”

No amount of wine was going to make this better. But I knew *I* could help.

“I have an idea,” I announced. I was pretty sure Beck would tell me it was a terrible idea if he was here. And probably so would Gabriel. But I didn’t care. I couldn’t stand by and let Sparkle kill Hollie’s dreams. I just couldn’t. “You should finish your internship at Daniels & Co.”

“Definitely wine,” Hollie said, wincing as she swallowed the last gulp of vodka.

I’d expected her to throw her arms around me and tell me I was her hero. But she seemed more focused on her drink. “Did you hear me?” I asked.

She clasped my shoulder. “God, I’m being awful company. I’m sorry. You said you have an idea.” She pointed at my head and I couldn’t help but grin. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen anyone quite so adorable when they were drunk.

“I have several.” I called the waiter over and ordered some soft drinks while Hollie held a conversation with the candle.

I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her toward me.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she asked. “I thought we were going to drink wine?” Dropping her voice to a stage whisper, she asked, “Are we going to have sex?”

“Absolutely not.”

She turned to me, the expression on her face as if I’d just insulted her.

“Hollie, you’ve had far too much to drink . . .” I paused. That wasn’t quite true. She hadn’t had much to drink at all. She was just drunk. “You’re too tipsy to be—I’m just moving you closer so you can hear what I’m saying.”

Sex wasn’t going to happen. Not tonight. Not when she was in a position to be able to regret it.

“I want to talk business with you,” I said.

“You don’t want to sleep with you?” Her stage whisper had transformed into a semi-shout. “With me, I mean. You don’t want to have sex with me?”

I chuckled. "I think you just proved my point." Our tray of nonalcoholic cocktails arrived.

"Pretty!" Hollie said, bouncing in her chair as the waiter transferred each of them from tray to table. "I like this better than wine."

I should probably wait until tomorrow to talk to her about working for Daniels & Co, but I wanted to cheer her up. And it would stop her booking a flight home.

"So, what do you think about being an intern for me?" I asked.

She turned to me, looking at me over her shoulder. "You want me to dress up? Like role play? That's your thing?"

"Hollie, will you focus?" I took the martini glass out of her hand. "Look at me."

"I'm looking," she replied, staring at me. The blue flecks in her green eyes seemed to have expanded over the course of the afternoon.

"Stay in London and finish your internship at Daniels & Co."

She seemed to be following what I was saying and her eyelids fluttered open and shut a thousand times and she reached for me.

"You would do that?" she asked, stroking the palm of her hand down my cheek.

I swallowed, trying to push down the instinct to scoop her up and take her home. "It makes sense. We need more hands on deck now we're through to the finals. And you need a job."

"You are so sweet." She sighed. "The British."

"So that's agreed. You'll start on Monday."

She picked up her martini glass. "Absolutely not. I shall not work for you."

I groaned. I should have waited until she was sober after all. "We can discuss it again tomorrow."

"You don't have to offer me a job to get into my panties. You are welcome there. There's a little brass band down there, ready to say hi whenever you're ready. They have banners and balloons. There is no job required."

I didn't know whether to laugh or be completely horrified by the idea she thought I was offering her a job in return for sex. And I guess I should also be slightly freaked out by the idea of her vagina band. "I'm not offering to swap you a job for sex. It might surprise you to know that I don't have to pay for it."

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” she said, suddenly completely sober. “Why would you even do such a thing?”

I got it. She was a gorgeous girl and I could imagine that she’d been offered a number of things to sleep with a guy before. “I do not want to have sex with you.”

“Rude!” she said. “I thought . . .”

This girl gave me whiplash. “Yes, of course I want to have sex with you—if nothing else so I can meet the tiny brass band in your underwear.”

She started to giggle and it was so bloody delightful that I wanted to grab her hand and escape somewhere I could hold her for the rest of the evening in front of a roaring fire, watching the London rain freshen up the city.

“I’m not offering you the job so you’ll have sex with me. I’m offering you the job because you need a job and I need the help.”

“Really?” she asked. “Tell me the truth.”

“Okay. That’s the truth. Also I don’t like the way Sparkle has treated you, and if I get to right some of their wrongs, that makes me feel good.”

“Any other reason?”

No more holding back or skating on the surface. “And I’d like to hang out with you some more and if you fly back to Oregon, I won’t ever see you again.”

She looked at me, concentration freezing her expression. “The problem is . . . if I’m your intern, I can’t sleep with you. Because I want to be taken seriously. I want people to see that I’m hardworking and that I have potential, not that I’m humping the boss.”

“Humping?”

I got where she was coming from. Daniels & Co wasn’t that kind of organization. The people I worked with were professional. They weren’t gossips but she wasn’t to know that. “Looks like I won’t be getting laid, then. Not if you’re back in Oregon and not if you stay in London.”

She grinned, as if the thought delighted her. “Are you serious? You want me to intern?”

“I have two conditions. First, I need to be open with my head designer, Primrose, about how I know you. I don’t keep anything professional from her. But she’s discreet and won’t judge either of us.”

“And the second condition?” She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at me.

“Everyone who works for Daniels & Co gets paid. So, for the next nine weeks, you’ll get a salary. Just above minimum wage, so don’t get too

excited.”

“Are you serious? No, I mean, I couldn’t. It wouldn’t be right.”

I just offered her a minimum-wage salary and she’d reacted as if she’d won the lottery. “Take it or leave it. But you’re not working for my organization for free. That’s not the way I operate.”

“Life is freaking ironic, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Why? Because the day you lose a job, you get one so much better?” Sparkle were idiots.

She tilted her head to the side. “No. Because I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to sleep with a man more than I want to get naked with you. And now you’re my boss and it’s strictly not allowed.”

Before I could respond, she called the waiter over and asked for the bill—or “check” as she put it. “I’ll get this,” she said. “As a thank you.” She took the bill from the waiter at the same time as I handed him my card. There was no way I was going to let her pay.

“Hey,” she said. “This is my treat.” And then her eyes widened at the total. “Okay, well, maybe I’m going to let you get this. But I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything. Be a good intern. That’s all you need to do for me.”

“I’m going to have to tell the guys in my panties to stand down,” she said. “It’s disappointing for them. They’ve never been so . . . animated.”

I chuckled. “Animated. Right.”

“But,” she said, and I could almost see the cogs in her brain whirring, “I’m not technically your intern right at this moment, am I?” She slid off her bar stool and stood, her body slipping between my thighs. “A kiss wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

Hollie was an adorable drunk. Adorable and *gorgeous*, particularly when she pouted, drawing my attention to her pillow-like lips. “I think a kiss would be acceptable,” I replied, standing and turning so I had her pinned against the bar.

Her hands slid up the lapels of my jacket, and I breathed in the clean scent of sunshine and summer flowers as she looked up at me with those green-blue eyes that I wanted to dive into.

She pushed her fingers into my hair, and I bent, pressing my lips into hers, sinking into her softness, relishing the warmth of her. Instinctively, I groaned at the sensation of relief and satisfaction I got from feeling her, from tasting her, from being this close to her.

She sighed against me as if the feeling was entirely mutual and I pushed into her with my tongue, wanting more, needing to be closer.

When had kissing ever been like this before? It felt so perfect, so intimate, so completely necessary.

A loud cough brought us back into the room and we jumped apart like guilty teenagers.

My heart juddered in my chest and my blood ran thick in my veins as I tried to compose myself.

What would I be missing if I couldn't have more of Hollie Lumen?

She looked up at me, her cheeks flushed, an expression of longing on her face. I had to stop myself from tossing her over my shoulder and sprinting home with her.

I cleared my throat, trying to get a grip of myself before I did something I'd regret. "We'll be friends," I said. But I wanted more.

"Absolutely," she replied. "You're my best friend in London."

Although I knew it was hardly a compliment—she knew almost no one in the city—a warmth gathered in my chest at the thought of being someone important to her. Even if it was temporarily.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hollie

I chewed on my nail as I huddled under the awnings of an office building two doors up from Daniels & Co. I was trying to stay dry and the rain was as relentless here as it was back home.

“You think I should go in?” I asked Autumn for the fiftieth time. I was calling her from my Daniels & Co phone that Dexter had had couriered to me so he could message me.

“I can’t believe you would consider not going in.”

“But there’s no such thing as a free lunch,” I said.

“Tell that to Mom and Dad. They seem to take your money left and right without ever worrying.”

“Taking favors can wind up messy.” I had learned that lesson the hard way.

“You only ever took a favor from anyone once. And it wasn’t your fault that your friend’s boyfriend had aspirations to be a loan shark.”

Even now my stomach churned as I remembered borrowing the deposit for our trailer. My friend offered to lend me the money. I was dumb and naive and didn’t see the catch until I went to repay it and her boyfriend asked for an additional twenty percent. It took me six months to pay it off because he kept making up reasons why I owed him more. To this day, the sting of all that interest paid was a reminder of how easy it would be to follow in my parents’ footsteps—careering from one disaster to another. I had to take control and rely on no one but myself.

“And anyway,” Autumn continued, “this is not a favor. He’s not just

handing out money. You're working for it. You have a job description. And he said he needed more staff."

"He was lying," I said. If Dexter had needed more staff, he wouldn't have waited for me to get fired. There were a million people who would have loved to be interning at Daniels & Co.

"Even if he was, you're not going to be filing your nails all day. You're going to work. You're going to learn. If you don't take this opportunity, I'll be furious with you."

Autumn and I were as close as two sisters could be. We were furious with each other rarely. And when we were, it was usually caused by one of the good-for-nothing guys she was dating. "I'm just trying to protect myself," I said.

"No, you're just uncomfortable with good things happening to you—with someone doing something for you—because normally it's you making sacrifices so other people can be happy. It's you making sure people have a roof over their heads and their bills are paid. You're just not used to the shoe being on the other foot."

I sighed and looked out at the sea of people rushing along the sidewalks, umbrellas askew and shoes squelching. Was I just uncomfortable accepting help? "But we've been on a date. We can't do that again if I'm working for him."

"Usually, you're inventing reasons not to go on a second date. Surely you're relieved to finally have a legitimate reason."

Darn her, she knew me too well. She'd backed me into a corner—I either had to admit that no second date was a relief and so there was no reason not to take the job, or that I liked this guy. "Well, I didn't have any reasons *not* to go on a second date with him. Not until now."

My sister screeching down the line made me pull the phone away from my ear for a couple of seconds. "Wow. London has all your good luck wrapped into one. You must really like him if you're saying you'd go on a second date," she said when she finally calmed down.

I wasn't sure if it was because he was British or so freaking good looking or the way I felt his goodness in his core, but I did like Dexter. The kissing didn't hurt either, and the job offer hardly dented those fresh feelings. But I'd have to bury them deep.

"And anyway, who says you can't date the boss?" Autumn asked.

"It would be a breach of duty or an abuse of power or something."

“Jesus, you’re only going to be there a few more weeks. Maybe you should abuse your power with him.”

I loved that my sister was so carefree about things but we weren’t the same. I had always been careful. It was who I was. Coming to London was a huge risk. Going on a date with Dexter was a bigger one. I needed to de-risk, focus on what I came to London for in the first place. Life wasn’t full of second chances, but I was getting mine and I wasn’t going to throw it away, not even for another kiss with the best kisser I’d ever known.

“Nope. There’s no way I’m fooling around with my boss. But I am going to take the internship. I came to London for experience and if it’s a question of accepting a helping hand or . . .” I didn’t dare think about the alternative. “Or not getting that experience, then I’d be a fool to—”

“Well, finally. I’m glad you came around to my way of thinking. You need to jump at life’s opportunities.”

I hoped she took her own advice. “How’s Greg?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s a loser,” she said. “You know it. I know it. But the sex is okay so he’ll do until I graduate.”

“Autumn! I can’t believe you just said—”

“And don’t worry, I’m on the pill and I still make sure he wears a condom. The last thing I need is to get pregnant by him.”

Perhaps it was the distance that allowed Autumn to admit the truth, but thank God she was focused on her future as much as I was.

“I thought you really liked Greg?”

“He’s fine for now. I’ve always defended him because you’ve been so anti-him.” I started to object but she shut me down. “Don’t try to deny it. And I understood that you didn’t want him to hold me back, but I wouldn’t let that happen. Especially not now.”

“Not now? What’s happened? Did something happen with Dad?” I’d warned him not to ask Autumn for money but I knew he wouldn’t be able to resist it. Who else would he ask if I wasn’t there?

“No, nothing’s happened with Dad—he’s asked me for money practically every day since you left, but I expected that. I mean seeing you follow your dreams and go to London, even though I know that leaving me was tough—it’s inspiring, Hollie. I knew you were strong and responsible and resilient and all of those good things. But to see you be so driven, so freaking determined to get out of this shit hole—well, I’m not wasting the opportunities that I have either.”

My ribcage lifted in my body as I listened to my sister say everything I'd ever hoped I'd hear from her. "I love you," I said.

"I love you more. I'm so grateful for everything you've done. Now it's time for you to shift your focus from me to yourself." I didn't want to abandon Autumn and it did feel uncomfortable to accept help from Dexter—a virtual stranger—but if Autumn hadn't accepted help from me, she wouldn't be about to graduate. If my parents hadn't accepted my help they'd be—God knows where. I had to work past my discomfort with receiving help, even if I was way more accustomed to giving it. "You've sacrificed enough. Go start your job with this new fancy jewelry company and grab yourself a life outside Sunshine, Oregon."

"Thank you," I said. I may have paid her college tuition, but having her as my cheerleader was more than enough of a payback.

"I love you," she replied.

I slipped the phone back into my pocket and headed into Daniels & Co.

I had no complaints about the people I worked with at Sparkle, who had been creative and energetic, but as I sat on my navy velvet chair alongside the rest of the competition team at Daniels & Co, Sparkle seemed a long way away. Daniels & Co people carried themselves slightly differently. Teresa used to high five everyone on the team every morning and my fellow American on the team, Evan, called everyone "winner" regardless of circumstance. The people at Daniels & Co were far more subdued. It was almost as if making the finals had been a foregone conclusion. They'd expected to excel, and now they expected to win.

People spoke in hushed tones as they joined us around the huge black conference table, though the seat at the top of the table remained empty. Over text, I'd tried to get Dexter to agree to act as if he didn't know me. He'd refused to go that far, but agreed to treat me like any colleague. I just hoped I could do the same thing. The problem was I could feel his rough jaw under my fingertips right now, and he hadn't even entered the room yet.

The subdued chatter settled down as an older lady with hair swept up into an elegant chignon came into the room.

“Good morning, team,” she said, smiling as she set her silver pen on her notepad. “I see we’re all here.” She glanced around the table and her gaze set on me. This must be Primrose, Dexter’s head designer. The one Dexter was going to tell about me. “You must be Hollie.”

“Yes, Hollie Lumen. I’m so happy to be here.”

“Well, we’re delighted to have you on the team. I’m Primrose and I’m the head designer at Daniels & Co.” She beamed at me, but just as I thought she was going to say something else, she turned back to her pad. “So, I know we are all very pleased to have reached the finals of the competition.”

Was Dexter not planning to come to this meeting? I didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

“But we can’t celebrate yet,” Primrose continued. “Now is when we want to increase our focus and commitment.”

Had he stayed away to make me feel more comfortable? I needed to focus. On the meeting. On work. I had to stop thinking about Dexter. This was a second chance and I wasn’t going to squander it.

“We want to win this entire thing and bejewel the princess of Finland. We’re not at work so we can say on our CV that we were on the team that finalled. That’s not who we are.”

I glanced around the room. No one was doing Jell-O shots or flashing their boobs. I’m not sure Primrose needed to tell her team to focus. Everyone seemed very serious.

I made notes of almost everything Primrose said—details of deadlines, information on the timing of each piece and who was working on what. If someone needed to know what Primrose had said in this meeting, I was their gal.

“Now we’re through to the next stage,” Primrose continued, “the gems will all be reexamined to see if there’s anything else we can improve. Dexter will want to see everything every day, as you know. Don’t expect him to be less demanding, less exacting, or any more forgiving. We must not let him down. But more importantly, we must not let down the princess of Finland.”

I’d only been on the Daniels & Co team a couple of hours, but I knew already why they’d finalled and Sparkle hadn’t. The contrast between there and here was like being on different planets. One was a kindergarten paddling pool and one was the 100-meter freestyle at the Olympics. If I’d thought I was lucky to be interning at Sparkle, I had to believe some kind of divine intervention brought me to Daniels & Co.

Primrose swept out of the room and I turned to Macey, my boss, who sat beside me and had been designated to show me around. “Can you go grab us coffees?” she asked, handing me what looked like a corporate credit card. “I’ll have a double espresso. You’ll need to take everyone’s order.”

“Absolutely,” I said. Some interns might have balked at the idea of making a coffee run, but not me. This was an opportunity to get in front of everyone, have a one-on-one interaction, and hopefully make a great first impression. Maybe they’d remember me when they needed something other than coffee.

“Don’t forget Dexter,” she said over her shoulder.

My stomach flipped at just the mention of his name. And I mentally wrapped myself on the knuckles. I was just getting the guy’s coffee order. No. Big. Deal.

I scribbled down orders one by one. People were friendly but there was no small talk, and the chatter I overheard was strictly business. No one was discussing *Love is Blind* or debating whether or not Mark Ronson was attractive—*compelling viewing* and *I would definitely say yes to dinner* would have been my thoughts, had anyone been interested. But they weren’t.

My final stop was Dexter’s office, which was down a modern but dimly lit corridor. I knocked on the door, expecting an assistant to answer, but it was Dexter who barked deep and low. “Come.”

Tingles rippled across my skin.

I opened the heavy door and took a half step inside. “I’m just collecting coffee orders,” I said.

He didn’t look up from whatever was preoccupying him on his desk. “Come in and shut the door.”

I slipped inside and did as he asked, keeping my ass pressed against the back of the door.

Finally, he looked up. “I’ll have a sparkling water.”

I scribbled it down on my pad and when I looked up, he’d silently stalked across the room and was placing his hands either side of my head.

“And a kiss,” he added.

I ducked under his arm. “Absolutely not,” I said. “I told you—I’m not dating the boss.”

“I didn’t ask you to dinner. I requested a kiss.”

“Kissing is not allowed.”

“Said who?” he asked, leaning against the wall, clearly amused.

“Said HR. You’re off-limits. It’s an abuse of power.”

He rolled his eyes and headed back to his desk, and it was as if my stomach had dived off the Angel Falls. Why did he have to be such a darn gentleman? I mean, I liked that about him. A lot. But if he’d kissed me, I wouldn’t have complained.

I was flip-flopping like the most flip-flopping flip flopper of all time. “Can I take a seat?” I asked, indicating the chair opposite his desk.

He raised his eyebrows, which I took as a yes.

“Look,” I said as I sank into the deep purple, leather chair. “I like you. And okay, it’s not exactly an abuse of power because . . .” I sighed. “Well, because whatever.” How could I say that I’d already found him close to irresistible before he’d gone and rescued my dreams from hurtling toward oblivion? Now? It was hard to think when what I wanted to do was hitch my skirt up, hop onto his desk and have him bury his head between my thighs.

He was annoying. Hot. Kind. Thoughtful. The guy bordered on perfect. He was the worst.

“It’s not an abuse of power because I said so.” I said it with resolve and hopefully that would be enough. “But I don’t want to mess up this opportunity. I want to build relationships with your team and have them respect me. I don’t want them to think I’m only here because I’m banging the boss.”

“Yeah. You mentioned that already.” He grinned. “And I’m not going to force you to kiss me. Or even speak to me. So, it’s fine. I get it.”

Lead settled in my stomach. The problem was I *wanted* him to kiss me. A lot. I’d never felt this pull, this sensation of someone blowing bubbles in my stomach whenever Dexter was nearby, and I didn’t want to give that up. London was meant to be the start of a new life and I’d assumed that meant a new career. But maybe it could be more than that. Autumn might have been right. Perhaps, for once, I could spend time with a man who made me feel special—a guy who gave me goosebumps, who I thought about every spare moment of the day. I’d heard about those kinds of feelings—read about them in romance novels—but I’d never experienced any of it.

Maybe Dexter was my shot at more.

“I have a suggestion,” I said.

“Go on,” he replied and I leaned back in my chair. I was always so sure of my decisions, but there was something about being in London that made me willing to take risks I’d usually run from. Or maybe it wasn’t London at

all. Maybe it was the man right in front of me.

“If we were somewhere private, no one would find out about us.”

“You want us to sneak around like teenagers trying not to get caught by our parents?”

“Or maybe jewel thieves on the run?” I suggested.

He chuckled. “You should know that I’m not a role-play kind of guy.”

The gravelly tone he used had me thinking immediately about what type of guy he was. When he was naked. In bed. Or in the shower or . . . I needed to leave. “Okay then, maybe not.”

“You clearly have a plan. What were you thinking?”

“Maybe just dinner. In private.”

“I can work with that. I can get a private room at Le Gavroche.”

I was guessing that was some fancy restaurant, which would be nice and everything, but I was fast running out of outfits to wear to those places. “I was thinking maybe I’d come over to your place and cook you a meatloaf. Maybe some pie?”

A beat of silence passed between us and the corners of his mouth twitched. “I can work with that,” he replied, looking at me as if he were stripping me naked in his imagination.

I could work with that too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dexter

I rarely used my kitchen and wasn't territorial about it at all, but it still felt odd as I sat on the bar stool and watched Hollie buzz about, poking her head in cupboards and pulling out bits of equipment I didn't even realize I had.

"Considering you don't cook, you're set up like a world-famous chef or something," she said as she pulled out some kind of device that looked like a sieve gone wrong.

"I used to have a housekeeper who liked to cook," I replied, taking a sip of my wine and pretending to be preoccupied with the emails on my phone. I needed something to take the edge off. Everything about tonight was making me itch. Not because I was uncomfortable, but because the exact opposite was true. I barely knew Hollie, hadn't even slept with her, but here we were in my flat as she cooked for me. No woman had ever made herself at home in my kitchen. Cooking together was the kind of shit married people did. And the only woman I'd ever even imagined marrying was Bridget.

"Have you ever lived with anyone?" I asked and immediately wished I hadn't. It felt too probing, too intimate. And I didn't want the same question back.

She turned to look at me, her hand hovering over the tap as she filled a saucepan with water. "I live with my sister." She paused. "And of course, my parents, back in the day."

"How long have you lived with your sister?"

"Ten years or so," she replied, shutting off the tap and putting the saucepan on the hob.

My creaky brain whirred and did the maths. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five. But I look twenty-one, right?” She winked at me and turned back to the hob.

I wasn’t sure whether or not there was much difference in what a twenty-one-year-old and a twenty-five-year-old looked like, but if it made her feel better . . . “Not a day older. You moved out at fifteen?” I asked.

She had her back to me and seemed to still at the question.

“Yeah. I mean,” she said, her voice softer. “We were just a few trailers down. My parents were fighting a lot. And . . . it was just easier to move out.”

She kept mentioning trailers. I was pretty sure she meant something other than the thing you towed behind a car to transport camping gear or rubbish. I’d heard of a condo, but I didn’t get US real estate. It was true what they said; we were two nations separated by a common language.

“Do you like marionberries? I’m going to make a pie.”

Marionberries? Christ, I hoped she was a good cook. I wasn’t the best liar—I became an awkward fifteen-year-old and might as well have a neon sign above my head with an arrow pointing down that flashed *liar liar*, and I really didn’t want to upset her. “I have no idea. What are they?”

“You have *no idea*?” She skated across to my fridge and threw the door open. I was half expecting her to pull out a selection of sea slugs but instead she held up a bag of blackberries.

“Oh, blackberries,” I said, relieved that it was something I actually liked. “Jesus, I wish you Americans would learn English.”

“You like them?” she asked, her eyes shiny and wide as if she were showing a child the ocean for the first time.

“Sure. Only a monster doesn’t like blackberries.”

She tipped her head back and laughed. “Maybe. My sister and I used to pick them wild when we were kids.”

“Me too,” I said. Bridget and I used to go down to a wild patch outside her parents’ village. “Funny,” I said. Those long lazy summers together had felt impossibly long and impossibly hot. I thought they would last our entire lives.

“Funny?” she asked.

“Not ha ha funny,” I replied. “Just . . . you know, we live on different sides of the planet and have that in common.”

“I bet you didn’t grow up in a trailer though,” she said. “I’m not sure we have so much in common.”

“I have to confess, I don’t know what you mean by ‘trailer.’ Do I need to consult my Anglo-American dictionary?”

“You’re too funny.” She pulled out her phone from a pocket in jeans that hugged her rather perfect bottom. “There,” she said, showing me a picture of her and a girl, their arms around each other.

“You look lovely. Is that your sister?”

“Yes, Autumn. But behind us. That’s a trailer.” She pointed at the static caravan behind her and her sister.

“Oh, I see. Like a holiday park or something?”

“I guess,” she said. “Except we’re not on vacation. It’s a cheap way to live. Maybe you don’t have them in England. My parents have never been able to keep a job longer than three weeks at a time, so cheap was what we needed if I was going to pay rent on two places.” Her tone was very matter-of-fact. She clearly wasn’t looking for sympathy but she’d obviously not grown up with much. Coming to London must have taken a lot—not just money, but vision. Drive.

“You still live there?” I asked. Living so far away, in a different country, and in many ways, a different world, it was difficult to picture her in her natural environment. And I found myself wanting to know who she was—before London, back in America—who she was right at the core of herself.

Her mouth twitched a little, almost as if she was considering what answer to give. She shrugged. “Doesn’t make me a bad person.” Her voice faded as she turned away and headed back to the fridge.

I hadn’t meant for her to feel judged. I pushed my stool back and followed her. Why would she think that’s what I meant? I stood behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. “I think something got lost in translation. I wasn’t suggesting it was a bad thing.”

She froze. “I’m not after your money, if that’s what you think.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “What are you talking about? I have about fifty quid in my wallet and you’re welcome to it. But it hadn’t crossed my mind that you were after it.” It was as if we were having two entirely separate conversations. She was clearly worked up about something. “Did I say something wrong? I’ve offended you but I don’t know how.”

She relaxed into my arms and tipped her head back onto my chest. “I don’t know what’s got me so worked up—defensive and acting crazy. I’ve never dated a guy with money—no, that’s not it . . . I’ve just never met someone like you. I like you and I’m not used to feeling this way. It’s making

me edgy.” She twisted out of my arms and began scraping the potatoes she’d just taken from the fridge.

I wanted to make her feel better. “You’re edgy because you like me?”

“Okay, Mr. Gigantic Ego—”

“Hey,” I said, leaning against the counter as she focused on the vegetables. “We broke through the surface, remember. I’m asking so I understand, not so I can poke fun at you.” I paused. I hadn’t had a conversation like this with a woman for a long time—about feelings and emotions. And it wasn’t because the women in my life hadn’t tried. One by one they had come at my ice with a pickaxe and one by one, I’d managed to hold my defenses in place. Eventually they’d given up or I’d shifted away from them in every sense. But here I was with Hollie, handing her the axe and hoping we might melt in each other’s sunshine.

“Everything is different here in London. Probably because I’m so far away from home in so many ways. This isn’t a normal situation. You’re not normally the kind of guy I date . . . I don’t know how to explain it. I’m used to dating men who I’m not that into.” She abandoned the potato on the work surface and came over to the island.

“So why do you date them? Are you bored?”

She tossed the blackberries into a normal looking sieve and held them under the tap before transferring them to a bowl. “On paper we look like we should fit, you know? Similar backgrounds and families. But it’s like where I am physically and where I am in my head are two different places. So, we match in terms of geography but mentally . . .” She shook her head. “I’m not making any sense. But you and me, we’re the opposite. You’re this super successful guy, you live in London, you certainly didn’t grow up in a trailer park. But in here—” She knocked the potato on her head. “In here, it’s like, not that we’re in the same place but . . . you’re where I want to get to.”

She pulled out a rolling pin from a drawer as I tried to digest what she was saying. What she was talking about was connection. Fit.

And I understood because I felt the same.

“I’m not confessing my undying love, don’t worry,” she said, maybe to fill the silence I’d left.

“I didn’t think you were. I have a suggestion.” I wanted to make her feel more comfortable—less edgy. “I think we should just spend some time deliberately trying not to analyze what’s going on. Just enjoy it.”

She nodded her head. “You’re right. I need to relax.”

I wasn't sure what I was saying but it seemed right. I didn't want to worry about what she was feeling for me or what I was feeling for her. I liked her—that was enough. I wanted to hang out with her. I wanted to taste her cooking. And at some point—like every minute I was with her—I wanted to get her naked.

“You know what's good to empty your mind?” I asked.

She gave me a sideways glance. “Kissing?”

I slid my arms around her waist and buried myself into her neck. “Yup. Very relaxing.”

She let go of the rolling pin and swiveled to face me. “Show me.”

“Wait,” I said, as she grabbed my arse. “Did you just surreptitiously dry your hands on my bottom and pretend you were feeling me up?”

She tried to bite back a smile. “You know all my secrets.”

I didn't, but I wanted to. I dipped my head and pressed a kiss to her lips, tension easing from my muscles as I did. I hadn't been lying, at least from my perspective—kissing Hollie was like meditation. And it was addictive.

Her breathy sighs made me want to get closer to her, and I pressed my hand into her back, drawing us together.

“Do you have anything in the oven? Anything likely to burn that I'm going to get the blame for?” I asked.

She shook her head, her eyes sleepy with desire. “Nope. Wanna meet the band?”

I chuckled and lifted her up and over my shoulder. “I just hope there's a French horn player. A brass band is nothing without a French horn.”

I strode out of the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom, where I tipped her onto my bed.

“Wow. This bedroom is ridiculous.”

I glanced over my shoulder before grabbing Hollie's hips and pulling her to the edge of the bed.

“It's got an entire living room in it. Two sofas and—Our entire trailer isn't as big as just this one room.”

I pulled her top from her jeans and dragged it over her head. I inhaled as I took in her smooth, creamy skin. I wanted to rip her bra off but knew I had to be patient.

“Are you the richest man in England?” she asked as if it were a serious question.

“Don't be crazy,” I said, unfastening her jeans. She wiggled, helping me

as I peeled them off her. I took a step back as she lay on my bed in her underwear. “But I feel like the luckiest.”

She groaned. “Cheese alert!”

“Is it cheesy if it’s true?” I asked. I crawled over her and stole a kiss.

“Absolutely,” she replied, her fingers undoing the buttons on my shirt. “Especially if it’s pre-sex. It sounds like you’re persuading me to get naked. And I don’t need persuading. Not by you.”

“Oh yes,” I replied, kneeling as I stripped off my open shirt. “The band.” I hooked my thumbs into her underwear and pulled them down. “Now, where are they?”

“They are quite small. You might have to look really hard.”

I chuckled. I don’t think even Tristan made me laugh as often as Hollie did. I kneeled on the floor, my thumbs pressed against her hips, my eyes level with her pussy. “Nope, can’t see a thing. I hope you weren’t lying, Hollie. I’ll be very disappointed if I don’t get a warm welcome.”

She moaned and her hips shifted. “Closer. You have to look very close,” she whispered.

I don’t know who I was torturing more—her or me. I wanted to taste her more than I wanted most things, but knowing she wanted me? Knowing she was wet just at the thought of my tongue on her was doing things to my cock that felt illegal but oh-so-good.

“Still nothing,” I said, the edges of my lips almost touching hers, my breath warming her skin.

She moved her legs a fraction, rubbing the inside of her thigh against my jaw. She moaned. I was toast. I couldn’t hold back any longer. I pressed my tongue over her clit and almost dissolved at the warm slide of her.

Her fingers in my hair urged me on, and all I wanted to do was make her happy, make her come, show her that what we were doing wasn’t banging, whether or not I was her boss. I circled over and over, one way and then the other, feeling her clit unfurl beneath me. I pressed hard and began to flick up and down, reaching up for her hands, linking her fingers with mine. She fought me a little—no doubt unwilling to relinquish control. But I wanted to touch her, make her come—I just wanted her to lie back and enjoy it. From what I could read between the lines of how she described her life back in Oregon, she was all too used to taking responsibility and looking after people, all while feeling like an outsider. I wanted her to see how she could relax with me, how she belonged under my tongue.

She'd confessed to me that I made her edgy. Well I was going to smooth all her edges away.

Her fingers tightened in mine and her hips lifted. "Dexter," she cried out, almost in disbelief. She made to shift away from me, to escape her pleasure, but I pressed my elbows down onto her thighs, keeping her in place. As I pushed my tongue through her folds, she began to pulse—her entire body juddered as she cried out. I stilled my tongue and watched as her orgasm coursed through her, her eyes opening to mine as she reached the peak and floated down back to me.

"You're gorgeous," I said, skirting my thumbs up her palms and then releasing her hands.

She shook her head as she tried to push to her elbows. "You're . . . I mean. Wow. I'm in trouble."

I chuckled and crawled over her and she swept her thumbs over my cheekbones and pulled me to her, kissing herself from my lips and then reaching down to undo my jeans. With fast fingers and a weird maneuver with her feet, my jeans and boxers were pushed to my ankles and I shook them off as she unclasped her bra.

"So, I met the band," I said, lying on top of her as I pushed her hair off her face.

She giggled and squeezed her eyes shut. "How were they?"

"You taste fucking amazing," I replied. "And watching you come is . . ."

She covered her eyes with her hand and I pulled it down.

"Look at me."

Slowly she opened her eyes.

"Watching you come is like seeing a cut stone for the first time." God, what was it with this woman and how corny she had me sounding? But I couldn't explain it any other way—she was at her most beautiful when she climaxed.

"And it got me rock fucking hard," I said, moving against her.

"I feel that." She brought her legs up and I rested against her mound, the throb that had started in my dick spreading down my legs, up my torso. She began to rock under me, just tiny movements, that connected my dick and her clit.

"Are you dry humping me?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say dry," she replied.

I groaned just at the thought of driving into her wetness.

“You have a condom?” she asked.

I grabbed the one I’d left on the bedside table before I got undressed and covered my cock in record time. “You ready?”

She took a deep breath as if she were preparing herself for my dick inside her—as if she was slightly concerned it would be too much. Too big. Too hard. It felt like someone had cut the tie on my self-control—I couldn’t wait a moment longer.

I kneeled up, instinctively wanting to take in her reaction when I plunged into her. It wasn’t enough just to fuck her or taste her pussy—I wanted to possess this woman. I positioned her legs over my shoulders and for just a second before I pushed in, I paused, teasing—her or me, I wasn’t sure.

“Please,” she whimpered.

Had this girl burrowed into my subconscious and figured out the exact thing that would press my buttons, send me over the edge, and cause me to lose myself in the moment? Apparently, Hollie Lumen was my kryptonite.

I tensed my body, bracing myself for sensation, and thrust in as deep as I could go. A guttural roar ripped through my throat at being connected to this woman. The feeling was primal, as if what we were doing was necessary for our survival—like if we didn’t fuck, something would be desperately wrong in the world.

She shifted her hips and I turned to press a kiss against the delicate, soft skin of her leg and slid my hand down to press gently on her lower belly before pulling out softly and ramming back in.

Her hand covered mine. “That feels . . .”

I thrust in again and felt the ripples under my palm before she finished her sentence.

“Dexter, I’m going to come again. Wait—”

But I wasn’t going to wait. I couldn’t. Didn’t want to. I wanted to fuck. I wanted her to come and I wanted to do it all night.

I thrust and thrust and my jaw tensed so powerfully I thought it would shatter as her orgasm squeezed me oh-so-tightly. But I didn’t stop—wasn’t going to give her time to recover, make me laugh, make me want her more. No. I was just going to concentrate on fucking her. She was going to see that she should never have joked that she didn’t want to have dinner with me, never questioned whether or not we should date, or whether she should take the job. I was going to convince her that questioning anything to do with us was entirely ridiculous.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her words pushed out in a breathy fog.

“I’m fucking you. We’re fucking.” Sweat sheeted my skin and my lungs filled and emptied as if I was approaching the finishing line on a marathon. But I didn’t care. All I could focus on was this woman beneath me who had me so wound up.

I pulled out and moved her leg from one side to the other so she was on her side and then I pushed in again. The blood sang in my veins as it pumped around my body, pulsing in my wrists, neck and cock. I positioned her leg further up so I could get deeper. I wanted to crawl into her and become one person.

Her hand clamped around the arm that was holding her leg in place and she looked at me, her gaze full of vulnerability and desperation. “Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god.” Her head tipped back and her entire body began to convulse. From this angle, as she clamped around my cock, I couldn’t hold back any longer, didn’t want to. We should have this moment together.

I cried out, ramming myself into her one final time before collapsing behind her.

I wanted to stay like this forever.

Spent.

Floating.

Exhausted but so fucking happy.

Her body sprawled half on mine, and the rise and fall of her rib cage had me mesmerized.

Had sex ever been so all-consuming? So intense?

She made to roll away from me and I circled my arms around her waist, shifted and pulled her toward me so we were spooning. She smelled good, like vanilla and flowers. Sliding her hand back, she grasped my thigh, as if she wanted to actively hold me, like it wasn’t enough for me to be holding her. It was as if she couldn’t take without giving at the same time.

“That was . . .” She paused but I wasn’t going to make a suggestion to end her sentence. “What would you say that was?” she asked, and I tried to push down the belly laugh she elicited.

“Sex?” I suggested.

“What kind of sex?” she asked. “Like, normal first-time sex?”

“You want me to mark it out of ten?” I didn’t think she’d object if it confirmed what she suspected—that nothing about that had been normal first-

time sex.

She elbowed me in the ribs. “I just . . . that wasn’t normal first-time sex for me,” she confessed. “Not normal anytime sex.”

My chest expanded at the thought that I’d been able to fuck her properly for the first time. But perhaps I was looking at this wrong; perhaps she was fucking *me* properly for the first time.

“We’re still doing the sex,” I replied. “It’s not finished yet.” I leaned across the bed with one hand and grabbed another condom.

I’d gotten hard again almost immediately. No, nothing about tonight was normal first-time sex.

“I’m not going to have time to make the pie,” she said as I slid into her.

“You want my dick or the pie?” I thrust into her again, and she placed my hands on her breasts.

“Is it wrong to want both?” she asked, twisting her hips.

I picked up my pace. “So greedy.” Truth was, I was the greedy one. I just couldn’t get enough of her.

After too short a time, our orgasms collided and we lay tangled and sweaty, breaths choppy, limbs heavy.

She shifted and I pulled her closer. I wanted to keep her beside me, entwined with me. I didn’t want her going anywhere.

“I need to use the restroom,” she said.

Reluctantly, I released my grip and watched as she didn’t even attempt to cover up as she strode to the loo. Fuck, I liked everything about this woman. “Hey, Gabriel’s having a birthday party on Saturday. Want to come?”

No answer.

Maybe it was too much too soon—meeting the friends.

“Who’s Gabriel?”

I turned and found her leaning, completely naked, on the door jamb. Her hair hung over her shoulders, almost covering up the perfectly sharp nipples that managed to jut out from beneath the treacle-colored hair.

“You’re beautiful,” I said, tucking my hands under my head.

“You too. Who’s Gabriel? One of your pack?”

“Yeah. The best looking one of us if you ask me.”

Her lips curled into a grin as she approached the bed. “Where do you rank? Because if you’re not the best looking one, I can’t wait to meet Gabriel.”

I grabbed her and pulled her on top of me. “Sorry to disappoint. He’s

married.” Separated, technically, but he wasn’t dating.

She sighed melodramatically. “Darn,” she said as she pressed a kiss against my cheek. Rearranging herself, she sat astride me. “You want to go to a party together?” she asked. “I thought we agreed that this was just between us. I was serious when I said I didn’t want anyone at work to find out.”

“No one from work will be there. Come on. It will be fun. It’s a fancy-dress party. I get to channel my inner geek, which I’m sure you’ll take every opportunity to exploit. And if you’re with me, I don’t have to wonder about what you’re doing.”

She reached over me, her breasts pressing against my torso, and I slid my hands down her back to her arse. When she straightened up, she presented me with condom from the bedside table.

“Make me come again and I’ll go with you.”

I chuckled. “You’re bargaining with me?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Am I?” She shrugged. “I don’t think so. I think no matter what, you’re going to make me come again, given—” She slid her pussy down my cock and gasped. “Given past experience. And as for your party, I’m not sure I’m capable of saying no to you.”

“Fuck, Hollie.” A couple of weeks ago, I’d never laid eyes on this woman. How was that even possible? The things she was saying, the way she was making me feel. Whenever I was with her, it was as if the concept of time was different. Just during the course of this evening, it was as if months had gone by and she knew me in a way few others did.

I ripped open the condom, slid it on and then reached for the base of my cock, ready to have her sit on me.

She lifted up and slid her hands down her thighs, throwing her head back as she lowered herself onto me. I was wrong—we might be floating in space, but this wasn’t a black hole we were nearing. We were lying firmly in heaven.

I deliberately never looked forward when I was in a relationship with a woman. I operated in the present—I liked her. The sex was good—that’s all I needed to know. But with Hollie, I couldn’t help but think of what was next—the way I was going to cook her eggs tomorrow morning, the party on Saturday, the fact that I was certain another few weeks wasn’t going to be enough with this woman.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked as she sat still, my cock inside of her.

“How much I like you sitting on my dick,” I replied.

She laughed and pressed her palms onto my chest, the shift creating a wave of pleasure. “Well, I like sitting on your dick, so I guess we’re the perfect pair.”

I dug my fingertips into her arse and pulled her deep onto me. She swiveled her hips as we both groaned. “I guess we are,” I said. “Oh, and no, I’ve never had sex this spectacular either.”

She rolled her lips back, trying to fight a grin. “Lay off the fondue,” she said. It wasn’t a line. Suddenly she paused. “You got to promise me something?”

“Anything,” I replied without even thinking about it.

“I know this is just . . . I’m not in London long and you’re . . . Well you’re you and I’m just some girl from Nowhere, Oregon—”

The six thousand miles between where we’d each built our lives was an obstacle to a future together, but where exactly she’d come from was completely immaterial “Hey, Hollie—you’re you and I’m me. I don’t care if you live in a castle or—”

She placed her fingers over my lips. “All I’m saying is, don’t say things you don’t mean. Don’t make promises you won’t keep, and don’t pretend to be anything you’re not. Let’s just enjoy these weeks together.”

It was an easy deal to agree to. Except weeks didn’t seem long enough. Even now.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dexter

I pulled up my collar against the biting wind and out of the corner of my eye, saw the familiar blue-green of Hollie's eyes. I turned my head to see a scarf in the window of Hermes, stretched as if it were a canvas in a museum.

As I stepped closer, I could see the colors were a swirl of feathers, each one a different shade of blue or green doing its best to block out the black image of a panther hiding beneath. Hollie would love this. The colors were her completely—the blue and green would bring out her eyes and her black hair echoed the big cat. The combination of soft and fierce would suit her too.

I pulled out my phone to take a picture, to show Primrose how the colors worked together and how the flat image managed to produce a sense of movement. She could take inspiration from this for the collection that we'd begin work on after the competition was over.

I took a snap on my phone and shoved it back in my pocket.

Yeah, it would really suit Hollie. I could imagine it bunched around her neck or draped over her naked body.

I checked my watch. I had ten minutes before I was to meet Beck and Stella for lunch. I headed inside the shop and it took less than half that time to purchase the scarf. The assistant folded it intricately then covered it with ribbons, tissue and a box.

With my orange gift bag, I headed south onto Piccadilly, which is when the realization of what I'd done hit me full force. A Hermes scarf wasn't the same as picking up the bill for dinner. A gift like this was a big deal, wasn't it? And Hollie and I had made a deal—not to make promises I wouldn't keep,

say things I didn't mean or be anything I wasn't.

That scarf was breaking every part of that deal. I wasn't a man who bought expensive gifts for his girlfriend, was I? And what did that expensive gift silently promise? More than I had to give.

I could just give the scarf to Primrose to use as inspiration. Or I could return it. Or I could just sling it in my wardrobe and not think about it again. There were several solutions that didn't involve giving it to Hollie. I didn't want to mislead her or let her down. She'd been through enough. I wasn't going to be another thing on the list of rubbish things that happened to her.

I pulled open the heavy oak and brass doors of Fortnum and Mason, resolving not to think about it.

This was most definitely a lunch arranged by Stella. Left to our own devices, Beck and I would have picked up a sandwich and found a bench. Although, in this wind, I was pleased we would be indoors. Dodging the tourists, I made my way across the lobby, with its tables, cabinets and shelves filled with jams, teas, confectionary and everything quintessentially English. I should bring Hollie here—perhaps we could come for afternoon tea. As I was making mental plans in my head, I realized she'd never agree to go out in public with me. Perhaps when the competition was over and she wasn't an intern anymore. There I was again, thinking about Hollie when my head was supposed to be elsewhere. It was as if she'd permeated every thought.

I took a clearing breath and climbed the few stairs on the far side of the store. I spotted Stella waving from a window seat, nodded and headed toward her and Beck. Stella pulled me into a half hug before I pulled off my scarf and put it on the back of the seat beside her.

“Hermes. Someone's been shopping. Next time can you take Beck?” She peered in the corner of the bag. “What is it?”

“A scarf.” I should have picked it up on the way back to the office to avoid attracting Stella's attention.

“What kind of scarf?” she asked.

“Have we got menus?” I asked, looking around for a waiter.

“What kind of scarf,” Stella repeated. “Can I see?”

“You know what a Hermes scarf looks like. I want to show Primrose the color. It's design inspiration.” That would throw Stella off the scent. I didn't want her to put two and two together and come up with eight, which is what would happen if I told her I'd bought the scarf for Hollie. Because it was also design inspiration. I beckoned over a waiter, who gave us menus and offered

us drinks. Just as I thought Stella had forgotten about the scarf, she got a second wind.

“How’s Hollie?” Stella asked and it was all I could do not to groan. Instead I focused my energy on glaring at Beck.

“What?” he asked, not even trying to pretend he wasn’t delighted that his fiancée was giving me a load of grief. “It’s not like I could keep news like that to myself.”

“Why would you want to hide that you’ve got a new girlfriend, Dexter?” Stella asked. “I was hoping you’d bring her today. When do we get to meet her?”

This time I couldn’t contain a groan at their pestering questions. “You’ve got all the disadvantages of parents without the advantage of me being able to borrow money from you.”

Stella fumbled in her wallet and pulled out a twenty-pound note. “Here you go. Now tell Auntie Stella exactly what’s going on in your love life.”

“Love?” Beck interrupted.

“Okay,” Stella said, taking the drink the waiter just brought over. “If it’s not love, what is it? Just sex?”

“Stella, we’re not going to talk in detail about my sex life,” I said. “Beck is a very good friend of mine and I really don’t want to make him look bad.”

She laughed. “Throw a girl a bone. Beck said you like this girl. I want to know more about her. At least tell me, is the scarf for her?”

“Christ, I thought you had a successful career and happy relationship. Why do you have time to stick your nose into my life?”

She slung her arm around my shoulder. “We’re family. I make time for family.”

I chuckled. “She’s a lot,” I said to Beck.

“Right?” he said, grinning as if he were completely proud of it.

“What if the scarf is for her?” I wouldn’t mind Stella’s take on me giving Hollie the scarf. Would it be inappropriate? Too much? “It doesn’t mean anything. Does it? It’s not like I planned it. I didn’t make a special trip—I was just on my way here and saw it in the window.”

Stella’s eyes widened. “So, you were passing Hermes, saw a scarf in the window that you thought would suit Hollie, and decided to get it for her? You’re making me swoon.”

Did I want to make Hollie swoon? Yes. *Should* I want to? I couldn’t decide.

“Seriously, is it a big deal? I don’t want to be a dick to this girl.” I glanced at Beck because he knew my history better than Stella did. He’d met Bridget and knew how I’d felt about her. “Shall I take it back?”

“How could giving Hollie the scarf be a dick move?” Stella asked.

“He doesn’t want to give her the wrong message,” Beck explained. “Because you know . . . Bridget.”

The silence of what wasn’t being said filled the space between us. I knew Beck thought I needed to get over Bridget, but he also knew *I* knew that wasn’t possible. There was no point going through it again.

“But you like Hollie, or you wouldn’t have bought the scarf?” Stella asked.

“Yes of course I like her,” I replied.

Stella wriggled in her seat and threw some very unsubtle *I told you so* looks at Beck.

“This is not the first time I’ve liked a woman, Stella. I’m not some kind of man-whore who can only handle one-night stands. I’ve liked women before. I liked all my girlfriends.” Stella was reading too much into a very small word.

“Do something for me?” she asked.

“Stella,” Beck warned.

“It’s okay,” I said to Beck. “I can handle your fiancée. I think.”

“Have Hollie be a new book—a fresh page if you like,” she said. “It’s almost as if you have a script to follow with a girlfriend. You know how things are going to turn out before the first kiss. Don’t look ahead too far and be open to whatever happens.” She lifted her chin in Beck’s direction. “Sometimes life can surprise you. Don’t second-guess giving her the scarf. It’s thoughtful and caring and you felt the desire to buy it for her. It’s generous, and that’s part of who you are. That’s not a bad thing, Dexter.”

The way Stella put it made sense. Maybe I wouldn’t be saying anything I didn’t mean if I gave Hollie the scarf. I wouldn’t be being anyone but me. But what, if anything, did a gift like this promise?

“It doesn’t have to be a big deal,” Stella said, answering the question before I could ask it. “It is what it is. You saw it, you thought of her, you bought it. It doesn’t mean anything beyond that.”

Our food arrived and that gave me a chance for Stella’s words to settle. She was right—I was second-guessing myself when I didn’t need to. I’d had the urge to buy Hollie the scarf because it reminded me of her, simple as that.

“I’m going to give her the scarf.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hollie

Today was going to be another day jammed full of firsts. And not the kind of firsts that I experienced back in Oregon. I wouldn't be running out of gas at the end of the week, unclogging a septic line, or having Billy from the arcade hitting on me, which was a rite of passage for all the girls in Sunshine, Oregon. I was going to see the earrings that would be submitted to the competition by Daniels & Co for the first time. I was going to help out on the photo shoot where the earrings were going to be modelled. And I was going to assist Jeremy, who was presenting to Dexter the different ways we could display the jewelry for the competition.

I would also be face-to-face with Dexter at work for the first time since we'd had sex.

I wasn't in Kansas anymore. Or Oregon. Sometimes I wondered if it was even the same solar system.

"Everyone in the conference room, please," Primrose said. I'd already fetched coffee for everyone and had just finished rearranging the furniture so we could fit in a podium for the earrings that would be submitted for the competition. We'd all seen the drawings, and obviously some of the team had been involved in production, but this was the first time they would be seen by everyone.

I couldn't wait. The drawings were beautiful and I knew they would be even more so in real life. The energy in the office was buzzing, ready for the reveal of the first finished works.

People began to file in when Frank, the chief jewelry engineer, came from

the other end of the corridor carrying a big white box. Everyone paused so he could go ahead and he set the cube on top of the podium.

“Okay, everyone, please take your seats. Hollie,” Primrose said, turning to me. “Can you take the stand around and show everyone while they’re seated so we don’t have a crowd around the podium?”

Holy Hercules, I couldn’t be trusted to handle something so precious. I was guaranteed to trip and send one of the earrings hurtling down a drain that would magically appear in the floor. Frank handed me a pair of white gloves and I put them on, trying to hide my trembling hands as he took the lid off the box.

I tried to act nonchalant, as if holding diamonds meant for the princess of Finland was an everyday occurrence for me. I took the stand from the box, which was like a six-inch high tree with just two branches, each one displaying a cacophony of diamonds. I wanted to remark on how freaking sparkly they looked and ask whether diamonds always looked that way, because, for the record, cubic zirconia definitely didn’t.

Primrose stood up. “As you know, this was the option Dexter picked out of the three earring designs we had. Our theme, the Finnish landscape, comes through strongly in these pieces. The loop here,” she said, indicating the row of diamonds that formed an unfinished almond-shaped loop, “represent the lakes of Finland. There’s a great deal of skill to make this chandelier earring asymmetrical while still ensuring a symmetrical hang. Frank and his team have had to come up with some creative solutions to bring the design to fruition and they’ve done a great job.”

The chairs were arranged around the edge of the room. I started at one end and very slowly moved along the line.

Along the edge of the lake hung different-sized diamonds that represented falling snow. Each was a slightly different cut, echoing the way each snowflake was unique. They were the most beautiful earrings I’d ever seen.

People’s reactions ranged from scribbling down notes, to trying to get so close I was concerned the earrings might get inhaled. Most seemed excited, in the subdued way people at Daniels & Co did, and remarked on how beautifully they’d turned out.

“I know everyone is working really hard on this,” Primrose said. “And although some of you haven’t worked on the earrings, none of this collection works without all the components. So, thank you to everyone in this room. You all contributed and we wouldn’t be here without your talent and

creativity.”

“You think we’ll win?” Jamie, one of the guys who did a lot of work on the computer—I just wasn’t sure what, exactly—asked.

Primrose frowned. “There are lots of things that I don’t know. But I’m sure we will all have done our best.”

The door opened and Dexter swept in. I hadn’t been expecting him until Jeremy’s presentation. I clung to the stand with the earrings, and tried to pretend my life was no big deal.

“What does everyone think?” he asked, scanning the faces of his employees. He glanced at the earrings and then up at me. “Hollie?”

I tried to ignore the heat crawling up my neck. “I think they’re beautiful. And a little daring.”

A smile curled the corner of his lips. “I like that. Daring. Anyone else?”

“The design is modern,” Sarah said. “I think most other houses will go much more traditional—”

“I don’t want us comparing ourselves to other houses,” he said, cutting Sarah off. “We are competing against ourselves. I want us to give everything we have—to know we’ve left it all on the field and if we had our time again, we wouldn’t do anything differently. If we win, that’s great. If we don’t? Well fuck them for not choosing us because we know we’re the best.”

The room dissolved into laughter, and I tried hard not to toss the earrings at Jeremy, jump into Dexter’s arms and kiss his face off.

“Judging takes place at the end of the week,” Primrose said. “But we won’t have results until all the pieces are in.”

Everyone groaned and chatter started to rise about how we wouldn’t know the score before the bracelet was submitted. But Dexter was right, knowing wouldn’t change anything.

“Did no one hear what I said earlier?” Dexter asked. “The score doesn’t matter. It doesn’t affect our output. Come on guys—be your own competition. Push yourself. Now get back to work. Jeremy, Frank, Hollie, Primrose, stay behind.”

Everyone filed out and Jeremy’s cheeks began to flush. Was he nervous because he’d come up with the presentation concepts or because he was presenting to Dexter, who looked even more completely fuckable than usual? His skin seemed bronzer than normal, his hair a deeper black if that was even possible, and there was a lightness about him I didn’t usually see at the office.

“Frank,” he said, beckoning to the chief engineer. “Two of those settings need to be redone.” He spoke so quietly I could barely make out what he was saying.

“Two?” he asked, approaching me to stare intently at the earrings I still held.

I put them down on the plinth and the two men bent to look at the stand as if they were watching a flea circus.

“I knew about that one,” Frank said, pointing at one of the solitaire diamonds that hung from the lake. “I told you about it.”

“And there,” Dexter said.

Frank looked closer then pulled out his loupe to inspect it more thoroughly. “Bloody hell. How did I miss that?” he asked. “I’m pissed off with myself.”

“Frank,” Primrose said. “You know what an eagle eye Dexter has. Don’t beat yourself up.”

“This is my job, Frank. If you were perfect, I wouldn’t have anything to do.” Dexter patted Frank on the back. “But you know, it’s good you’re pissed off. Keep those standards high.”

Frank huffed as he left the room, mumbling under his breath. Dexter turned to Jeremy. “So, what are the options on presentation?”

I pulled out my Daniels & Co phone, ready to take a note of everything everyone said. Jeremy had just asked me to attend to make sure he remembered Dexter’s and Primrose’s comments, and to help out if he needed an extra pair of hands. I’d only seen one of the concepts, but I knew he’d worked on several ideas.

Jeremy flipped open his laptop. “I have three options.” He launched a video. “I’ve put together a film of the Finnish landscape,” he explained. “The idea is to have the landscape in the backdrop, but add subtle, dynamic movement. Then in the front”—he pointed to three rocks that looked like they’d been fished out of the sea—“I’ve picked out pieces of stone—”

“Rocks,” Primrose said to herself.

“We place the jewelry on the rocks,” Jeremy continued. “And they really stand out. Look, I’ve used some placeholder jewelry in the next bit.”

Jeremy’s gaze flitted between Primrose and Dexter as the video played. “The advantage of this is that it underlines the concept of the collection and it’s the most innovative. I think it will really capture the judges’ attention.”

From where I sat, the presentation just didn’t work. It was pretty and

everything, and Jeremy had clearly worked hard on it. But the jewelry was lost in everything going on. There was too much to look at, and the concept didn't reflect the Daniels & Co brand, which was all about understatement. But what did I know? Perhaps it would be exactly what Dexter and Primrose had envisioned.

Dexter pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't like it. I knew I shouldn't be mentally high-fiving myself because I liked Jeremy and wanted him to impress his boss, but at the same time Finlandian fairies danced about in my stomach because I agreed with Dexter, the most successful jewelry designer in the business.

"What else?" Dexter asked, clearly not wanting to spend more time on the first concept.

Jeremy pressed play on the video of a glass case that reminded me of an ornament Mrs. Daugherty, the woman two trailers down from my parents, had in her living room window. She'd inherited it from her mother—a red rose preserved in a sort-of snow globe, except there was no snow or liquid. It always made me think that if Mrs. Daugherty had the space for it, her trailer would be full of stuffed beavers and animal heads. In Jeremy's concept, each item of jewelry was encased in a glass dome set on a mirrored stand. It felt old and staid. I glanced at Dexter to see if I was going to be two for two. His face was completely blank.

"I think this is better," Primrose said. "Less going on. But I wonder if you had a third option?" From what Dexter had said, he'd known Primrose so long, she knew what he wanted almost before he did. The fairies in my stomach were partying like it was 1999 at the thought that I, too, had anticipated Dexter's reaction. It felt like a victory to be in agreement with Dexter and Primrose, but at the same time I felt bad for Jeremy.

"I don't have anything else fully developed," Jeremy confessed, his shoulders hunched and his gaze focused on the computer screen. He looked defeated.

"Why don't you tell them about what you were telling me earlier," I chimed in. "You know—about 'back to basics.'" Jeremy mentioned he'd played around with plain black velvet in a traditional display case, and I was surprised he hadn't worked that up into a third concept. Dexter and Primrose both turned to me and I stepped back. I was just the intern. I shouldn't have said anything.

"What's back to basics?" Dexter asked.

Jeremy shrugged. “That was a very straightforward display on black velvet.”

Dexter nodded. “I was just thinking that might be the way to go.”

“I have some images,” Jeremy said, clicking through to a new file. “I didn’t do a video though.” He brought up some images of a traditional set up with jewelry mounted at different levels on a swath of black velvet. “I also did this,” he said, flicking to what looked like pebbles covered in black velvet.

“It’s simple,” Jeremy said, almost anticipating Dexter and Primrose’s rejection.

“Regal,” I countered, unable to stop myself. “The shapes of the pebbles are elemental. And the black is classic Daniels & Co coloring while still representing the earth, the land of Finland,” I said. I wanted to save Jeremy’s ass and sell the concept to Dexter and Primrose, but also, I believed in it. I thought it was the best option—not just of the three we’d seen. I was a big believer in keeping things simple. I glanced at Jeremy to see if he was preparing to wrestle me to the ground and gag me, but he just winked.

“It shows confidence,” Primrose said.

“That’s agreed then,” Dexter said and turned toward the door. “Work up several set-ups for each piece on its own and for the collection together. Different sizes.” I couldn’t wait for Dexter and Primrose to leave so I could high-five Jeremy. “Oh,” he said as he reached the door. “Work with Hollie. I want to see what you two create together.” He swept out and Primrose followed him.

“You saved me back there,” Jeremy said, collapsing back in his chair. “I felt so sure they would go with the first one. I assumed they’d love all the technology and the way it played into the theme.” I understood why he thought that, but Dexter wasn’t ever going to go with a presentation that didn’t focus on the jewelry. “I worked so bloody hard on it.”

“I know but just think—at least you don’t have to worry about setting up computers and screens and all that technical stuff before the judging.”

He nodded. “And we’re back to jewelry on velvet. Not very innovative.”

“But it’s classic. And very Daniels & Co—understated elegance,” I said. Jeremy had been trying to impress Dexter and Primrose, but he should have focused on the jewelry. “The pebble shapes add something unique, give a little bit of edge.”

“I guess,” he said. “Thank God you were here or I would have been

sacked. You understood what they wanted more than I did and I've been here two years."

"Lucky, I guess," I said. Of course, I hoped it wasn't luck. I hoped I was on track to see stones and design jewelry in the way Dexter and Primrose did. If I had only a tiny fraction of their vision, I might be able to create a new future for myself.

Every day spent in London felt like a step taken in the opposite direction of my life in Oregon. The only problem was I didn't know what I was walking toward.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Hollie

“You saved Jeremy’s arse today,” Dexter said as we sat cross-legged in his bed, me in one of Dexter’s shirts, eating the cheese and crackers I’d brought over. I wasn’t sure how it happened but we’d gotten into a little routine. Most nights, I would arrive at Dexter’s flat about eight with some food, and he’d just be arriving home from work. I’d cook while he showered and finished up some emails. Today we’d gotten distracted and I’d ended up in the shower with him.

I was enjoying having a salary, and I’d splurged on some expensive cheese I was sure Dexter would love. I’d assumed men like Dexter lived on caviar and champagne, but he loved my grilled cheese and told me my chicken pie was the best thing he’d ever tasted. And then he’d said something dirty and I thwacked him with a tea towel.

“I just went with my gut,” I replied.

“What did it say?” he asked.

“That whatever the display was, it had to be all about the jewelry.”

“Exactly.” He sighed. “I was disappointed he didn’t get it.”

“We shouldn’t talk about this,” I said. I didn’t want to know what Dexter thought about his staff—didn’t want the responsibility of insider information in case it changed the way I looked at my colleagues, who I liked a lot. “Work is work and this is,” I said, pointing at the cheese, “delicious.”

“You’re delicious. Are you sure I can’t just have you for dinner?”

My insides shimmied at his words. “You’re going to need your strength for what I have planned for you later,” I replied.

“I can’t wait. Oh, that reminds me. I have something for you,” he said. He reached over the side of the bed and produced one of those thick paper bags with rope handles that you get from expensive stores.

“What is it?” I asked, eyeing up the orange bag with a big H on it. It looked a bit like the Hermes logo, but of course it couldn’t be. “My birthday isn’t for weeks.”

“Well, why don’t you open it and find out,” Dexter replied.

I wasn’t sure why, but suddenly I felt out of place, sitting on this bed, opposite the most handsome man I’d ever seen. If I was reading the room right, Dexter had bought me a gift. But why would he do that?

I fingered the corner of the bag.

“It won’t bite,” he said.

He was asking me to open a bag—not exactly a demanding request. I wasn’t sure why I was hesitating but if I’d thought I was on a different planet earlier in the day, now we’d rocketed to a different universe. I just felt uncomfortable.

Stop being ridiculous. I pulled the light package onto my lap and picked at the brown, monogrammed tape that sealed it shut. Inside I found a square, shallow box that felt lightweight when I balanced it on my lap. The game was up—the box had *Hermes* written on it, and I was pretty sure this wasn’t a knock-off. Regardless of what the box held, it was too much for me.

“Can I ask you something?” I said. “Did you buy me this? Like as a gift or something?”

Dexter frowned before putting a piece of cheese on his cracker. “Yeah. I said that before. That I got you a gift.”

Those hadn’t been his exact words. He’d said he *had something* for me—slightly more ambiguous, and a lot less overwhelming. I wanted to know for sure when I opened the box on my lap what it was for and why. “You don’t need to give me presents,” I said, staring at the box, half itching to open it, half scared to see what was inside.

“It’s not a big deal,” he said. “You want me to open it?” He reached for the box and I held it out of his way.

I pulled at the thin brown ribbon then lifted the lid. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting to see but what I got was white tissue paper.

I pulled open the tissue to find fabric that looked like silk—proper silk, not the rayon imitators in my wardrobe. It was printed in the most beautiful colors—every blue and green that had ever been. “What is it?”

“You keep asking me the same questions and I’m going to keep giving you the same answers,” he said. “Pull it out, for goodness sake.” This time he got hold of a corner and pulled the silk from its box, letting it float in a canopy over our heads. The peacock colors swirled above us like the most gorgeous indoor parachute.

“Careful,” I said, jumping up and catching it as it floated down toward our cheese picnic.

“It’s a scarf,” he said as I held the fabric in front of me like it was a picture I was deciding where to hang.

“It’s beautiful.” It was more than that. It was breathtaking. Stunning. It was the kind of scarf that let you know immediately who someone was—sophisticated, well-travelled and college-educated.

Disappointment roiled in my stomach.

I was none of those things.

I glanced over at him and he shrugged. “I saw it in the window and it reminded me of you—your eyes. Your hair. I thought you’d like it.”

Someone cut the cable in my ribcage and my heart landed with a thud in a pool of mixed emotion. I didn’t know if I should laugh or cry. And then a voice inside my head whispered, *Go home. You don’t belong here.*

“You okay?” he asked. “Shouldn’t I have bought it?”

“It’s just not . . .” How could I explain what I was feeling when I didn’t know myself? He bought me a gift. I should be giddy. Instead I wanted to throw some clothes on and get on the next plane back to Oregon. I’d never felt so far away from home.

“Hey,” he said and pulled me onto his lap. “Did I do something wrong?”

I wanted to push off his lap, get away, but I didn’t want to be ungrateful. “It was really nice of you,” I said, my fingers fiddling with the buttons on the shirt I was wearing.

“Do you hate it?” he asked.

I shook my head. No one could have hated something so beautiful.

“Was it inappropriate? I thought it might be but Stella convinced me to go with my gut. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. I can take it back, even.”

Inappropriate wasn’t quite the right word, but it was in the neighborhood. “Maybe not inappropriate but . . . it wouldn’t be right on me.”

Dexter cupped my face in his hands. “Tell me what you’re thinking, Hollie Lumen. Because I know it would suit you.”

If I’d learned anything about Dexter over these weeks, it was that he was

like a dog with a bone—determined and driven. I wasn't going to get him to change the subject unless the building was on fire. "I wasn't thinking about whether or not it would suit me."

"Then I hope it's not because you don't think you're worth it."

It was as if the lights went out and someone had sucked all the oxygen from the room. Five minutes ago, we'd been eating cheese and quoting our favorite films. Why had things suddenly gotten so deep?

Why was Dexter wondering what I thought I was worth? I'd been thinking I would never wear a silk scarf once I went back to Oregon, that it would sit in its box the rest of its life. And that led to a thousand more questions. After spending time in London, how could I go back? Would I be successful in getting a job at a jewelers in New York? And even if I did, wherever I was, whatever job I was doing, would I always be Hollie Lumen from the trailer park?

Of course I would.

I'd never have a reason to wear a scarf so expensive and beautiful. My die was cast.

The scarf represented a life I'd never have and a woman I'd never be.

"Hey," Dexter said, pulling me closer. "It wasn't meant to make you sad."

It wasn't his fault. He'd done something nice for me. Something wonderful.

"I'm not sad," I replied, the hitch in my voice telling a different story. "It's just too much." For me. "Too expensive," I corrected myself.

"It's just money, Hollie. And given the jewelry we're surrounded by every day, it's not that much money."

I rolled my eyes and pushed off his lap. He had no clue. Only people with money could afford to say that anything was *just money*.

"We come from very different worlds, Dexter. I have no idea what a Hermes scarf would cost, but I can guarantee it's way too much money. I'm guessing that's a month's grocery shopping right there." I lifted my chin to the silk strewn on the bed next to us.

He scowled at me. "You're right. We do come from different worlds. But I don't see why that means I can't use my money to buy you something nice."

"I don't need your money."

"I know you don't." His tone had changed to the one I was used to

hearing in the office but never here. Never when it was just us. “I don’t know what the hell I’ve done. Maybe you’re only happy when people are bleeding you dry.”

His words were like a physical blow.

“You’re saying my family are leeches now?” I stood on the bed, waiting for his reply. “I’ve never said anything that would make you think that.”

He didn’t reply and when I glanced at him, he was pinching the bridge of his nose. I’d learned now that Dexter did this when he didn’t like what was happening or what someone was telling him. “I can put two and two together and come up with four. You pay your sister’s tuition, your parents’ rent. Does anyone in your family do anything for themselves?”

I was so angry I was rooted to the spot, not knowing if I should punch him in the mouth or flee. “They’re my family. Are you telling me if your parents were alive, you wouldn’t help them out if they needed something?”

Dexter abandoned his cheese plate and tried to grab my arm. But I scooted away and jumped off the bed. I’d had enough of this conversation. I was ready to go back to my apartment. I’d call my sister, who was sure to agree with me that Dexter was a complete nutjob.

“Hey,” he said, following me into the bathroom. “I wasn’t trying to upset you. I was just trying to make sense of why giving you the scarf made you look like you were going to vomit all over my duvet. I could take offense, you know.”

I ignored him, fastening my bra and slipping on my shirt. “You’re ridiculous,” I said, my anger simmering, ready to boil over. He clearly wasn’t taking offense. He was far more interested in pissing me off. Leeches? “Not everyone who doesn’t have money is a leech. Some people in this world don’t have the opportunities, the talent or gene pool you did.” I pulled on my underwear and jeans, my anger giving way to a wave of grief over all those lives I could have led if things were different—all those opportunities I hadn’t had. I worked hard to make sure my sister could go to college and my parents always had a roof over their heads. But it was hard. There wasn’t anything left for me after everyone else was taken care of and sometimes, I could admit, it felt thankless. All Dexter was doing was reminding me of my responsibilities, and of how much I’d sacrificed to fulfill them.

I had to leave. A rumble of self-pity sounded in the distance and clouds of sadness gathered in my ribcage. If I didn’t get out of here, I was going to cry until I ran out of tears. And Jiminy Cricket, that was the last thing I wanted

Dexter to see.

He came up behind me. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have said that about your family. But it sounds like you go unappreciated. That’s all.”

His words were coaxing out my tears. “I have to go.” I scanned the floor, pretending to be looking for something so he wouldn’t see how upset I was.

“Seriously,” he said, grabbing my hand as I went past him. I tried to shake him off but he gripped my wrist tighter.

“I won’t have you—”

Before I had the chance to finish my sentence, he’d scooped me up, carried me to the bedroom and tossed me on the bed, capturing my wrists on either side of my head. “I need you to listen to me. Because this is getting out of hand. You’re overreacting. I’m clearly being insensitive—I’m pushing every one of your buttons, and I have no clue what’s really going on.”

“Just get off me,” I said, squirming underneath him. Anger would be easier. Tears would be far more difficult to explain.

“I want to talk,” he said as he released me. “I don’t want you running out when we’re having an argument I don’t understand. I was trying to do something nice and you’re upset and angry and I want to resolve this.”

I didn’t move from where he’d left me. He was a jerk for calling my family leeches, even if sometimes it felt like my parents could do more to help themselves.

On a sigh, he grabbed the scarf and tossed it in the trash. “Sod the fucking scarf. I wish I’d never listened to Stella.”

My skin seemed to shrivel as if I’d been dunked in an ice-cold lake. I’d hurt his feelings, been rude to the one person who had my back. Dexter probably thought I was being spoiled. He couldn’t know that a kind and thoughtful gift would stir up so much in me. “It just felt a bit weird,” I said, my voice small. I slid my gaze sideways, barely able to look at him.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to me, raking his fingers through his hair. He was too gorgeous. Too kind. Too good to me. “I’m sorry,” I said, reaching for him and then pulling my hand away, concerned he’d flinch if I touched him. “Maybe I’m scared I’m going to get used to . . .” Him? Anyone other than Autumn being so good to me? A life that I knew I was going to have to walk away from? “You’re just really nice to me.”

“And you’re really nice to me. Normally.”

How could he even think that? What had I done for him? “I am not.”

“What do you mean you’re not?” He turned toward me, shaking his head.

“Really, Hollie, you are. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here with you.”

“Come on, Dexter. Look at everything you’ve done for me. The job, the salary, now the scarf. It’s a lot. And maybe you’re right, maybe I’m not used to some billionaire saving my ass all the time. It’s not something many girls at the Sunshine Trailer Park are used to.”

“Don’t you see that you do nice things for me too? You make food for me most nights and you’re the most amazing cook. When you’ve been here, I always find a vase of flowers on the kitchen side or—”

“Dexter, the roses I buy cost me five pounds from Tesco and I’ve only done it twice.”

“The money doesn’t matter, Hollie. You’re being kind. You’re giving. I might buy you a Hermes scarf, but I have more money than you. It’s the thought behind it—the intention.” He sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have . . .”

I hadn’t thought about how the cooking and the flowers could be thought of as giving. It seemed like nothing in comparison to what he’d given me, though I supposed it was. But it wasn’t a big deal. I was happy to do it—I enjoyed it. “I like cooking. I like that you like it. And I didn’t even realize you noticed the flowers,” I replied. His flat was gorgeous, like something you’d see in a magazine. Cheap flowers probably made it look worse, not better.

“I don’t want you to freak out, but you just said yourself that you don’t even realize when you’re giving, when you’re doing nice things for people. It’s ingrained in you. You’re so used to it that you don’t even see it. Usually between people, it’s a two-way street—both parties are nice to each other. I’m just not sure that’s your normal.”

“Maybe that’s true,” I said. “And maybe the reason I was so upset is that I can’t be anyone other than who I am. I’m always going to be the girl from Nowheresville, Oregon. I’m never going to be some sophisticated city girl who went to college, majored in marketing and then got a job in New York City. Even if I got out of Sunshine someday, it wouldn’t erase who I am. For me, a Hermes scarf will never not be a big deal.”

“I think who you are is kind of wonderful,” he said and my heart lifted a little, trying to find a foothold to burst out of my chest and give itself to this man in front of me.

How had I found him?

“I’m really sorry for acting crazy.” I slipped my fingers into the waistband of his jeans and pulled him toward the bed. I didn’t want to fight

anymore.

“You’re a good person, Hollie. And *I’m* really sorry. I wasn’t trying to cast aspersions on your parents—”

I couldn’t help but laugh despite feeling as if I were in a heap of limbs at the end of a fairground ride. “‘Cast aspersions?’ You’re so British.”

“I can’t help that.” He circled his arms around my waist. “But seriously, I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad. Quite the opposite.” We sat for what felt like ages, Dexter’s arms around me and our breaths the only sound surrounding us. “Don’t leave tonight.” He buried his head in my neck.

I was dressed now, and I would normally leave before midnight anyway. “I should go home.”

“You could stay the night, you know. Go home tomorrow morning if it makes you feel better not to go straight to the office from here.”

Despite my initial instinct to run, right now I wanted to spend the night in his arms.

“You promise not to return the scarf?” I said, a small smile curling around my mouth.

“With what I’ve got planned to do to you with it, I’m not sure Hermes would take it.”

There was no way I was going to let him ruin such a beautiful thing. I pushed away from him and retrieved the scarf, folded it quickly, slipped it back in the box and put it on the seat under the window. “Well, that’s not going to work for me. No one’s ever given me anything quite so beautiful and I’m not going to let you ruin it.” Even if I never had an opportunity to wear the scarf, I’d keep it. I’d take it home and put it in my memory box. If I ended up retiring at the Sunshine Trailer Park, I could bring it out and remember that one summer in London when the most amazing guy in the world thought I had peacock-colored eyes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dexter

I didn't argue with women. I didn't have the energy or the will. I'd never cared enough.

Hollie was different.

"Are we good?" I asked, following her into the kitchen where she was checking she hadn't left anything on. I wanted to make things better for her. I hated the idea that she felt she wouldn't ever get to be the kind of woman who wore a Hermes scarf. There were plenty of women who didn't have half her heart or soul that wore head-to-toe Hermes.

It had been a confounding evening, but there was nowhere I'd rather be. The last time I fought with a woman had to have been the last time Bridget and I argued. I'd had things thrown at me a couple of times but I just didn't engage. And some women would sometimes go completely silent on me. I just ignored it. I never cajoled them into talking about it or told them I didn't want them to leave. I hadn't meant to be cruel. I just thought it was better if they cooled off in their own time. And if they were so annoyed they didn't want to hang out anymore—well, we lived in a free country. That was their choice.

"Yeah, we're good," she replied, looking at me over her shoulder from where she stood by the hob.

"Then can I kiss you?" I asked. I needed to *know* she was okay, not just hear her say it.

I didn't want to lose her.

The realization hit me like a tree trunk to the forehead—I liked this

woman. Really liked her. Liked her more than I could ever remember liking anyone.

Except Bridget of course. Although it had been such a long time since Bridget and I had been together. Such a long time since I fell in love with her. And although I would always love her, I wasn't sure I was actually *in love* with her. I wasn't sure it was possible to be in love with a woman I hadn't seen for fifteen years.

Not that I was in love with Hollie. I just really liked her, more than I'd liked anyone in a long time. I hadn't been looking for it. I hadn't been looking for anything. I'd just thought she was beautiful from the very moment I'd laid eyes on her. And I wanted to make her laugh, buy her dinner, sleep with her. But all those things had been true for other women who had been in my life since Bridget. There was something different about Hollie from the start, but there hadn't been any seismic shifting of tectonic plates under my feet until tonight. Until I realized I didn't want her to leave. That I'd miss her if she did go. That I wanted us to talk through whatever was bothering her about the scarf because I didn't want her to be upset—but more because I wanted to know her better. I wanted to know how to soothe her, how to avoid upsetting her the next time.

It was as if I was standing under a waterfall of new feelings cascading over me.

“The answer to that question is always yes,” she replied. Streetlights shining in from the window lit her up, a halo of yellow light making her look even more beautiful than usual.

For how long would that be her answer? I wondered. At the moment it was always yes but what if we had another argument and she made it out of the door that time? What about when she went back to Oregon?

Before I could think too much, she came over to me and hiked herself up onto the kitchen island, sliding her hands up my arms. I sighed, instantly soothed by her, her touch some kind of hypnotic balm.

I cupped her face in my hands. She really did have the most astonishing eyes. And I pressed my lips to hers.

“Thank you for not leaving,” I said as I pulled away.

“Thank you for convincing me to stay,” she replied, slipping her fingers into the waistband of my trousers.

“We have some making up to do,” I said, undoing the shirt she'd just buttoned.

“Is that a promise?” she asked.

I unpeeled the white cotton and pulled off her bra to reveal her soft skin. Just like I’d wanted to know her mind and what she was thinking earlier in the evening, now I wanted to map her body with my tongue.

I wanted to know every part of her, inside and out.

I pushed her back onto the marble, smoothing my hands down her stomach, over the peaks and dips of her hips and down to her thighs.

“You’re touching me like you think I might not really be here,” she whispered.

I sighed and pressed a kiss just above her ankle bone and another on the inside of her knee. Maybe she was on to something. Perhaps the woman in my bed wasn’t the one I’d been expecting all those weeks ago when I’d first spotted her at the launch of the competition. She was now the woman I fought with. The woman I didn’t want to go home. The woman I was going to bury myself in so she’d never leave.

I pressed open her legs and placed my tongue flat against her clit. Christ, she was delicious. She was almost instantly wet and I wanted to be surrounded by it. I slid my fingers inside her, and she began to twist away.

“Too much. I’ll come too soon,” she panted.

I placed my hand on her stomach, keeping her in place. Yes, she’d come quickly. That’s what I wanted. I wanted her to lose count of the number of times I made her climax tonight. I wanted to leave a mark on her mind and body—make tonight unforgettable—not because we’d fought. But because we’d made up.

As I licked, Hollie gave a little wiggle of her hips as if trying to get my fingers deeper and my tongue harder. I growled at the realization she wanted to belong to me as much as I wanted to possess her. I pulled back, not to punish her for being so greedy but because she tasted so fucking delicious I wasn’t ready to give it up.

She moaned and I put my mouth on her again, this time letting my tongue trace her up and down, through her folds over and over. Her back arched off the stone, and I pressed my fingers into her again, grinning as I watch the calm sedation pass over her—like she’d given up whatever she was holding back. Like she had surrendered.

To me. To us.

I used my fingers to explore and twist while my tongue just tasted and tasted and tasted. She flopped her arms over her head and spread her legs

wider. She was mine. To do with what I pleased.

Her bulging clit began to pulse and my hardened cock reared in response. Fuck, being able to bring her to the edge so quickly made me feel like a fucking king.

“Dexter,” she cried out and reached for me. I grabbed her hand, pressing my lips onto her stomach, feeling the ripple of her orgasm against my skin as she came.

Her eyes still closed, my impatience to be inside her took over. I wanted my cock coated in her wetness and my fingers digging into her flesh. Just the thought had me as hard as wood, sweat starting to prickle at my neck. I gathered her in my arms and took her over to the sofa, bending her over the back cushions and pulling a condom from my trouser pocket.

I stripped out of my clothes, rolled on the condom and rested my cock at her entrance. “Are you ready?” I asked. I was rushing. She rid me of the unflappable detachment that I had. I needed more of her. And each time she gave me what I craved, I got greedy and took more still.

I needed to take a moment. To breathe her in. To enjoy every second. But she undid my self-control.

“For you? Always.” I groaned and drove my cock into her, long, slow and deep. It was so good—so hot, tight and wet. I slid my hands under her arms and cupped her breasts. Her hard nipples pressed against my palms and she reached behind me, urging me deeper still.

I wanted to stay there, buried inside her until sunrise, but she shifted, and the pleasure that bloomed in my chest at the drag against my cock was nearly too much.

“Fuck, Hollie,” I said as I started to draw out and push back in, eeking out the pleasure, wanting to make each stroke last as long as possible. Being here was so good. So fucking perfect. Thank fuck she hadn’t left tonight. Thank fuck we had this. All night. How lucky was I to have found this woman who could make me feel so fucking right? It was as if for years I’d had a piece of my soul missing and she’d found it. I felt more alive when I was fucking Hollie than I could ever remember. I felt like I belonged. Like I could do anything as long as I could be with this woman.

Her hand coaxed mine from her breast and she interlaced my fingers with hers as I almost roared at the perfection of it. How such a nonsexual movement could make my cock ache as much as it did. But it was the intensity of the connection—the purity of it—that really got me. It

represented her and us and how I felt about her.

She began to tremble beneath me. Her legs started to shake, her entire body consumed by her climax. She pushed down further on my cock and the shift in position had me driving deeper into her. Her climax pulsed around me, squeezing my cock, making me pant and grunt and fuck harder and harder until I was almost blind with effort. All I could do was feel. And all I felt was Hollie.

I exploded into her on a moan and pulled my arms tighter around her.

“You’re going to ruin me,” she whispered.

If I’d had any energy left, I’d have asked her what she meant. I’d have questioned whether she was talking about the scarf. But I’d given her every last drop of effort I had.

And I’d do it all again if she asked me.

At some point we made it to the bedroom, though it was long past dark when Hollie shifted out of my arms and crossed my room into the bathroom.

“Have I told you you’re beautiful?” I asked.

She turned and looked at me over her shoulder as if I’d just said the most ridiculous thing. She shouldn’t be shocked. If she was, that was my fault. There should be no doubt in her mind that I thought she was the most beautiful woman on the planet. Because that was the truth.

“Let me go to *the loo*,” she said and I grinned at her anglicization. She suited London. And she had a natural eye for what showed off stones, which was important if she was going to be in this business.

“You never told me if you actually liked the earrings,” I called out to her. She reappeared at the bathroom door, smiling as if she’d been waiting for me to bring it up. We weren’t supposed to talk about the office, but I wanted to know what she thought.

“Okay, let’s have a five minute time-out so we can talk about work.” She grabbed her mobile from beside the bed. “We have until six minutes to the hour.”

I grinned, enjoying her rules as much as her disapplication of them.

“You know what I thought?” she asked, tucking her hands under her cheek as we lay on our sides, facing each other.

“No,” I said, rolling my eyes as if I found her exasperating instead of sexy and completely fascinating.

She ignored me. “I thought they would go perfectly with your parents’ tiara.”

Her statement left me slightly winded. It wasn't at all what I'd expected her to say. I'd thought she'd comment on the theme or technical innovation. What did my parents have to do with those earrings?

"You know," she continued, "modern but classic. Innovative but still regal. And of course, they were beautiful," she said. "The theme is amazing and there's the technical thing of getting them to hang straight without it looking too obvious that you're using the snowflakes as the counter-balance. I loved every part of them. It's clear you're the son of two incredibly talented people."

I didn't have a response to that. It wasn't sadness I felt when Hollie mentioned my parents, as it was when most people spoke of them. I didn't rush to quieten her or quickly change the subject. I liked that she respected my connection to them still, fifteen years later. And I wasn't sure anyone had paid me such an incredible compliment. I reached for her and pulled her toward me, needing her heat against me. Enjoying the closeness of her.

Whatever was between us wasn't about easy company and regular, outstanding sex—although it was those things. It was more than that. It was about hanging out with someone I found endlessly fascinating, feeling cared for and wanting to care for someone else. It was wanting her to love what Daniels & Co produced. And it was so much more than I'd ever felt in such a long time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hollie

I only had thirty minutes before I had to leave for Gabriel's party, but I hadn't spoken to Autumn for two days. I'd mastered video calling on my Daniels & Co smartphone, far quicker than I'd mastered the design software—though I was improving on that front—so Autumn and I could chat while I got ready to meet Dexter.

“What's Dexter going as?” Autumn asked as I pulled out my onesie from the pile of clean laundry.

Dexter had blindsided me, telling me Gabriel's birthday party wasn't fancy dress as in we had to dress fancy, but the British version of a costume party. I'd had two days and zero dollars to find the perfect outfit.

“Maverick.”

“Top Gun?”

“Yeah. You know what guys are like. They all think they have a Navy fighter pilot on the inside waiting to get out.” Though Dexter was always Mr. Cool and Above It All, I actually thought it was refreshingly human that he had an inner child wanting to be Tom Cruise.

“And you're not going as Kelly McGillis?”

I groaned. Autumn was usually a little more creative. “I have at least five reasons why that's a bad idea.”

“I have enough patience for your top three.”

“One, it's boring. It's the first time I'm meeting his friends. I don't want them to think I have zero imagination. Two, why should my costume be dependent on his? Maverick was Maverick. You can't even remember Kelly

McGillis' character's name."

"Okay, so you could have gone as Goose. And anyway, that was only two reasons."

"No," I said. "I'm steering away from anything with a Simpson-Bruckheimer vibe."

"But you want your costumes to interrelate, right?"

"No. Absolutely not," I confessed.

"I'm totally confused," she said. "Why not?"

I didn't want to talk to my sister about something I didn't want to even think about. But as usual, what I wanted really didn't matter. "Because, you know, it's not like we're engaged."

"But you're a couple, right?"

It felt like we were a couple. It had been creeping up on me for a while, but it wasn't a feeling I was used to, so it was difficult to recognize. Ever since our fight, things had been different. Something had shifted. He'd given his doorman my name so I could go up to his apartment without him in case he got tied up at work. He kissed me differently—his eyes were more searching before his lips touched mine. We were interconnected in a way we weren't before, but there'd been no discussion or labelling and that was completely fine. "I don't know what we are," I confessed. "It's going to look a little stalkersville if I dress in a complementary costume and he wasn't expecting it. Anyway, I go back to my previous argument—I should have my own cool costume. My decision about what I wear shouldn't be dictated by what Dexter's wearing."

"Oh my God, Hollie," Autumn said. "I've never heard you so ruffled by a guy."

"I'm not ruffled," I said. "I'm saying the opposite—that I don't want to be dressing a certain way because of his costume."

"I call ruffled," she said. "I can count on one hand the number of second dates you've ever been on, and with any of those guys, you wouldn't even consider what they were wearing to a costume party. You'd just wear whatever you wanted."

She was exasperating and a bad listener. "That's exactly what I just said I was going to do."

"Hmmm, maybe. But you're not picking a complementary costume because you don't want to freak him out, not because you don't give a shit. It's an important distinction." I could almost hear her grin. "You like this

guy, Hollie.”

This wasn’t news to me but hearing it out loud was kind of weird. “Yeah, maybe I do.”

Autumn squealed. “This is amazing. Why didn’t you choose to go as Princess Leia in the gold bikini? Guys love that and your hair would be perfect—”

“Absolutely not. It’s a complete cliché and . . .” I’d like to think Dexter was a little bit above the whole female objectification/Leia fantasy, but of course he wasn’t. He was a guy. With a pulse. “Just absolutely and completely not. My idea is cool. I don’t care what you say.”

“I want to meet this guy,” Autumn said. “He must be special to finally get my sister to fall in love.”

“Autumn! I am not in love with him. He’s a great guy to hang out with in London, but it’s not like it’s going to work out between us.” The soon-to-be five thousand miles between us ensured what we had was a short-term thing. Even if I did end up with a job in New York, we’d still be an ocean apart. “I haven’t even told you about the fight we had. He bought me a gift, and I had a meltdown that led to the world’s biggest argument.”

“What was the gift? A butt plug?”

I wasn’t sure if she was trying to be funny or if she just assumed the gift must have been inappropriate to spark a fight. She could only go on past history of the men I’d dated. And if I had been talking about any of them, she’d wouldn’t have been so off base with a butt plug. But Dexter would never do that. If he wanted anal sex, he’d just suggest it—not pretend it was a gift. Autumn was going to think I was an idiot when I told her what had sparked our disagreement. “No, he bought me a scarf. It’s really beautiful.”

“And you freaked out because . . .?”

She was going to think I was a maniac. I took a deep breath and exhaled slow. “There were a lot of reasons. But he had a theory about me. He thinks I’m not used to accepting presents, receiving stuff.”

“Did he mean gifts or is this an oral sex issue?”

I laughed, relieved she’d lightened the moment. I never had a problem receiving Dexter’s tongue. That’s where his argument failed completely—a point I’d be sure to make if we ever argued about this again. “He thinks because I pay Mom and Dad’s rent that I’m not used to . . .” It was a little awkward to talk about this with Autumn, since she was someone in my life that I helped out. But she was younger. And my parents weren’t stepping up

to help her, so what did he expect? That I would just leave her high and dry? If I could help, of course I was going to.

“He’s right.” She sighed. “I like this guy and I’ve never even met him.”

“Wait, what do you mean he’s right? I haven’t even told you what he’s said.”

“Well, you’ve said bits and it doesn’t take a genius to fill in the rest. You’re not used to a two-way relationship. You’re used to being the giver, the caretaker. And everyone else takes from you.”

“Life isn’t perfect. If it was, there’d be zero calories in fried chicken and I’d wake up looking like Irina Shayk.”

My sister grinned and her smile filled the entire phone screen. I wish I was there. Or that she was here. I wanted us to grab the duvet from the bed, snuggle under it and watch *America’s Got Talent* while eating ice cream straight from the carton. “I didn’t say anything about perfect. But you’re a natural giver. And you’ve never been in a relationship with a guy you really like. Ever. He could really take advantage.”

She was sweet to be concerned. I was usually the protective one with her boyfriends. I shook my head. “Dexter’s not like that.”

“Bet you cook for him. Go down on him.”

“Well, I like to do both, so we’re good.”

“Just remember—it’s a two-way street. I like the fact that he bought you something. It’s nice. And you should let him. It’s what good boyfriends should do. I read it somewhere. And one of these days, I’ll be treating you. I think you can rule Mom and Dad out on that score.”

I snorted. As if I was banking on that. Neither of them ever had more than five dollars in the bank and they weren’t particularly practical. If they were stopped by the police for a broken tail light, left to their own devices they’d end up in jail. And it would never be because they’d ever done anything terrible—they’d just piss people off, forget dates and not turn up when and where they were supposed to. It was easier for me to step in to pay the fine for the broken tail light, and then there wasn’t a danger of me having to pay lawyers’ fees for a jury trial. That was just life with our parents.

“Exactly. It’s totally natural that you’d have a warped idea of what your role is in a relationship. Let him do nice stuff for you. And if he doesn’t, dump him. Kindness goes both ways.”

It was simple the way she said it. And it was pretty much what Dexter had said. I didn’t know if it was because I was hearing it from Autumn or

because I'd had a couple of days to think about the fight, but the accusation that I wasn't used to getting what I should in a relationship seemed to make more sense today.

"How do you know when they're doing too much?" I asked. "Should I keep a list? Make sure I only do something nice for him when he does something nice for me?" That seemed a little over the top, but I was a novice, apparently. Surely a Hermes scarf was too much. How could I ever repay him?

"No, Hollie, you don't keep a tally. You're just caring for each other—him for you, you for him. Equal doesn't mean identical."

She paused and I tried to read her expression but the screen froze. "It probably wasn't that much to him. You said he has money. And you're not prone to exaggerate. I'm thinking this guy could buy and sell the whole trailer park."

"Right. That's what he said. Not about the trailer park. About the scarf."

"So, let him do what he wants to do for you. And you do what you want for him. If you make each other happy, that's when shit gets serious."

That made sense. I should just do what was in my heart and he should do the same. As long as we were both happy.

"When did you get so wise?" I asked.

"Grew up this way. It was the way my sister raised me."

I was suddenly so homesick I could barely stand. Not for Oregon. Not for the Sunshine Trailer Park or my parents, but for Autumn. "I miss you," I said.

"Don't you dare miss me. You're chasing your dreams and hanging out with Sexy Dexter. You don't have time to miss me."

I might have paid Autumn's tuition, but that girl gave me the strength and courage to try to carve out a life for myself outside of the trailer park.

"Although I'm going to miss you like crazy on your birthday."

"It's the first one I won't spend with you."

"You'll just have to make Dexter sit in bed, eat ice cream and watch reruns of the *Housewives*."

If he was capable of that, the man was worth marrying.

"Is that a glue gun?" Autumn asked, frowning at me as I stuck together the blue felt.

"I just spotted a hole in the hat."

"Well, if he has sex with you after seeing you in that outfit, you'll be engaged by Christmas."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dexter

I'd offered to pick Hollie up but, she said she'd meet me outside Gabriel's place and made me promise not to go inside without her. I leaned against the car, trying to see if I could spot her. I didn't know what I should be looking for, given we were going to a fancy-dress party. I'd asked her a couple of times about her costume but she'd refused to tell me anything. When I suggested Kelly McGillis, Hollie had challenged me to remember the character's name, and when I couldn't, she told me she wasn't going to go as my nameless appendage. Then I made a crude joke about my dick being my best appendage, and she thwacked me with a towel.

I transferred my fighter pilot helmet from one hand to the other. My assistant had done a good job with the costume. The red and black striped helmet even had the word *Maverick* painted on it in white. My green jumpsuit had all the requisite patches, including the American flag, Top Gun school crest, and Tom Cat. But I felt a bit of a dick. Costumes weren't really my thing.

I checked my watch. She'd said she'd be here ten minutes ago, but it was difficult to know whether she was normally late. Our relationship had been conducted entirely behind closed doors in my apartment. We'd had that one dinner when we first met, but since then we'd been banished from going outside together.

"Hey, wanna be my wingman?" Hollie called from behind me.

I turned to find her grinning at me. And then her face dropped. "You guys have Dr. Seuss, right?"

I chuckled, taking in her red flannel outfit and the white circular label on her chest that read *Thing 1*. “You’re adorable. And yes, we do. Where’s Thing 2?”

She pulled out her keys and dangled a miniature version of herself in front of me. “Autumn bought it for me. She has another.” Then she slipped her red-gloved hands around my waist and put her head on my chest. “I like you as a pilot. Maybe I should have gone for something a little more feminine, Sexy Dexter.”

Her blue felt hat, shaped like an upside-down octopus, smacked me in the face.

“You’re the sexiest I’ve ever seen you,” I replied.

“You’re a terrible liar,” she said.

“I mean it. Are you wearing anything under that—what is that—is it all-in-one? Does this zip work?” I reached for the neck of her costume to see if I could reveal what was underneath.

She batted my hand away. “I’m wearing pajamas,” she said. “I got a bunch of felt online and with hand stitching and glue, this is what I came up with. And yes, I have underwear on, you pervert.”

She looked completely cute. I was relieved she’d gone to some effort and not bunged on a suit and said she was a CIA agent or something. Gabriel would appreciate her commitment. All the boys would.

“You look phenomenal,” I replied, kissing her on her forehead. No one would be dressed like her.

“You’re sure you don’t wish I’d come as Princess Leia in the gold bikini?” she asked, looking up at me.

I’d be lying if I confessed that the image she’d conjured up wasn’t appealing. “Was that an option? Do you have the bikini back at your place?” I asked. “We could have our own private party later if you insist.”

She rolled her eyes. “So predictable. But this,” she said, pulling away and sweeping an arm down her soft, crimson body, “is as sexy as you can handle.”

I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward Gabriel’s drive. “If we stay here in the dark a moment longer, I’ll have you unzipped and naked in the back of the Sentinel.”

“If I’m completely honest, I’m not feeling hugely sexy,” she said, holding on to her hat as we crossed the road.

“My jumpsuit is chafing if it makes you feel any better.”

“It does. It’s good to know it’s not just women who suffer for their fashion choices. I’m a fire hazard most of the time given the materials in my clothes.”

“Well, at least tonight, no one will miss you in a fire.”

I knocked on the door and went in. The hallway led into the open-plan kitchen area where Gabriel and his daughter spent most of their time. The glass doors into the garden had been opened and the party had spilled out onto the patio.

I didn’t see anyone I knew. Probably due to the fact that we were all dressed up and pretending to be someone else. Then Stella, in a gold helmet and blue cloak, came toward us, her gaze pinned on Hollie.

“Hey!” she said, brandishing a spear. “You must be Hollie. I fucking love your outfit. Just my type of girl. I thought you might turn up in a Princess Leia bikini and I’d have had to take off your head,” she said, wiggling her spear.

“What the fuck is with the spear?” I asked, kissing her on both cheeks.

“I’m Boudica, you walking cliché. You know that film is full of homoerotic imagery?” she asked.

“I like fast planes and good-looking guys,” I replied. “Shoot me.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Hollie said, laughing.

“He is,” Stella said, grinning as if she finally had a partner in crime. “I’m so pleased I don’t have to break it to you. Come and get a drink. You have to see what Beck has come as. He’s even more ridiculous. The testosterone is exhausting. Gabriel’s the only normal friend they have.”

Hollie looked at me and smiled, her blue hat wobbling to one side. “Thank you,” she said.

I wasn’t sure what she meant, and I didn’t have time to ask her before we found Tristan, Gabriel and Beck. I couldn’t help but laugh at how predictable Tristan’s outfit was. “Han Solo?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m hoping there’ll be a few women here dressed as Leia. You know,” he said, making a cupping gesture in front of him. “In the bikini.”

“You know I’m carrying a spear,” Stella said. “And you’re just asking to have me target your balls.”

Tristan just shrugged.

I turned to Gabriel. “Happy birthday.” I looked him up and down. “Did you two come as a couple?” I asked, taking in his Darth Vader costume. The five-year-old in me was dying to know if the mask pushed to the top of his

head did the voice.

“No. And I have to say, I think Han Solo is a weak costume. It’s too conventional. Tristan’s basically rummaged at the back of his wardrobe and found what he wore to university and picked up a plastic gun. Unlike me. Or you.” He held his hand out to Hollie. “I’m Darth,” he said.

“Thing 1. Happy birthday,” she said. They shook hands as if this was any old introduction in the pub.

“Very good,” he said. “I read Dr. Seuss to my daughter. She’s three so I’m not sure she appreciates all the nuances, but I do.”

“How’s it going?” I asked. It was his first birthday since his wife had left.

He nodded and took a large swig of wine. I didn’t press him. It was his birthday, and I was sure he didn’t want to get into it.

“Why are you so pissed off at Beck?” I asked Stella, taking in Beck’s Hulk costume.

“I’m just irritated. He’s greener than I ordinarily like a man. I wanted him to come as Batman,” she said. “That’s a manly costume. And much less green.”

“Yeah but too Vader-y,” he said, indicating Gabriel’s billowing cloak.

“It was thoughtful not to upstage the host,” Hollie muttered beside me.

Stella leaned toward us both. “I know. It’s very sweet that he didn’t want to overshadow Gabriel, but I’m hoping he’s going to put on the costume I got him when we get home so I’m pretending to sulk.”

Hollie laughed and her blue hair fell off, revealing her own dark tendrils. “Oh, this thing is so hard to keep on,” she said. “Where’s your restroom? I’ll go reattach it. I have some bobby pins with me.”

Gabriel pointed over to the door by the stairs. I tried to catch Hollie’s eye to see if she wanted me to go with her, but she’d already turned to go. She’d been so adamant she didn’t want me going into the party before her, I wasn’t sure if she was okay to be on her own. “You think I should go?” I asked Stella.

She frowned. “No. She would have asked you to help her with her hat if she hadn’t wanted to go by herself.”

I nodded. “Yeah, hadn’t thought of that.”

“But it’s very sweet that you’re considering her feelings. You’re very . . . touchy with each other,” she said.

“We’re not,” I said. Yes, I was holding her hand when we came in, and perhaps I’d given her a reassuring back stroke. But I wanted Hollie to feel

comfortable. And it was rare for there to be so many people surrounding us. I just wanted her to know that I was . . . here. “No more than you and Beck.”

“Yeah, Beck and I are very touchy. It’s not a criticism. It’s nice to see you like that with a woman.”

I was about to defend myself and say how it was no different from any other girlfriend, but there was no point. I’d never had the same desire to touch a woman every moment the way I did with Hollie, and although I’d not thought about it consciously before, no doubt that was obvious from someone like Stella’s point of view.

“But you know the thing that makes me sure she’s a winner?” Stella asked.

“Go on,” I said, making clear from my tone that I didn’t want to know.

“Her costume.”

I laughed. “You think Hollie is my perfect match because she’s dressed as a Dr. Seuss character?”

“Absolutely. She could have come as Wonder Woman or Catgirl. Or Princess Leia in that bloody gold bikini. But she came in a onesie. I like the lack of vanity. She’d be completely entitled to come as some super-sexy character, but I like that she didn’t. It proves there’s more to her than the pretty face. She’s quirky.”

“She’s not that quirky,” I said defensively. I didn’t want Stella to think Hollie was some kind of novelty. “She’s just . . .”

I couldn’t find the right word because Hollie deserved more than a throwaway phrase to describe her. She was more interesting than that.

“You like her.”

“Of course I like her or I wouldn’t be hanging out with her.” I could feel myself falling into the same old argument I had with all my friends—how yes, she was a nice girl but how she wasn’t Bridget. Only this time, I stopped myself. “But yes, I really like her.”

Beck interrupted us. “What are you two gossiping about? Hollie? I like her outfit. Thank God she didn’t wear that Princess Leia bikini or you would be competing with Tristan.”

Women who flirted with my friends to get my attention didn’t last long. “No, I don’t think I would,” I said. “Hollie’s not like that.”

I didn’t miss the nudge Stella gave Beck. It was to be expected, I guessed. I liked Hollie a lot, and it was only in the context of the outside world that it was so obvious.

“I like her outfit,” Beck said. “Shows she’s a woman with her own mind.”

“That’s what I said,” Stella replied.

And that was what Hollie was for me—unlike anyone else I’d ever met. She was just . . . Hollie.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hollie

“Today is Friday,” Dexter announced from where he was lying in his bed, watching me scabble about, collecting bits of clothing from where they were strewn last night.

“Honestly, Dexter, I think we need to get you in for some lab tests. You’re beyond smart,” I replied. “What other nuggets of wisdom do you have? Grass is green? I’m American?”

I glanced up to find him grinning at me.

“I really like you,” he said, sliding one hand behind his head. The sheets shifted to reveal more of that hard torso that felt so very, very good under my hands. Darn, he was distracting.

“I’m naturally very charming,” I replied, trying to stay focused.

“And now, you’re picking up all your stuff so you can go back to your place after work before turning right back around and coming here tonight. Just like you did yesterday, and the day before. Only today is Friday.”

I was going to be late if I didn’t get a move on. “Do you have a point or are you just running through what my day is going to look like? My boss is a real asshole, and if I’m late, there’s no telling what he might do.”

“I’m serious, Hollie,” he said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and padding into the bathroom. He was acting like he made any kind of sense. “What’s the point in you going home every morning? Like now, for example. Why don’t you have a shower here? If you don’t want to drive into work with me, fine, but there’s no point in leaving at six just so you can shower on the other side of town. It’s crazy.”

He was right. Getting up this early wasn't doing anything for the bags underneath my eyes. "Okay, so maybe I'll bring an overnight bag sometimes." If I went by tube and Dexter drove, there was no way anyone would ever know about us. Dexter was true to his word, keeping our interactions professional at the office. No one had the slightest clue—if some of the mundane tasks I was given were anything to go by.

"Yeah that's one option," he said as he swept past me and grabbed his toothbrush.

I couldn't stay today. I didn't have any clothes here, and I wasn't about to wear the same outfit as I wore yesterday. "Okay, well, we can talk about it again later." There was never any discussion about whether or not I was going to come over. Only what time and what we were going to do. Sometimes it was easy to forget that a couple of months ago, we'd never met.

"Things are going to get busier and busier in the office," he said before brushing his teeth.

I pushed my wallet into my purse and paused. What was he trying to say? Was he giving me the brush-off? I'd heard my girlfriends complain about this excuse men made when they wanted to end things but were too scared to actually say the words. *Oh, I'm going to be away for most of August, or, my car is getting fixed up in the next couple of weeks and I won't be able to come over.* Well if that was Dexter's game, I was going to make him say the words.

"Spit it out, Dexter. What are you trying to say?"

On cue he spat his toothpaste, rinsed his mouth and turned to me. "I think we should go over to your place tomorrow and collect all your stuff and bring it back here. I want you to stay with me."

I stared at him, my brain trying to work through what he'd just said. I took a deep breath, trying to even out my whiplash. I didn't know why I'd just jumped to the conclusion he might be trying to end things when there hadn't been any signs. I supposed I was just used to disappointment. But move in here? That seemed like a lot, but the corners of my mouth were twitching as if I was about to break into a grin. "All of it?" was all I could come up with at first.

"Sure. You came over from the US. It's not like you have a lot." He froze. "Right?"

I shrugged. "As much as I could fit in two suitcases."

"Exactly. So, we could go and get it," he said again. "You spend almost all of your free time here anyway. And as we get closer to the finals, there

will be less time to spend together. We should make the most of it.”

It made sense, but at the same time, this was more than practicality. This guy was asking me to move in with him, even if it was only for a few weeks. “Isn’t this a big decision? Don’t we have to discuss it and come up with pros and cons, and shouldn’t I ask you questions or something?” My logical brain told me this was fast and reckless. I would be putting my faith in this guy to keep a roof over my head—not something I could even trust my parents to do for me when I was a child. So why wasn’t I freaking out and telling him no?

Dexter turned on the shower, slid out of his boxers and stepped in, the steam quickly obstructing my view of his perfect body. “Well we could analyze it to death or we could simply see it as convenient. If you decide to stay in London, then we can have another discussion.”

Stay in London? Now the elevator of anxiety started to clunk into gear and hurtle skywards. That wasn’t even on my radar. “Who said anything about staying in London?”

“Well, aren’t you applying for jobs?”

Should I have been? My palms started to sweat and I wrestled off my cardigan. I’d assumed I’d go back to Oregon when this was all over, go to my sister’s graduation and polish up my resume before starting to apply for things. “I haven’t so far.”

“You want me to see if Primrose knows anyone who might have a vacancy?”

This morning I’d expected to collect my things and haul my butt over to the other side of town just like I did every morning, but instead, I’d woken up on the freaking yellow brick road. “Just hold your white horses, there,” I replied. “A fast second ago we were talking about bringing my two suitcases over this weekend and now you have me immigrating to London. We might want to slow down a second because I’m starting to feel the pull of the g-force.”

He pushed the soap and water back over his head. My mind went entirely blank for a split second as I imagined stripping naked and joining him. That would cool me off, stop me thinking too far ahead. I turned away, intent on clearing my head.

I loved London. There was no doubt about that. It felt like this city was the world and Oregon had been some kind of waiting room. I knew it would be difficult to go back when now my eyes had been opened to what was out here in the world. But while my sister was still in Oregon, that was home. “I

appreciate that you're thinking of me," I replied, turning back toward Dexter but keeping my gaze trained on the floor. "But there are a lot of things I need to consider. You know Autumn hasn't graduated yet. She needs me."

"She's a grown woman. Surely she wants you to live your life," he said.

"You don't understand," I replied. "I've always looked after her."

"No, you're right. I don't understand. My brother couldn't wait to disappoint me."

I hated hearing him talk about his brother, because he was still so obviously upset about it. I just didn't understand why David hadn't protected him from Sparkle, hadn't fought for the family business. "Yeah, I know, I'm sorry. I can't imagine what it would be like if I didn't have Autumn. Were you and your brother close before your parents died?"

"Very. The four of us were . . . unbreakable."

I couldn't imagine it was possible for the bond between Autumn and I to be broken. Devastated wouldn't even begin to describe my feelings if we were suddenly estranged. "And you haven't spoken since your parents died?"

"Since after I found out what he'd done." He stood directly under the water as if he were trying to wash away the memories.

"It's unthinkable to me that he did that even though he knew it would have been the last thing your parents wanted and you were so set against it." I would do anything to make my sister happy. Perhaps it was because I saw my parents fail to make sacrifices for either of us, but I just wanted her to have what I never did—someone who would put me first.

"The difference is you're a good person, Hollie."

"But you would have said the same thing about your brother," I replied. There must have been a reason for David to do what he did, but Dexter clearly didn't think so. "What changed?"

He yanked the lever to turn off the shower and his mood shifted. "So, you moving in or what?" he asked, obviously not wanting to dwell on his broken relationship with his brother. "If you think it's too much then it's not a big deal. We can keep things as they are."

I liked things as they were. A lot. I liked Dexter *a lot*. I glanced around his bedroom. I only went back to my studio to shower and change these days. It was two hundred and twenty square feet I wouldn't miss. "You'd have to clear out some closet space," I said as Dexter stepped out of the shower, completely naked. "And you're going to have to keep away from me in the morning when you're naked."

He tilted his head. “Can’t resist me, huh?” He grinned, wrapped a towel around his waist and swept past me. “Follow me.”

I glanced at the clock on my watch. I was going to have to get moving or I was going to be really late. And I needed time away from Dexter so I could think clearly. “Can this wait?” I said, padding after him. “I really have to get out of here.”

I followed him into one of his guest rooms. “So, this wardrobe is totally free. But I put some of my old suits into the other bedroom so there’s a couple of rails in the master as well. Up to you how you want to distribute stuff.”

He must know that everything I owned would fit in half of one of the units in his closet, but it was super sweet of him not to banish me to the guest room. He really wanted me here. And I wanted to be here. What was there to analyze? Dexter had done nothing that deserved anything but my complete trust.

“I can get on board with the suitcase thing,” I conceded. “But on the condition that we park any talk about future jobs and moving to London.”

“Deal,” he said, turning to kiss me.

“You’re wet,” I said. “And I need to leave.” He kissed me again and I headed toward the door, trying to bite back a smile. I knew it was only for a few weeks, but I’d never lived with a guy before if you didn’t count my father. I’d never even considered it.

Dexter, just like everything in London, was a whole new world.

“Move in this weekend,” he said. “And at some point, we’ll talk about what happens after the competition ends.”

I pretended not to hear him and headed out. Being with Dexter had me thinking about things in new ways, had me living a different life to the one I thought I was destined for. But the pull of home—of my sister—was a bond welded in hardship and struggle and wasn’t easily dismissed. Dexter was a dream come true, but at some point, I knew I would have to wake up and get back to the real world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dexter

I prided myself on having laser focus at work, but today I was distracted. I had to approve the final bracelet for the competition, yet I was mulling over the brief conversation about my brother I'd had with Hollie this morning.

Hollie and Autumn were as close as two sisters could be. I wasn't sure if it was because their parents didn't seem capable of looking after themselves, let alone two children, that Hollie had taken on more of a mother role to Autumn. Maybe it was just Hollie's intrinsically good nature. But listening to Hollie talk to her sister on the phone or talk about Autumn and how proud she was—I couldn't help but think about David. Since he'd sold the business to Sparkle, I'd not only cut him out of my life but cut him out of my memories, out of my brain. I had done my best not to even think about him. But over the last few weeks, the unanswered questions I had for him were all clamoring for attention in my mind.

"Come in," I called to the knock at the door.

Primrose came in together with Frank. I could tell by their expressions that the bracelet would be fine. If they'd not believed it to be perfect, they would be downcast and miserable. These two lived for their work just as I did. "You two look happy," I said.

"Satisfied," Primrose said. Frank just mumbled under his breath because Frank was never satisfied.

I sat back in my chair and Primrose set a black velvet tray in front of me that contained the fruits of all our labor. I took a breath in relief. The one thing I'd been worried about was the clasp on the bracelet, but I could see

without touching it, it was perfect. I pulled out a pair of white gloves from my desk drawer and picked it up. “Very nice,” I said, seeing the changes we’d made to the setting of the diamonds. “It looks much cleaner.”

“I agree. This setting is the better option. But I thought we might put the original setting on the retail version.” If we won, we’d planned to do some limited-edition pieces inspired by the collection. We’d need to make them different but similar enough that people thought they were wearing something fit for a princess.

“Yes, that would work,” I said. “And we should bring in a different stone. Given that we’ve just gone with the diamonds and the Zambian emerald, we should steer away from that scheme and do sapphires and rubies with diamonds.” I checked over the bracelet—turning it in my hands, looking at it through my loupe—despite the fact I knew that Frank and Primrose wouldn’t have brought it to me unless it was perfect.

“I’m happy,” I announced.

Frank’s expression didn’t change. I swear if I told him he’d just won the lottery he would remain dour and serious. He was always focused on what wasn’t right and determined to make it better. That’s why I employed him.

“Good,” Primrose said. “Shall we go through our normal agenda?”

Frank stood and took the tray and bracelet from in front of me before leaving me with Primrose.

“I got your email,” she said as she closed the door.

“I can talk directly to the design consultants if that’s easier,” I said. I was surprised I hadn’t gotten a call from Primrose as soon as I’d sent her the email asking her to go and see a Knightsbridge property with some design consultants.

“No, I’m happy to go with Beck. From the brief, you want to know a rough outline of display space. To see if it’s financially viable . . . right?”

“Exactly,” I said, sitting back in my chair. I was waiting for the question Primrose would be dying to ask me.

“So come on, Dexter, why the sudden change of heart? Now you want to open in London? After all these years?”

“It’s time,” I said. I’d spent long enough trying to erase painful memories of my parents, and avoiding the city where they’d grown their business. “Being in this competition and seeing people my parents used to work with or compete against has been . . . Well, it’s not been as difficult as I expected.” I’d enjoyed hearing people’s stories about my parents. It was good to see

familiar, if now older, faces.

“I’m so very glad to hear it,” Primrose said, shuffling forward in her seat. “You would make them so proud. Everything you’ve built—it’s quite extraordinary.”

“I did it for them,” I said.

Silence settled between us. Their death had been so raw at the beginning, the only thing I could do to survive was to push it away. But the edges had softened, and although I still missed them and wished I’d spent the last fifteen years being able to seek their advice and see their smiles, now I could just be grateful for what they’d given me.

“I want to ask you something and I want you to tell me the truth,” I said. When Primrose and I first started working together, she’d made a number of attempts to try to talk to me about my brother. I’d been very clear if she ever brought him up to me again, not only could she no longer work for me, but I couldn’t have anything to do with her. I hadn’t wanted to hear any excuses about what he’d done. The actions he’d taken were unforgivable. Nothing could be said or done that could undo his betrayal, or even justify it. She’d agreed and from that day, had never mentioned him. From time to time I did wonder if she’d stayed in touch with him, whether they swapped Christmas cards or saw each other at all. “Are you in touch with my brother?”

She sat back in her chair as if I’d hit her.

My heart began to thud as I waited for her reply. I wasn’t sure what I wanted her to say. Did I want her to have stayed in touch with David? What did it mean if she had? Would I be pleased he still had a connection to our parents through Primrose?

Primrose’s gaze was in her lap. “Dexter, I don’t want this to be an issue between us.”

“It won’t be,” I snapped. Primrose could make her own decisions. “I never asked you not to see him. It’s none of my business. I just specified that you were never to speak to me about him. I was wondering whether you saw him—whether you see him still.”

She cleared her throat. “I do.”

I wanted her to elaborate but she stayed silent, no doubt honoring the request I’d made of her. It said something that Primrose had maintained a connection. I couldn’t help being curious as to what kept her in contact with David. “Okay,” I said, changing the subject. “I’m not in a rush to open in London, but if the Knightsbridge property works, we should be ready. Let’s

work up what Daniels & Co would look like in London. Are you okay to liaise with the team?"

"Certainly," she replied. "I'm really happy you're—"

"It makes good business sense," I said, shattering any kind of emotional lens she wanted to see this through.

"How are you and Hollie?" she asked. "She's getting on very well in the role. She's got a real eye—an instinct."

I tried not to grin and agree too readily. "I'm pleased. No special treatment though. She'd hate that." Hollie never expected anything she didn't work for, and it was one of the things I liked most about her.

"No, she gets treated like an intern. But I like her. That's all."

"Good," I said. "I like her too. In fact, she's going to be staying with me for the rest of her time in London." We'd not talked too much about the future, but I couldn't see a time when I didn't want to be with Hollie. "It makes sense."

"I think that's wonderful, Dexter. You deserve someone worthy of you."

It was an interesting phrase to use. "I surround myself with good people, Primrose. Same as you do." I just wasn't sure how her relationship with my brother fitted.

"I just wonder if historically, there's been a gap," she replied. "Things have shifted for you in recent months, Dexter. You're thinking about opening in London. You're facing things from your past and investing in your future."

I'd opened the door to this conversation but it was getting drafty. I wanted to put my shoulder to the wood and press it closed.

"I'm pleased for you," she continued. "You might want to consider whether it's time to hear the whys of the past." That was cryptic. "Good people don't suddenly turn bad, Dexter, but sometimes they're put in a position where they have to make a choice and every option is dreadful." Without saying his name, she was talking about David, trying to make excuses for his betrayal. She stood, leaned across the table and pressed her hand over mine before heading out.

I wasn't about to accept he was a good person, but lately I'd become more curious about the why.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Dexter

I'd thought Hollie was underestimating how much stuff she had. But she was true to her word when she said she had two suitcases.

"Can you put it in a guest room?" she asked me as I pulled the large suitcase into my hallway. She'd insisted on towing the smaller one.

"You're not going to put things in the master bedroom?" I asked.

"Yeah, I just don't want to mess it up in there. You're always so . . . neat with everything."

I'd left her a gift in the second bedroom, so I supposed now was as good a time as any to give it to her. "If you say so."

"You know that girls fart, right?"

She'd been hitting me with all these stupid bits of information since we woke up. "Will you stop trying to sabotage you moving in?" I said as I set her suitcase in the walk-in wardrobe.

"Why do you need all these bedrooms, anyway?" she asked. "Oh," she said, looking at the rails where I set out her gifts, still wrapped in garment bags. "Do you want me to put my things somewhere else?"

"Yes, I want your things in the master bedroom," I said. "But you insisted on me bringing the suitcases in here."

"To unpack and put things I don't use so much. Am I still okay in here or shall I use another closet?" she asked, nodding at the rail that had been empty.

"You're okay. And these," I said, running my hand along the four hangers, "are for you. Well, for you to pick between. Moving-in gift."

You'd have thought I'd told her it was time to pull her fingernails from her hands, given the expression on her face. "For me? Dexter? You've got to stop doing that."

"No, I really don't." I found I quite enjoyed treating her. Although I had hoped the gesture would elicit a smile rather than the grimace I was actually faced with.

She rose from the floor, abandoning her suitcase, and moved toward the rail. "What are they?"

"Dresses. For the final ceremony of the competition. I picked out four so you can choose one. Or if you want to keep all four, that works." I shoved my hands in my pockets, hoping she wasn't going to be pissed off.

"You bought me dresses?" she asked, glancing between me and the rail. "Dexter," she whispered, then stepped toward me and slid her hand around my waist. "You really shouldn't have. It's too sweet."

"You've not seen them yet. You might hate them."

She squeezed me tighter. "Impossible. I know your taste. And anyway, I don't even care. I just can't believe you would do that for me."

"You deserve it."

The sound of her deep breath filled the space between us. "I don't think —"

"Let me do this, Hollie. I enjoy it. I like seeing you happy."

"I don't need gifts to make me happy," she said. "You've already done so much for me."

"I keep saying this—it's a two-way street. You make me happy and I want to do the same for you."

She reached up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to my neck. "I actually have a little something for you."

"Hollie, I don't need—"

"Hey," she replied. "You don't get to give me stuff and then complain when I do the same. This is a two-way street, remember?" She grinned at me as if she had me bang to rights.

She dived into her suitcase and pulled out an envelope. "I haven't had time to wrap it. I had Autumn send it because it was something I was experimenting with back in Oregon." She produced a woven, brown leather bracelet with a silver clasp.

"Wow, that's beautiful," I said, examining the silver.

"It's meant to be like the trunk of a tree or a log or something. Like I said,

it was a bit of an experiment.”

I didn't wear jewelry. Ever. I always thought there was something very wrong with men who ran out of ways to spend their money so decided that jewelry was the way to show off. But this I'd make an exception for. It was gorgeous, and there was nothing Hollie could give me that I wouldn't wear. I loved that her hands had crafted this, and she wanted me to have it.

She opened it and put it around my wrist. “You don't have to wear it, of course. But it's yours anyway. The clasp reminded me of you. You know—solid. Steadfast.”

I caught her by the waist and pulled her against me. “Thank you.”

She shrugged. “Less about you, let's move on to my gift!” She grinned and pulled out of my arms. “No one's bought me clothes since I was about twelve.”

I didn't like to pry into Hollie's upbringing, but it clearly wasn't a privileged one. She seemed to have raised herself and her sister. I loved to treat her.

“If you don't like any of them, we can send them back and start again. I didn't think you'd picked a dress for the finals yet.”

“This is crazy,” she said, moving the hangers on the rail.

“You know you have to unzip the bags to see what's inside, right?”

She glanced at me, then started to undo the first bag.

There were lots of *Oh wows*, *This is gorgeous-es* and *Jiminy Crickets* as she unpacked and examined all four dresses.

“Which is your favorite?” she asked. They all seemed nice to me, and Hollie would make anything look gorgeous.

“I like them all. You could video call your sister and ask her opinion.”

She held the navy-blue sequined dress against her body and swung her hips. “I don't think so.”

“She doesn't have good taste?” She and her sister shared everything. I would have thought that trying on clothes would be a classic sister bonding activity.

“I don't want to make her feel bad.”

“Feel bad? Why would she feel bad because you have something nice?”

She hung the dress back on the hanger and took down the black halter-neck Tom Ford. “She'd be completely happy for me. But the Sunshine Trailer Park is a long way away from your Knightsbridge apartment. And I would hate it if she felt a little sorry for herself when we got off the phone.

This is . . . a lot.” She swept her hand around, so I wasn’t sure if she meant the gift was a lot or my apartment or London . . . or our relationship.

“Too much?”

She shook her head and slid her hands around my waist. “Of course not. You’re amazing. I’m bursting at the seams to show her these dresses and your apartment, where I’m actually staying. My life is like some kind of fairytale at the moment. But hers isn’t, and she doesn’t need to be reminded of that.”

Hollie was such a beautiful human being that she was prepared to put a lid on her own happiness just in case it created a shadow over her sister. “You’re a good sister.”

“It’s my job,” she said.

I wish David had felt that way. I’d found him with just a Google search, still working back office at a bank. I didn’t know if he was married or if he had children. Maybe if he had, he’d regret what he’d done to me. Maybe he understood the value of family now.

“But you know I’ve made plenty of wrong decisions in my time,” she said. “When I first got the trailer and moved out of my parents’ place, I left Autumn with Mom and Dad.” She shook her head and a curtain of shame fell across her face.

“You were fifteen and your sister was eleven. You were a kid, even if you were old enough to forge your parents’ signature on a lease, from what you’ve told me. There’s nothing to feel bad about.”

“I know. I try to make up for it. And Autumn didn’t hold it against me, which I’m grateful for.”

“Have you ever fallen out?” I asked. Their situation wasn’t enviable, but their relationship certainly was.

“Yeah. We argue a lot when we’re living together.” She took the red Valentino dress off the rack—it had a big, floaty skirt and she twirled around, the fabric lifting as she turned. “I mean, there’s not much space and she’s so messy she drives me crazy. But our differences have only almost broken us once.” She turned away from me and put the dress back on the rail. “I told her I wasn’t going to pay tuition for her if she went to some community college in Idaho.” Her shoulders lifted and her head bowed. “She hated me. But I knew she’d picked the place because her boyfriend was going there. And she had an offer from Oregon State, which is a really good school. And she could still live at home and commute, which would save so much

money.”

I nodded, trying to be encouraging. She was clearly just trying to do the best for her sister. “I’m sure she gets it now.”

“I hope. She still brings it up every now and then.” Her voice rose an octave as she said, “It was hard because my parents took her side. I wanted to cave in so many times but I knew that guy would end up dumping her and she’d end up dropping out and she’d have lost her place at Oregon State . . . but I couldn’t say that to her.” She pulled the next dress from the rail. “That red one was really pretty,” she said, sounding like her dog had just been run over.

I didn’t know how to make her feel better. I knew a pretty dress wasn’t going to cut it. “What can I do? I hate to see you sad.”

She sucked in a breath and unhooked the final dress from the rail. “It’s fine. I was looking out for her, trying to do the best I could by her. So, I have to live with that. And this is really pretty,” she said, holding up a long black one.

I chuckled. “It is pretty. But I think I like the Tom Ford one best.”

“Tom freaking Ford? Are you serious? That’s ridiculous, Dexter. I don’t belong in a Tom Ford dress.”

I’d never bought a woman a dress before, but if I had, I couldn’t think that any one of them would belong in these dresses more than Hollie did. “Then take the Valentino,” I said, grinning at her.

She turned to me. “Valent—You need to take this back. I’m fine with Zara.”

“I think you should keep all four.”

“You’re just saying that because I’m upset about Autumn. But nothing’s going to stop the hurt of her thinking I wasn’t trying to do my best for her. I hope she knows by now I’d do anything to make her happy.”

“That’s why you’re such a great sister,” I said, pulling her toward me and kissing the top of her head. “I wish my brother had the same instinct to protect me that you have for Autumn.”

She sighed against my chest. “You said you haven’t spoken since your parents died.”

“No, not since I found out what he’d done.”

“Maybe he’s sorry.” She slid her arms around my waist.

“Doesn’t undo what he did.”

“True. But if he regrets it, wouldn’t it make it easier? Or if he had a

reason? Don't you want to ask him to justify what he did?"

After my parents' death, it was as if I'd been sucked into a black hole of despair. I couldn't remember the details; I just remembered finding out he'd sold my parents' business and feeling as if I'd lost them all over again. "He was always the back-office guy—all about the money and profits. He never got the beauty of the jewelry. Never felt it in his soul like I did. I guess he saw the chance to get a pile of cash for not doing much and he took it."

"But he didn't say that to you, did he? He didn't tell you that was the reason why."

I sighed. I understood that Hollie would see it from David's perspective but it was different. "I was always the one interested in the gems and spent my summers working in the shop. He wasn't ever going to be that guy. He was always the one at the till, counting the coins. We're not made the same way."

"But you don't know whether that's the reason he sold the business," she said, gazing up at me with those hypnotizing eyes.

"What other reason could there possibly be?"

"The only person who knows that is your brother."

Or Primrose, I thought. But she'd honored her word and never mentioned my brother or the sale of the business. No doubt they'd talked about it. "I don't want to dredge it all up again. They say the definition of madness is to keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result."

"It's not worth a conversation? He's your only family, Dexter."

My body went rigid. Beck, Gabriel, Joshua, Andrew and Tristan were my family. They were more my brothers than David had ever been. "He is not." I twisted to pull away from Hollie but she locked her arms around me.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know you have a very close circle of friends, and I know your brother upset you deeply."

"Hollie," I said. "You have no idea. After my parents died, my friends showed me it's not your DNA or your blood that counts, it's who you're prepared to bleed for. If it hadn't been for those guys, I might not have survived. I couldn't function. I was driven half mad by guilt and grief and anger. I didn't sleep for weeks, couldn't hold a conversation for much longer. Part of me died with them. You don't know how it was."

I sucked in a breath, trying not to be overwhelmed at the memories of that time in my life. Trying to forget the darkness that settled in me and grew and grew until it nearly took me over. At nineteen, I'd been a legal adult, but it

wasn't until my parents died that I grew up.

"You're right. I can't begin to imagine how awful things must have been for you, Dexter. Nothing's going to take that away. But you've got nothing to lose by asking him the question. And maybe it would help in a small way if you heard it from him, and he was apologetic and regretful. Maybe it would be closure."

"I don't need closure. I don't need David. I need a time machine that will let me go back and change history."

"Well, if I could, I would build you one with my bare hands. But take it from an older sister who has to parent a younger sister—it's freaking hard. And you get it wrong all the time. All I can hope for is that she forgives me my mistakes and gives me a chance to explain myself."

Her words came out like rain, soaking through to my core. I saw Hollie's point of view so clearly when she talked about making decisions that impacted her sister's life. That was because I knew Hollie's heart. She was always trying to do her best.

It was exactly who I'd thought my brother was until he'd betrayed me so badly.

"It's different," I said, thinking back to the photograph of my brother that I'd found online. He looked older—even had a few gray hairs at his temples. A lot of time had passed since I'd last seen him.

"Is it though?" Hollie said. "You'll never know unless you ask him."

Hollie made it sound simple. "A conversation can't just wash away years of pain and hurt, Hollie. That's not how life works."

"But it might," she said. "Until I got the internship at Sparkle, I didn't believe in miracles. And then meeting you and working at Daniels & Co—the strangest, most magical things can happen. What have you got to lose by picking up the phone? It might be the best thing you ever did."

Being with Hollie made music a little sweeter, the sea air a little fresher and the sun a little brighter. And all those things added up to making my life a whole lot richer.

She was beautiful. Creative. Talented. Sweet. Funny. Caring. Innocent and wise in the same breath. But she couldn't perform miracles. Not even she could reconcile my brother and me.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Hollie

I wasn't the only one to gasp as Jeremy removed the velvet from the stand to reveal the Daniels & Co entry for the princess of Finland's tiara. There was no doubt it was beautiful. Nothing created drama like diamonds. The peaks and valleys on the band, representing the mountains of Finland, were breathtaking. But despite feeling a little disloyal and a lot ridiculous, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

What did I know? I was just the intern.

"Does everyone love it?" I turned to see Dexter scanning the faces of everyone in the conference room. We locked eyes. He frowned, looked away, then whispered to Primrose.

She nodded and turned back to the room. "It would be good to hear each of your voices. Let's go around the room. Lauren, what's your reaction?"

"It's mesmerizing. Even better than the picture. And the way that emerald hangs in the center, it's—" Lauren looked like she was about to tear up, so Primrose moved swiftly to the next person, who said similar things. Shit, what was I going to do? They were right, it was beautiful and amazing. There was no doubt about that. But that wasn't my only thought. Should I be honest and risk embarrassing myself and upsetting Dexter and Primrose, who had both been so good to me?

"Hollie?" Primrose asked. How was it my turn already?

"I mean, just what they said. I've never seen anything like it. It's gorgeous."

"But?" Dexter asked. I felt all the eyes in the room slide to him before

following his gaze to me.

I sucked in a breath and nodded. “I mean, I think it’s a winner.”

“But you have a comment,” Dexter said. Dexter had never spoken to me in front of the team before. Even though Primrose knew we were dating, she’d never singled me out for anything other than tasks strictly within the remit of an intern. Dexter shining the spotlight on me like this was going to make people suspicious, and he needed to quit it. “Hollie, I’ve asked everyone to speak freely.”

He could make his own dinner tonight.

“I think it’s beautiful. But I think . . . if it was my design, I would have been tempted to create some kind of link between the future and the past.”

“But that’s not the theme,” Dexter said. “The theme is the Finnish landscape.”

“I agree. I wasn’t thinking it would have to be anything particularly extreme—just a subtle hint at the link between the generations.” Every time I saw the design of this tiara, I couldn’t help being brought back to that night I’d met Dexter, the night I’d seen the tiara his parents had made for the queen of Finland.

“And how exactly,” Dexter said, “would you do that?”

I briefly glanced to my right, where the rest of the team glared back at me, horrified, as if I’d just told a convent full of nuns I didn’t believe in God.

But I believed in Dexter. If he’d been entirely happy, he wouldn’t want to hear what I had to say. “The tiara the queen wore on her wedding day was designed by your parents. That’s an advantage your competitors don’t have. If you just whispered that connection in this piece, I think it might give you the edge.” I stood and took a step toward the tiara. If I was going to tell him what I thought, I wasn’t going to half do it—I was all in. “The way your parents’ tiara links these points with the twisted rope of diamonds,” I said as I looked up at Dexter and Primrose, who had both stepped forward. “You could do something similar with these smaller peaks at the back. The rope would be too much, but a single swath of diamonds might work. I think it would give emphasis to the larger peaks, which would enhance this design while incorporating a technique from her mother’s tiara that the princess might appreciate.”

Dexter glanced at Primrose, who was looking at the tiara intently.

“It’s a sentimental touch without taking away from the theme.”

“You mean here?” Primrose asked, pointing to the sides of the tiara. I

nodded. “Create that bunting feel—that was what we were trying to do when we designed the queen’s tiara—make it a celebration.”

I shrugged. “But it’s beautiful as it is, too,” I said.

Dexter chuckled. “You need to have more faith in yourself,” he said. “Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Primrose, Frank, let’s discuss in my office.” And he swept out, leaving me unsure of whether I’d embarrassed myself with my naïve ideas, or doubled my money by giving away to the entire team that Dexter and I were in a relationship.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hollie

It had been a tough week and I was looking forward to the weekend, but I'd never thought I could enjoy a job before working at Daniels & Co. I pushed through the doors to Dexter's apartment building to find him pacing in front of the concierge desk in the lobby.

"Hey," I said. "What are you doing home and what are you doing down here?" He normally didn't get back until around eight.

He beamed at me and raced over, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the elevators. "It's your birthday tomorrow," he said.

"Did I tell you that?" I asked. I was sure I hadn't mentioned it. The last thing I needed was to give Dexter an excuse to buy more expensive gifts.

"Sort of. You told me it was in a few weeks and I did some detective work."

The doors to the elevator slid open and Dexter ushered me inside.

"Are we in a hurry?" I asked, and he grinned as wide as the ocean.

"So, I've been wondering what I could get you for your birthday. I realize you're not a Chanel bag kind of girl."

"More a pint of Rocky Road and Netflix."

He leaned and placed a kiss on my lips. It started off as a peck before he slid his tongue between my lips and I slipped my hands up his chest. He groaned and pulled away.

Something must be wrong. Usually, I'd be half undressed by the time the elevator reached the penthouse.

"We were talking about your birthday. I've arranged an early gift. I hope

you like it,” he said as we stepped out of the lift.

Oh gosh. I hoped he hadn’t bought me anything too extravagant. I really would have liked to just spend the day in bed, watching movies with Autumn on FaceTime. It was our long-standing birthday tradition, and while I was in no way sad to spend my birthday with Dexter, a part of me felt a pang of longing for my sister. “I’m sure whatever it is, it will be lovely,” I said.

When we got to his front door, instead of pulling out his key, he stood behind me and moved me onto the mat, so I was facing the door. Then he knocked. On his own front door.

“What are you doing?” I asked, turning my head.

He pointed ahead of me as I heard rustling at the door. Who was in there?

The door flew open and *Autumn* was standing opposite me. Before I had a chance to react, she leapt into my arms, circling her arms and legs around me like she used to when she was a toddler. “I’ve missed you so much.”

She slid down my body as I started to cry. I couldn’t believe she was here. I turned to Dexter to see him grinning at the pair of us.

“Dexter,” I said, standing up on tiptoes and reaching up for a kiss. “I can’t believe—how did you—”

“I can explain the logistics later. Let’s get inside.”

“It gets better,” Autumn said, linking her arm into mine as we clattered into the hallway.

How was she here? How did Dexter know that Autumn being here was the only thing I really wanted for my birthday? How was it possible that I was in London with my two favorite people in the world?

“I’m in here,” Autumn said, pointing to one of the guest bedrooms.

“But I’ve set up a little something in here,” Dexter said, showing us into another of the guest bedrooms.

I gasped as we went in. The ceiling was covered in balloons of every color, and there was a huge Happy Birthday banner stretched across one wall.

“I know it’s not until tomorrow but I thought you might want to get a head start. Seeing as Autumn is here.”

Why had he set this up in the guest bedroom? I squinted at a weird-looking piece of new furniture in the corner. “Is that a fridge?”

“Holy shit, you’re going to love this,” Autumn said. She sprang across the room and opened the door, revealing a hundred tubs of ice cream.

“I got a few flavors,” Dexter said, nodding to the window. “And the TV is set up. You can watch Netflix, the *Housewives*. Anything you want.”

There hadn't been a TV in here before. He must have set this up especially. "Are you serious?" I said, sliding my arm around Dexter's waist. "This is insane."

"I thought this was what you'd want to do on your birthday? Stay in bed all day, eat ice cream and watch TV with your sister."

Dexter's thoughtfulness was off the scale. It would have been easy, and very generous for him to buy me a Chanel bag. But this? This was a thousand times better.

"Oh," he said, pulling away from me and putting his head into the walk-in closet. "There are matching pajamas, slippers and robes in the wardrobe," he said. "If you get sick of ice cream, we can order in tonight. Tomorrow, I've arranged a chef for the day to make you anything you want. I figured you wouldn't want to go out if Autumn was here."

The last thing I wanted to do was go to a fancy restaurant. But having the fancy restaurant come to me? Who was I to complain?

"You are a very special man, Dexter Daniels," I said, grabbing his hand and kissing him.

"I'm going to leave you two to it. Gabriel's going to stop by any minute on his way to a charity thing. He needs to borrow a bowtie."

"Is he single and as handsome as you?" Autumn asked.

"He's red hot," Dexter said with a wink.

I turned to her as Dexter left us in the guest room. "I can't believe you're here. When did you get in?"

"Around lunchtime. Dexter arranged everything, Hollie. That man is gold, let me tell you."

We headed into the closet and found matching silk pajamas, gorgeous robes and the most beautiful fluffy slippers.

"How did he even know how to get in contact with you?" I asked, kicking off my shoes and trying on the slippers. Of course they fit perfectly.

"He emailed me. Got my address from HR. You put me down as your emergency contact."

"Sneaky," I said, as I began to undress. I couldn't wait to change into my jammies and catch up with Autumn face-to-face.

"But amazing."

That was a good way to describe Dexter Daniels—amazing.

"How's school?" I asked, slipping the pajamas on. Autumn was an adult, but part of me was a little concerned that once I'd taken off, she'd stop

studying quite so hard or she'd get distracted by some worthless guy. Or even more likely, she'd end up spending her time sorting out Mom and Dad.

"Are these silk?" she asked. "Oh, and I made the Dean's list this semester."

I scrambled to grab her in a hug and ended up half falling over, tangled in lengths of silk. "Are you serious? That's completely amazing."

"Yeah, I'm pretty happy about it," she replied.

"When did this happen? Why didn't you tell me?" Now properly pajamaed, I held her at arm's length as if I were inspecting her to see if she looked more intelligent since the last time I'd seen her.

"Because I wanted to tell you in person. I've nearly let the cat out of the bag a thousand times. It's been hard to keep it from you."

"I'm just so happy for you. Sounds like you've been studying extra hard this semester. I was obviously a distraction." I was so proud of her. Dexter was right—she was a grown woman. Perhaps she didn't need as much taking care of as I thought. And that was great, obviously, but also . . . unbalancing.

"I didn't want you to feel any more guilty about leaving than you already did." She crouched on the floor and slid on a pair of slippers. "What can I say? Seeing you chase after what you wanted made me want to do the same. I haven't found what I'm passionate about yet, but I will, and when I do, I want to be in the best shape," she said. She couldn't have said anything that would have made me any happier. The fact I could be some kind of role model for my sister was all I could ever want. "And honestly, Mom still has that job at Trader Bob's, which means they've had money and they haven't been bothering me."

I couldn't remember the last time my mom held down a job for three months. "I can't believe she's still there. What happened?" We pulled the robes off their hangers and headed back into the bedroom.

Autumn shook her head. "I don't know. I think Jenny working there helps because she has someone she can ask if she doesn't know what to do, rather than just quitting like she normally would. A group of them from the store went out for breakfast last weekend."

I couldn't ever remember a time when my mom had money for waffles. "She's holding down a job, has money in her pocket and is socializing? What is happening to the world?" Both my sister and my mom were doing better than they ever had since I'd left.

"I know. I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

Honestly, I thought she was lying to me when she told me she was still working. But I was in there the other day to pick up some groceries and saw it for myself. She was showing a customer where the almonds were.”

No one could think this was anything but good news, but there was a drag at the pit of my stomach that made me feel uneasy. “And she hasn’t been talking back to her boss or missing shifts because she can’t work the alarm on her phone?” I collapsed on the bed while Autumn went to inspect the ice cream fridge.

“Apparently she loves her boss. Honestly, I was over at their place earlier in the week and she made lasagna for dinner.”

“She did not,” I said. “She can barely boil water.” What was happening? I’d half expected to go back to Oregon to find both my parents in prison.

“I know. She said Jenny showed her what to do.”

All the years I’d cooked for the four of us. Even when we moved out, twice a week, I’d take food around for my parents. “I can’t believe it,” I said. “It would have been nice if she could have made a lasagna once in a while when we were kids.” Of course I wanted her to be more capable, more focused, but I hadn’t *expected* it actually to happen. Especially not when I was five thousand miles away. “How’s dad?” I asked. “I bet he thinks aliens have invaded.”

“Well, he’s getting a home-cooked meal so he’s happy. And he’s been helping Kenny over at the bike shop.”

“What do you mean helping? Is he doing something he shouldn’t be doing?” My jaw tensed as I waited for the bad news that was going to inevitably follow Autumn’s cascade of good news.

“Nope.” She decided on a tub and picked up two spoons and brought it over to the bed. “Kenny’s apprentice walked out and left Kenny short so Dad offered to help. Was only meant to be for a few days but that was four weeks ago.”

Why hadn’t she said something before? I’d just assumed they were sitting watching *Wheel of Fortune* and complaining about not having enough money—because why would anything have changed? Would this have happened if I’d still been around, or had they gotten off their asses to spite me? To show me that they didn’t need me. “I guess that’s great.”

“I don’t think he gets paid much, but he said he likes learning about the bikes. And honestly, I figure helping for free is still better than sitting at home, thinking up trouble.”

“Yeah, I agree. Sounds like you’re all better off without me.” I said it with a smile but I wasn’t joking. It kind of hurt that as soon as I’d left, things got better, as if I’d been the problem all along.

“Oh, I bet you by Friday, Mom will ask me for a loan.”

“Well, I told you that if she does, you have to get her to call me. You don’t have enough as it is.”

“None of us has enough,” she replied. “Except maybe Dexter.”

“Dexter definitely has enough.” I took the tub from Autumn and dug in to the Rocky Road. I’d never even seen it on sale in London. “A lot of people in London do. I can’t wait to show you around. When do you have to go home?”

“I have class on Monday. I’m flying home Sunday. Can you believe he flew me out here for two nights?”

I wanted Autumn to make her classes, but I also wanted her to stay. I shouldn’t be greedy. Having her here on my birthday was more than I could ever dream of.

“I saw the final tiara the other day and guess what?” I asked. “You’ll have to strap yourself in before I tell you this.”

“Dexter gave it to you?” she guessed.

I laughed. “I know you think Dexter is the perfect guy, but no, he did not give me a tiara.”

“A ring? Are you engaged?”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I handed her back the ice cream. “As if I’m going to get engaged to a guy who lives five thousand miles away.”

“You’re living with him,” she challenged.

“Until I come back to Oregon. And it’s just logistics. It means we can see a little more of each other as the competition gets more demanding. No, they asked everyone to give feedback on the tiara and everyone said how amazing it was—and it was totally amazing. You’ve never seen anything like it—”

“Can I see it? I’m dying to.”

I shook my head, half saying no to her request, half trying to get rid of the brain freeze. “It’s all top secret until the finals next week. Don’t you want to hear what happened?” She nodded. “Well when everyone was saying how great the tiara was, I couldn’t help but think there was something missing. So, I made a suggestion. And they decided to incorporate it. Can you believe it? An idea I had about the design for a freaking tiara is going to be made.” Even saying those words gave me the chills. I’d made Dexter promise he wasn’t

taking up the idea just because it was mine, and he basically told me I was an idiot if I thought that was possible.

“That’s amazing. But not really because you’re so talented.” She would say that. “Don’t you just pinch yourself? To think that a few months ago you were sitting here.” She slapped her hands down on the bed. “And now you’re designing royal stuff. And you’re in London with a hot, British boyfriend.”

My life was very different from how it had been up until a few months ago. But by the sounds of it, my mom and dad’s lives had changed almost beyond recognition as well. Why had it taken me leaving the country for them to get jobs and put their lives in something like order? Perhaps they would be able to manage without me if I wanted to extend my stay. Dexter had been true to his word and not brought up the idea of me applying for jobs again. Maybe I should be the one to restart the conversation.

“Are you two decent? Can we come in?” Dexter called from the corridor.

I slid off the bed as the two hottest guys on the planet walked in.

“Happy nearly birthday, Hollie,” Gabriel said. “I brought you a card. Handmade by a three-year-old, so don’t judge.” I lifted up on my toes to hug him and he said “Hi” over my shoulder.

“This is my sister, Autumn.”

He nodded and my sister stood and extended her arm. I swear she’d never shaken hands with anyone in her life. “Dexter was right,” she muttered.

“All the way from Oregon,” Gabriel said, smiling at Autumn as Autumn smiled back at him. There were lots of smiles. “Well, I don’t want to interrupt. You two look very cozy.”

Maybe it was me but it seemed like Gabriel was having a hard time looking away from my baby sister.

“Are you staying in London long, Autumn?”

“Just two nights,” I interrupted.

It was as if I’d broken some kind of spell he was under. Gabriel cleared his throat and nodded again. “Well, happy birthday. Very good to meet you, Autumn. I hope to see you again.” And with that both of them swept out, leaving Autumn fake fanning herself with her hand.

“What is it with the men in this town? Are they all like this? No wonder you fell in love here.”

I dissolved into laughter. “I’m not in love.”

“Of course you are,” Autumn replied, her eyebrows pulled together as if I’d just told her there were twenty-six hours in the day.

“Don’t be crazy.” I wasn’t in love. Dexter was just the first man I’d dated who didn’t want me to be his mother. Yes, I cooked for him, but he bought me scarves and dresses, flew my sister over for my birthday and told me I was beautiful, like all the time. Yes, I listened as he told me about the frustrations of his day but he did the same for me. And yes, I wanted to make things better for him, just as I did with my family, but he wanted to do the same for me. “It’s a stupid thing to say because he’s Dexter Daniels and he has everything anyone could ever want, but it feels like we’re a team, you know?”

“Well, like I told you, that makes a change for you.”

“Yeah, remember when I dated Pauly for those few weeks and he asked me how to use the washer and it turned out his mom was out of town seeing his aunt? I swear he was hoping I’d offer to do his laundry for him.”

“He was ridiculous. But I don’t mean it’s a change in the men you date. What I mean is, in Oregon you’re out front, trying to lead everyone out of the woods. While behind you, people are getting distracted swimming in the lake, eating marionberries, or just looking up at the sun. It’s good to have someone who goes at the same speed as you, someone who’s working with you rather than against you.”

Dexter and I were at completely different points in our careers. We weren’t going at the same speed. He was in the New York marathon and I was doing a charity five-mile fun run. And it sounded like my family had all put their names down for the same run as me now I’d left for London. “Sounds like everyone’s making their way out of the woods just fine without me.”

“Maybe Mom and Dad have realized that they’ve got to stand on their own two feet.”

It sounded great in theory—just what I’d always wanted. Except, if I wasn’t looking after them, I didn’t know who I was leading out of the woods anymore. If they all had their own paths, where did that leave me? Wandering around, and maybe a little lost.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dexter

It had only taken three words—sixteen letters—to get me to this place. This café. On this day. Sixteen letters and fifteen years and now I was about to see my brother.

The email from me had been short and to the point. I had questions. I wanted answers. I named the time and place. He replied in three words—*I'll be there.*

I slowed my gait and glanced into the coffee shop. I saw him a half second before my eyes landed on him. Still the same—the height, the short hair, the starched collar. But at the same time, a stranger to me. I didn't even know if he was married.

He picked up his coffee cup and then, without taking a sip, put it down again. Was it nerves? Irritation? I pushed open the door, heading straight for the table. I wasn't interested in coffee.

I pulled out the chair opposite him. His head shot up and he stood.

“Dexter.”

I sat quickly to avoid the shaking of hands or any other greeting that might or might not be appropriate.

“David,” I replied as he sat down. For a long time, I'd told myself I didn't need to know anything more than I already did. I'd buried my past along with my parents and moved on, just wanting to create a legacy that was worthy of them. But now . . .? I blew out a breath. Why now? What had changed? Yes, the competition and seeing so many people who knew and loved my parents had started unpicking the locks on the door I'd shut so firmly behind me, but

there was something about Hollie—something about seeing my future so clearly with her that I needed to understand where I'd come from. "I need to hear in your own words why you—" I'd told myself to stay unemotional. I just wanted the facts. He didn't need to hear the hurt in my voice. Now we were both men rather than boys pretending, I wanted to hear what possible excuse he had to have betrayed me and my parents so fundamentally and completely. "I want to understand the circumstances that led up to you selling the business to Sparkle."

The gray suit jacket my brother was wearing seemed to deflate like a balloon with a slow puncture. For a moment, he looked as if he'd expected me to come here and ask him how he thought Frank Lampard was doing at Chelsea. Had he really thought I was going to offer him my hand and suggest we let bygones be bygones?

He shook his head, took a sip of his coffee and leaned back in his chair. "I was twenty-three. Our parents had just died. And then I'd found out—"

I waited for him to finish his sentence.

"You have to be sure you want to hear this," he continued.

"Hear what?" I asked. "I've been quite clear in telling you what I want."

He glanced around as if to check no one was listening in on our conversation. "Sometimes, it's best to remember the best about something. Or someone. Sometimes it's good not to know everything."

What was he talking about? "I want to know everything. I'm a grown man. I want the truth."

"I get it," he replied, nodding. "I just—Our parents were good people. And they gave us a good life before theirs were cut short." His voice faltered as he finished his sentence.

Ice trailed down my spine. I wasn't sure if it was a reaction to thinking about my parents' death, hearing the upset in my brother's voice or the anticipation of getting to know something I'd been missing for fifteen years.

"I know that," I said, my tone curt, trying to cover up the emotions simmering just beneath the surface.

"Primrose and the solicitor called me in for a meeting just after the funeral. They told me the business had taken on a lot of debt over the years. There was always just enough to keep everything going—to pay all the bills and cover all the staff costs, but only just."

"What sort of debts? For the shop?"

"Yes, there were several mortgages taken out on the property on Hatton

Garden, and there were also personal loans.”

“But there was plenty of stock. Dad always had a full safe.”

David nodded. “Yes, they were keeping their heads above water. Remember, Dexter, I was twenty-three. I didn’t know anything much about business at the time.”

Looking back, David had always seemed so much older than me, but it was only a few years—the kind of time that dissolves to nothing as you get older. We’d both been kids when our parents had died. We knew nothing of the world.

“Primrose and the solicitor took me through the options but really there was only one.”

My skin heated and I fisted my hands. “There’s always more than one option.”

He shrugged. “Maybe in the circles you move in,” he said. “But for a twenty-three-year-old who just found out his parents’ business wasn’t the thriving, moneymaking place he’d thought it was, it didn’t seem that way.”

I unclenched my fists. “Go on.” I needed to hear him out. It was my one chance.

“The debts were piling up—already by the funeral we’d missed a mortgage payment because the shop had closed. People’s jobs were at stake. And the business couldn’t take on another designer and cutter.”

“Primrose could have done the design,” I said, instinctively trying to find a hole in his theory.

“Maybe, but trying to find a gem cutter? And someone who could actually run the business? I know you wanted to be that person but, Dexter, you were . . .”

I was young. I knew that. But I was a fast learner.

“You were broken,” he said. It wasn’t what I’d expected. “You were inconsolable in your grief.”

“My parents had just died,” I snapped.

“Our parents, Dexter. Our parents. I lost them too.” He sighed and shook his head. “You weren’t in a position to take on a failing business and neither was I. The offer Sparkle presented paid off all the debts and gave us both a little money—”

“The money wasn’t important. I didn’t give a shit about having money.”

“I thought it would give you a start if you wanted to launch a business yourself. The last thing I wanted was you to start off in life with a concrete

block chained to your legs. It would have pulled you under.”

“I’m a fighter,” I said. “You knew that.”

He sighed and nodded. “I know but then? You were drinking. You wouldn’t—couldn’t engage. You wouldn’t even talk about the funeral plans.”

I thought back to that time. It was just a dark pit of horror I thought I would drown in. If it hadn’t been for Beck. And Gabriel. And all the guys. I’d forgotten, but they’d taken shifts and stayed by my side, drunk with me, listened as I ranted. But my real blood brother hadn’t been there.

“The funeral wasn’t important,” I replied. “Their business, their legacy was important.”

“I agree,” he replied. “But what was their business? It was their work ethic, their love for what they did, their talent.” He paused and glanced out of the window. “You’re their legacy.”

His words were like a sucker punch to my gut. All I’d wanted my entire life was to be the son they would have wanted me to be. To have the business they should have had. I’d wanted to honor them. “Why didn’t you talk to me about it? You could have told me about the debts and—”

“I tried, Dexter. You were just . . . you were grieving. And you didn’t want to hear about the possibility of selling the business.”

“Of course I didn’t. Mum and Dad were gone. I didn’t want to lose their business as well.”

“Which is completely understandable. Neither did I. You think I didn’t want you to run that business? To carry on their name? To do what you’d always dreamed of? Of course I did. But it was impossible. The business was teetering on the brink, and without Mum and Dad it would have gone under. There was no doubt about that. I had to think of the jobs that would have been lost when the business collapsed. Sparkle agreed to keep everyone on. And I had to think about you. How would you have felt if I’d let you go into that business and it had failed? How much guilt would you have felt? I know you’re angry, but I wanted you to have a good life—not one marred by a huge failure right at the outset. And the way you were consumed by your grief—I was afraid. Afraid for you. Afraid of the consequences of whatever decision I made.”

What he was saying sounded completely . . . right. Not just true or accurate, but *right*, like finding the perfect uncut stone after seeing hundreds and hundreds of not-quite-perfect alternatives. My instinct always knew instantly that it was just right. I’d created explanations for David’s behavior

that never felt like an exact fit. But what he was telling me now was the entire truth.

I'd felt angry at my brother for so long, I didn't know how to feel any other way. But the anger was no longer directed at him. Instead, as he spoke, I turned that anger around and pointed it back at myself. There was no wild conspiracy to cheat me of my legacy, no selfish, quick decision that made life easy for David.

Why had I thought so badly of him for so long? I'd held on to so much futile fury. So much bitterness. For too many wasted years.

I swallowed, trying to clear the regret from my throat. "Why Sparkle?" I asked. "Of all the people."

"That was . . . tough. I asked the solicitor to see if anyone else was interested. But realistically, Sparkle was willing to pay far more than the business was worth. They were guaranteeing the jobs of the people who had worked for Mum and Dad. And it left some money for you to use to start again. I asked myself time and time again what our parents would have wanted me to do, and to this day I still think they would have told me to take the money."

It was as if someone had wrapped a belt around my chest and was pulling it tighter and tighter. My brother had done everything he could. He'd made the best decision—the decision I would have made if I'd been brave enough or cognizant enough to have been involved.

"And you got to start your own business. I know they would have been so proud of you."

"I still miss them," I said, wincing at the constriction around my chest. "All these years later, the pain is still there."

"I don't think it will ever go away," he replied.

He had it too—we both shared their loss. Over the years I'd been able to convince myself that *my pain* was deeper, stronger, harder somehow. I thought the fact that I'd been denied their legacy meant I loved them more. But that wasn't true.

"I blamed you," I said. "For a lot of years." The wall of rancor I'd placed between me and my brother slowly crumbled as I looked at him through fresh eyes.

"I blamed myself. I still do."

"You did nothing wrong." All these years I'd pushed him away when I'd needed him. He'd just been trying to do his best.

“I wanted to save the business so badly,” he said. “For you. For us. For them. I wanted to keep them close.”

“It wouldn’t have worked,” I said. “Nothing would have brought them back.” By hating my brother, I’d just punished myself even more.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I failed you when you needed me most.”

“Don’t say that. If I hadn’t been so bloody minded. So blinkered.” I paused, trying to take it all in. Hollie had been right. “If I’d just remembered who you were, I would never have assumed the worst of you.”

“I should have made you see somehow. Made you listen to me.”

I managed to let out a small laugh. “No one other than Mum and Dad ever made me do anything I didn’t want to.”

He grinned at me. “I guess that’s true.” He sighed. “But I wish over the years I had tried more. I thought if I gave you a little space, you might come around.”

“I guess I did. But it shouldn’t have taken so long. *I’m* sorry, brother.” I took a steadying breath. “They would hate that we haven’t spoken in so long.”

He nodded, his glassy eyes giving way to tears. He pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose, clearing away the signs of grief. “I think that’s why I pushed for the bank to sponsor the competition.”

“That’s why you were on the list of attendees at the launch?” I’d thought he was there with Sparkle. Again, I’d made assumptions I had no right to.

“I heard you were entering and I got the bank to sponsor. I wanted . . . some kind of connection. I didn’t dare to hope we’d talk, but I just wanted to be a part of your life in some small way. I couldn’t face attending in the end. Didn’t want to risk coming face-to-face with you and it going badly.”

I’d spent the last fifteen years thinking David had been plotting against me. All that futile anger I’d felt toward him. All that pointless fury.

Too much time had been wasted.

Too much lost that neither of us would get back.

We had to make things right.

Most importantly, I had to learn my lesson. I had to seize opportunities. I had to make the most of everything and everybody in my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Dexter

“Gosh darn it, Dexter Daniels. This is all your fault,” Hollie called from the bedroom.

“Hollie’s furious because she can’t decide what to wear tomorrow night,” I explained to my brother, who had just called.

“We do have it lucky just throwing on a dinner jacket and combing our hair,” David replied.

“Thank God,” I replied. “Is Layla having the same issue?”

“I think she picked something. She’s excited to meet you. Won’t stop going on about it.”

It was weird I hadn’t met my brother’s wife. Fifteen years may have passed, but we’d spoken every day since we’d met in the café. It felt as if the time we hadn’t been speaking had collapsed to a mere moment. It was like it had always been between us when our parents were alive.

“Hollie’s the same. You’ll like her. She’s different to Bridget but she’s great.”

“Different to who?” he asked.

Hadn’t he heard me? “Bridget. You know, who I was going to marry.”

“The girl you dated at uni?”

Who else could he think I was talking about? “Yeah. You don’t remember her?”

“Vaguely. The one with the curly hair and the tiny feet.”

“No, that was Paula.” I’d forgotten about her. I’d gone out with her before Bridget. “Bridget was the girl on the same course as me.”

“The one with that insane laugh? With the button nose and hips.”

“Well as far as I can recall, every woman I’ve ever dated has had hips.” David was just as he always had been, focused on the details. “But no, that was Verity. Bridget was blond.”

“Did she have a nose ring?”

Finally, he remembered. “That’s the one.”

“Oh, I vaguely remember her. You got *engaged* to her?” Why did he sound so incredulous? It must have been obvious that Bridget wasn’t Verity or Paula. That she was the one. David must have met her countless times. He would have known we were serious.

“No, but I would have asked her.” I hadn’t had a chance before I’d ended things after a stupid argument.

He chuckled. “Well Mum wouldn’t have been happy. You know how she hated nose rings.”

“But she liked Bridget?” I wasn’t sure if it was a question or a statement. It was so hard to remember back then.

“God knows, Dexter. You went through women like most students go through pints of beer.” Why hadn’t Bridget stood out to him? “I don’t think any of us thought you were close to getting serious with someone, let alone married. You were young. Having fun. If Mum and Dad thought you were going to marry any of those girls from uni, they would have had something to say. And it wouldn’t have been good.”

I wanted to press him on what he remembered about Bridget, because it was clearly different from what I remembered, when I heard Hollie in the hallway.

“Yes, I’ll just get him,” she said as she came into the sitting room, her phone clamped to her ear. “It’s Primrose. Was trying to get you but you’re on the phone. It sounds urgent.”

It was getting late. What would Primrose have to speak to me about that wouldn’t wait until the morning?

“David, I’ve got to go, I’ve got Primrose on the other line. I’m sending a car for you tomorrow so I’ll see you at the venue.”

Hollie handed me her phone.

“Dexter, we have a problem,” Primrose said. “One of the pieces was dropped while we were packing up for transport to the venue.”

My jaw clenched and I tried to take a deep breath, steeling myself for more bad news.

“It’s the tiara. One of the emeralds came out and when they tried to force it back into the setting it . . . the stone cracked.”

I didn’t know where to start. I stood and strode to the kitchen to find my car keys. “Who the hell tried to replace it? Was it Frank?” I knew without asking it hadn’t been because he didn’t go around cracking emeralds. Whoever was stupid enough to drop the tiara was stupid enough to try to cover up the damage.

“Dexter, you know I’m not going to tell you. But it could be worse. It was one of the smaller stones.”

I didn’t give a shit if it was the smaller stones. A crack was a crack. I had to contain my anger and focus on what mattered, which was making sure that tiara was ready for the final round of judging tomorrow morning. The ceremony to announce the winner would happen later in the evening.

“Get Frank in. I’m on my way,” I said and hung up. I’d chosen every stone for every setting for this competition. We had some Zambian emeralds I’d sourced for the earrings until we’d chosen to go only with diamonds. I’d have to hope one of them worked for the tiara.

As I got to the doorway, I spun around to find Hollie running up behind me.

“You okay? What happened? Can I help?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “One of the stones in the tiara has cracked. I have to go and sort it out. I’ll be back later.”

She slid her hands up to my face and cupped my jaw. “Oh gosh, Dexter, I’m sorry. Is it fixable?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure the extent of the damage or which exact stone had cracked. I just needed to see it for myself and then figure out what to do.

“Shall I come with you?”

I shook my head. There was no point in neither of us getting any sleep. “I need to focus. I’ll call and tell you what’s happening, but you stay here.” I kissed her on the head and headed out.

Up until five minutes ago, Daniels & Co was perfectly positioned to win the competition and carry on the Daniels family legacy.

But no one would win with cracked stones and a broken tiara as the centerpiece to their entry—not even me.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Hollie

Arms folded, I looked at the four dresses hanging in the closet. Should I even be worrying about what I was going to wear to the finals when Dexter was back at the office trying to salvage the tiara? It felt wrong, but at the same time, I knew Dexter would handle things. That's what he did.

My phone buzzed and I slid it open, expecting it to be Dexter. But it was Autumn calling.

"Hey, lovely, how are you?"

No answer.

"Autumn?"

"Hey," she replied in a small voice.

"Hey yourself. What's up?" I headed back in the kitchen to figure out what to cook for dinner. Something that would be good cold if Dexter came in late.

"Hollie, I fucked up."

I closed my eyes, willing down the fear rising through my body. This was it. This was the conversation I'd been dreading for years now. "You're pregnant," I said.

"God, no."

I collapsed onto the couch. I didn't care what came next, as long as Autumn's future was still waiting for her.

"But it might be worse," she said. "I ended things with Greg. And he didn't take it well."

No surprises there, and as far as I was concerned, the fact that Autumn

was single was only a good thing. “Okay. Well he’ll get over it. Or he won’t.” Did it matter?

“Except that he’s out for revenge. I’m really fucking sorry.” Her voice faltered as she spoke. What in the hell had happened?

“Mind your manners,” I replied. “What are you sorry about? What’s the worst he could do?” He’d probably spread all sorts of gossip about Autumn, but people who knew us would know the truth. It wasn’t like Greg was the type to get violent.

“You got a letter today. Mom and Dad got one too. From the park.”

“And . . .?” My stomach squeezed into a ball, winding my breath tighter and tighter.

“His dad has tripled the rent on our trailer and Mom and Dad’s starting next month.”

“Tripled? But that’s impossible. We weren’t getting a great deal to start off with because Mom and Dad have been late with payments so often. How can they just triple our rent?”

“I don’t know. I’m so sorry.”

I needed a solution. Something to make it right. “Can you make up with Greg? Apologize?”

“He saw some messages between me and some guy at the college. He got all bent out of shape and there’s no talking him down. I’ve tried, believe me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t have done to set this straight.”

I dreaded to think what Autumn had offered Greg.

Just when I thought things had moved on in Oregon. My last conversation with Autumn had unsettled me. I’d questioned whether I should have left years ago to leave everyone to fend for themselves, seeing as they seemed to be doing so much better without me. But now? There was no way we could afford triple the rent on two trailers. We’d have to find an apartment in town. It would be more expensive, but likely not triple what we were paying now. I wouldn’t be able to walk to work. I’d have to get a car, plus insurance . . . Costs were adding up in my head.

What a mess. “At least we’ve got a month to figure things out.” Hopefully, I’d win the lottery.

“What do you mean a month?” Autumn asked. “It’s three days until the rent’s due.”

The bitter taste of diesel fumes coated my tongue and all at once I was transported back to Oregon.

Ten minutes ago, my biggest problem was which dress I was going to wear tomorrow night. Now it didn't matter because I wasn't going to make it. I switched the phone to speaker and started to look up flights.

"I'll come home," I said, defeated.

My time in London had come to an end. I'd been stupid to think I could have a new life just because my sister was graduating. Life just wasn't that easy. I'd thought that with some experience, I'd be able to get a job and leave Oregon with Autumn. That wasn't going to happen now. I was going to be trapped paying expensive rent.

"No, don't do that," Autumn said. "I'll try to talk to him again."

It wouldn't work. I knew it in my heart. I'd go back to Oregon and figure something out. Because that's what I did.

I should have saved more while I'd been in London. I'd been frivolous buying flowers and fancy cheese for Dexter's place.

I scanned the flights online. There was one I could afford in three hours. I'd have to Usain Bolt it, but I could just make it. In just a few clicks my future was sealed.

I needed to accept my fate. I wasn't getting out of Oregon. By tomorrow night I'd be back at the Sunshine Trailer Park and everything in London, including Dexter, would be five thousand miles and a million lifetimes away.

At least I'd had this time, this experience—Dexter. Even if it had been so temporary. I'd hold these memories close for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

Dexter

Three missed calls. Three voicemails. I hung up on the last one just as I stepped into my apartment after working through most of the night. My phone had been on silent at the office as we'd been focused on saving Daniels & Co's place in the competition.

One crisis bled into another. The new stone was in place on the tiara but Hollie was thirty thousand feet up on her way back to Oregon.

Her messages were garbled and muffled. All I could glean was that she had to go back because her parents and her sister were threatened with eviction. What I didn't understand was why it took Hollie to fly five thousand miles to sort it out. Her parents and Autumn were adults.

Instinctively, I pressed call, even though I knew she'd be in the air. A phone rang in the kitchen. I followed the sound and found Hollie's Daniels & Co phone on the counter. Locked.

I didn't even have her US mobile number.

I scrolled through my phone, looking for Autumn's number then realized we'd only communicated by email about Hollie's birthday. We'd never actually spoken.

I wandered through my apartment, looking for signs that she was coming back, but her mobile and four still-covered dresses for tonight's event told a different story.

There was nothing left of Hollie in London.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dexter

I stepped out of the cab with the feeling I'd left something vital behind at home. But Hollie wasn't back at my flat. I checked my watch. She'd have landed by now and I still hadn't heard anything.

This evening was meant to be different. I'd thought I was going to introduce her to my brother.

I tried to shake it off, put on my best poker face, as I pushed the revolving door into the lobby. Near the check-in desk stood a woman whose profile looked familiar. Her hair was a chestnut brown bob and she was a little taller than Hollie. And then she turned in my direction.

Bridget.

My heart began to pound as if I'd been searching for buried treasure for a decade and my spade had just hit gold.

She looked at me with no recognition in her eyes, turned and started toward the bank of lifts.

"Bridget," I called after her. I couldn't let her walk away without saying something.

She stopped and turned around. Narrowing her eyes, she took two steps toward me. "Dexter? Oh my God, how are you?"

"Hi," I said, bending to kiss her on both cheeks, preparing myself to touch her for the first time in so long. But when my lips reached her cheek, there was no longing, no physical reaction at being so close to her after so long. "It's been awhile. How are you?"

"Great," she said smiling. "You look good. But then you always did.

What are you up to?”

“Here for an event in the ballroom.” This stilted small talk was odd, considering this was the woman I’d long considered the love of my life.

“Explains the bowtie,” she said. “I’m meeting a girlfriend for drinks downstairs.”

“Shall I walk you down?” I offered.

She shrugged. “If you like.”

We headed over to the lifts in silence and I glanced over at her, trying to remember what about her had been so special. “Are you still a tennis fan?” I asked.

“More of a spectator these days,” she replied. “Although I do play occasionally.”

The lift pinged open and I followed her inside.

As the doors closed, she looked up at me. “Dexter, I should have said something years ago when . . . your parents, you know. I’m really sorry I wasn’t more supportive to you when they died.” Her mouth twitched and she shifted her handbag from one shoulder to the other. “It was just that things had been so casual between us and then this huge thing happened to you and I couldn’t handle it.”

Had I been so lost during that time that I didn’t remember anything about our relationship? David had the impression Bridget was no one special to me and now Bridget herself was saying the same thing. “It’s fine,” I said, confused and hoping she’d elaborate. “I can’t quite recall the details.”

“Well, I’m not proud of myself,” she said. “I shouldn’t have just finished things with you when you needed someone.”

I’d always thought I’d broken up with her, messed it up by being stubborn and stupid. Bridget clearly had a different view of what had happened between us.

“It was a long time ago,” I replied.

Part of me wanted to probe, dig deeper, ask more about her memories from that time. They seemed so completely opposite from what I recalled. But here we were—two almost strangers. It didn’t seem right to ask someone who didn’t know me about the most difficult time in my life.

“It was,” she replied. “That doesn’t make it right. You had your friends though.”

I smiled. “I did. I still do, actually. The six of us are still close.”

She turned toward me. “Wow. That’s really nice.”

More than nice, but if Bridget wasn't lucky enough to have friendships as strong as mine then I wasn't going to make her feel bad about it. I had the most incredible life with the most incredible people in it. I had nothing to regret or feel bad about.

Whatever had happened between us all those years ago just didn't matter.

Whether or not she was important to me at the time or I'd simply mythologized her because she'd come before my parents' death, when life had been good—she was nothing to me now. The woman in front of me wasn't *Bridget*. She wasn't the woman I'd clearly created in my head as proof I'd never be married. Be in love. Have a future with someone.

We stepped out of the lift and stopped at the entrance of the bar where she was meeting her friend.

"It was really good to see you," I said, smiling as if I'd won tonight already.

She half smiled at me, as if she couldn't understand why I might be telling the truth. "You too."

I turned back to the lift. She would never know how good it was to have bumped into her. Only now was I able to say goodbye to a lie I'd been telling myself for so long. Seeing her had cut the last few strands that were tying me to my past.

I'd been set free.

Standing beside Primrose, I angled myself away from the far end of the room where the entries were displayed. I hadn't even looked at the designs of the other four finalists, and I didn't want to see their finished products. My father always said that comparing yourself to others led to madness, and it was a rule I lived by. Primrose, on the other hand, knew everything about everybody else's designs, which were all showcased on the back wall of the ballroom.

"It's about personal choice at the end of the day," she said to the editor of *The Jeweller* magazine, who had come over to welcome us but had really wanted to know how stressed and competitive we were. "We just focused on designing and making a collection worthy of Her Royal Highness."

“Anything you want to add?” the journalist asked me.

“I’m just looking forward to an enjoyable evening with my team. I hope we raise a lot of money for charity,” I said.

To win tonight would be the pinnacle of everything I’d worked for my entire life. But I wasn’t about to admit that to a journalist. The winning shouldn’t matter. I knew we had produced an incredible collection—it incorporated the heritage of Finland and the royal family as well as raising the profile about global issues. And on top of all that, it was some of the finest jewelry in existence.

But the winning *did* matter. To me at least. My parents would never know—would never get to appreciate it—but I wanted to do something I *knew* they would have been proud of. My fortune wouldn’t have impressed them. No doubt it was their lack of interest in money and profit that had left the business on the brink when they died. No, they would be interested in the pieces. In the creativity. In the stones.

And we’d nailed all of it.

I spotted Tristan through the crowd a few meters away, and he headed toward us, glass in hand. “I might not know anything about jewelry,” he said. “But if it was up to me, you’d win. Congratulations, mate. By far the best entry in the room.”

“I agree,” Primrose said as Tristan kissed her on the cheek. “But I’m slightly biased.”

Gabriel came up behind him. “Well done,” he said. “It all looks spectacular. And no gimmicks. Did you see that first entry as you come in has some kind of graphic scene behind it?”

“It’s clever,” Tristan said. “But it means you’re looking at the film and not the crown thing. Which is probably for the best. Because it was very mediocre.” Tristan, like all my friends, was loyal to the core.

“Very mediocre,” agreed Beck, as he appeared from nowhere. I hadn’t been sure he’d make it. “The Daniels & Co entry is spectacular, on the other hand.” He glanced around. “Where’s Hollie?”

Lucky for me, Gabriel distracted him, probably remembering that Hollie didn’t want the rest of my business to know we were dating. Not that it mattered. She wasn’t here, and I wasn’t sure we were dating anymore. After she’d left, I’d checked the flat over and over, but she’d taken every single last thing of hers. And I knew she hadn’t left anything at her studio. She had no reason to come back. Was that it? Was I supposed to just say, “Thanks, see

you around”?

I'd sent an email to Autumn but I'd heard nothing.

I wanted Hollie here. To see what she'd earned. To see what she was capable of.

We were called to our table and Gabriel, Tristan and Beck headed to the table next to the one where I would sit with the Daniels & Co team. I glanced around to find David before following them.

“Mum and Dad would have loved to have seen you both here,” he said as he came up behind Primrose and me.

I pulled him in for a hug. I didn't want to let go. I'd spent so long angry at him I'd forgotten to miss him. But having him back in my life, it all came flooding back. I liked his laugh and the way he was terrible at football. I remembered how he was so grouchy if things weren't fair. I remembered him plastering my knees, giving me Chinese burns and cutting my hair when I was about eight; it had gotten too long and our parents were too busy to notice. He'd been the consummate big brother. When he'd sold the business to Sparkle, all those memories had been locked away. Now I'd allowed them out, it was as if I was more *me*.

I was whole now I had my memories of us back.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Wild horses couldn't have stopped me,” he said as we parted. “This is my wife, Layla.”

A small, pretty blond woman stood beside him, beaming. “I'm so happy to meet you,” she said and threw her arms around my neck as if she was my long-lost sister. I supposed she was in a way. “I feel like I know you. Primrose always kept us up to date, but it's not the same as being able to see you in the flesh.”

I glanced at Primrose. I'd never told her not to talk to David about me. I'd spent years trying to act as if I didn't have a brother, and now I wished I could get those years back.

“Sounds like I have some catching up to do,” I said.

She grabbed my hand. “Lots. Come round for supper this week, will you?” I nodded, realizing I didn't even know where they lived. So much wasted time. “And bring someone if you want?” Frustration clutched at my stomach as I imagined Hollie back in Oregon. She was probably home with her sister now. However hard I tried, I couldn't imagine her in America. She belonged in London.

I shook my head. “I’m a party of one,” I said.

We made our way to our table, with me fastidiously avoiding looking across the room at the competitors’ pieces. I’d look if we lost. But not before the winner was announced.

Our first courses were delivered and as Primrose chatted to David and Layla, I checked my phone, but it was blank. I’d put my phone number in my email to Autumn and was hoping for a message from Hollie. It didn’t feel right that she wasn’t here. The last-minute changes we’d made to the tiara on her suggestion had elevated the piece to another level. I’d been so fucking proud of her. I knew in that moment she was going to have a fantastic career.

But she needed to learn to put herself and her own needs first.

If she was determined to be drawn back to Oregon at every opportunity, then no doubt, she’d have to make do with an Etsy store. And that would be a waste of talent.

The meal dragged on, intermittently interrupted by short films about the charities that had been supported and speeches on the industry and Finland. The entire room was smiling and feigning interest. I glanced at the next table and saw Beck, Gabriel and Tristan chatting away and then across from me, my brother and his wife. Next to me, Primrose. Not all the guys had managed to come tonight, but other than Andrew and Joshua, everyone important in my life was here. The only person missing was Hollie.

After the plates were cleared and the amounts raised for charity announced, the room began to quieten. Everyone was ready. All heads were turned to the podium and side conversations hushed.

The princess of Finland was welcomed on stage to finally announce the winner. Not just months, but a lifetime of preparation had come down to this moment. Her Royal Highness was going to decide whether or not I’d picked up that baton from my parents and carried it with me.

I was usually quite a patient man—fine jewelry making required it—but right then I wished I could press the skip button on the princess and get to the part where she announced the winner. Instead she talked about the charities being supported. About Finland, her family and her fiancé. With every sentence my insides coiled tighter and tighter, images flashing into my head of me as a boy in my parents’ shop, me opening my first business, taking my first commission. I glanced at my brother, whose gaze was glued to the stage.

“And now,” she said. “To the winner. As you know, I’ve been advised by the expert panel who were responsible for selecting the finalists and I’ve

made my choice.” I swallowed. I knew we’d done our absolute best. The thought that it might not be good enough gnawed at my throat.

“The winner’s design was inspiring in so many ways. I love the way it incorporates the ethereal beauty of the Finnish landscape without compromising on the design.”

That sounded promising. She could be talking about Daniels & Co, but because I hadn’t seen the other finalists, perhaps it could apply to them as well.

“And the quality of the stones and settings was outstanding.”

I imagined she’d say that about whoever won.

“But I also loved how there were small references to my mother’s wedding jewelry.” She paused and the breath in my chest turned solid, rendering me entirely still. “The winner is Daniels & Co.”

The corners of my mouth twitched, the rock beneath my ribcage dissolved and I released the breath I’d been holding. I glanced at my brother, who was on his feet, his arms in the air, cheering. His wife was beaming as if she’d known me for the last fifteen years. Over at the table beside ours, Tristan had two fingers in his mouth and was whistling. Gabriel stepped across and pulled me into a hug.

I was proud and pleased and relieved. But despite being exactly where I wanted to be, with everything I’d been working for . . . it wasn’t enough. Because Hollie wasn’t by my side to share in it. All I wanted was to turn to her and kiss her.

Instead, I took Primrose’s hand and led her to the stage.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Dexter

I lay my hand, palm up, on the shiny mahogany of the bar. “I swear, my skin’s about to break I’ve shaken so many hands tonight,” I said, before downing a gulp of whiskey. As soon as we won, I’d wanted to leave, but Primrose made it clear I was to stick around. It wasn’t the skin on my hands that truly hurt. It was the stormy darkness swirling in my gut that I couldn’t drink away. Hollie should have been here tonight. She should be here now. With me.

“For a guy who just reached the pinnacle of his career, you don’t seem very happy,” Gabriel said.

My driver had taken Primrose and the trophy home and was going to come back for me. I’d been ready to leave but I didn’t want to go home, so Gabriel and Tristan had brought me to a nearby bar. My driver would be outside by now but I wasn’t ready to go back to the flat. Maybe I’d grab a room at a hotel. There was no point in going back to empty room after empty room. Not until I’d drunk a lot more. There was no one there to go home for. “I just have a sore hand,” I replied.

“Right,” he said, and he glanced over his shoulder. “Tristan never misses an opportunity to get a number, does he?”

“He tries too hard,” I said. It wasn’t true. Tristan didn’t need to try—he just liked the challenge—but I was taking my bad mood out on my friends. I needed to go out for a run or take a shower or do something to clear my head.

“I presume the fact that Hollie isn’t here has something to do with your demeanor,” Gabriel said. “As well as your sore hand.” He didn’t roll his eyes

because that wasn't Gabriel's style, but he might as well have done.

There was no point in talking about Hollie. She was gone.

I finished my drink and ordered another. "You want one?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Come on, mate. What happened? You should be happier than a pig in shit."

"She had some kind of family crisis at home. Left early."

"Oregon home?" he asked and I nodded. No doubt he had to check because it was so bloody ridiculous that she'd leave London completely. I should have forced the conversation about her staying in London. I'd just been busy with the competition and it didn't occur to me that she'd up and go back to the US with no notice. I didn't know who to be angrier with—her for just taking off or myself for not making her stay.

"But she's coming back, right?"

"On the basis I've not had a single message or call since she left for the airport, I'm assuming she's gone for good." As I said the words my stomach churned. Could that be true?

I'd heard nothing. And I didn't believe that bullshit about no news being good news.

"The phone works two ways, you know," Gabriel said.

"I don't have a number for her. She was using a company phone here, and she left it. I've emailed her sister. What more can I do?"

Gabriel beckoned over the barman and ordered another drink. "Do you want her back?"

"I wanted her here tonight." I'd assumed we'd have time to figure things out after we'd won the competition. I'd assumed she wanted to stay. I'd assumed a lot of things. Things had been good between us and she loved London. She wouldn't be going back to Oregon if it had been her choice. She wouldn't have missed tonight.

But it definitely had been her choice not to call me. Or leave me with her US number.

"It's hard not to put family first," Gabriel said. "It's a natural reaction."

Hollie's generosity and thoughtfulness were at the core of who she was, and I didn't want that to change. "I just want her to be happy and stop sacrificing herself for people who should be able to look after themselves. I want her to get what she wants out of the world." She deserved a happy and successful life where she wasn't just looking after other people. But maybe I was being selfish.

“Sounds like you’re serious about her.”

There was no doubt about that. “Tonight was meant to have been special. I’ve worked so hard to live up to my parents’ reputation, and to have that recognized tonight was all I could have wished for. You’re right. I should be fucking ecstatic instead of a miserable bastard, drowning my sorrows at the bar.” I took another sip of my drink. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d be a hell of a lot more miserable if we hadn’t won.”

Gabriel chuckled. “Yeah, I probably wouldn’t be sitting here if you’d have lost. Or if I was, I’d be wearing body armor.”

“I just wanted her here,” I said. “I wanted to share it with her.” Nothing was right without Hollie. It was slowly sinking in that she was gone. Not just for tonight but forever. Faced with the prospect of Hollie not being around, I was being forced to consider what life felt like without her. It was like a fist to my face.

I didn’t want to go home tonight because I didn’t want to be anywhere she wasn’t. A hotel room wasn’t going to be any different. I wanted to wake up next to her every morning and go to sleep, her body tucked into mine, every night. I wanted her in my life every moment of every day.

“Hey,” Gabriel said. “Your parents would have been immensely proud. Your brother was there to celebrate with you and so were we. It’s a fantastic achievement.”

I knew the theory. And of course, it was fantastic my brother had been there tonight. It was fitting. And I was grateful and so happy to have him back in my life. Even though we’d not seen each other for so many years, it was as if he’d never been away. But him being here just made me think of Hollie. If I hadn’t seen the way she was completely devoted to her sister, I would never have contemplated that David might have a legitimate side of the story. It was Hollie’s example that made me consider getting in contact with him again. If she hadn’t come into my life, tonight would have been even more of an empty experience than it was turning out to be. If she was gone for good, did that mean I would spend the rest of my life with something missing?

I shrugged and tipped back my drink. “It will be good publicity with the store opening.”

“Do you regret not making things right with David sooner?”

Christ, was Gabriel trying to make me feel worse? “I think we both have regrets.” He wished he’d pushed me. I wished I’d not been so pig-headed.

“But yes of course I do. We wasted a lot of years.”

“Guess you wouldn’t want to repeat that mistake,” Gabriel said. He thought he was being subtle. Or maybe he didn’t—he wasn’t a stupid man. But he didn’t get it. The situation with my brother was very different. I’d been grieving and desperate to hold on to my parents. We’d both been young and in pain. Time and age had given us perspective. Hollie knew I wanted her to stay in London. She wanted to please her family more than she wanted me. It was as simple as that.

“Hollie and I didn’t have an argument. She flew back to Oregon. I can’t change that, Gabriel.”

“I get the impression that she was important to you. Like more important than anyone for a long time.”

“Yes,” I said. The days of trying to deny that were long gone. “She was very important. Before Hollie, I was resigned to being on my own.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I think we’d all figured that out.”

“Hollie was different. She’s sweet and caring and funny and talented and fucking gorgeous.” There weren’t words enough to describe how really wonderful she was. “There’s no point dwelling on it. She’s gone. There’s no bringing her back.”

Gabriel put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me to face him. “What are you talking about, Dex? She didn’t get married. And . . . she didn’t die. You don’t have to let her go without a fight.”

He made it sound simple. I knew she hadn’t died or moved on, but I also knew I had to let go of things in my life that weren’t meant to be. “She’s a grown woman. I can’t make her do anything she doesn’t want to do, and she hasn’t called.”

“So that’s it? You walk away?”

“I didn’t walk anywhere. I’m right here where she left me.” She had my number.

“Dexter, I’ve never seen you like this. I don’t want you to spend your life regretting that you didn’t do more.”

“What more can I do? If she doesn’t feel the same way about me, I can’t force her.”

Gabriel clapped me on the back. “You won tonight because you were determined and focused. Because you didn’t consider that you could ever fail. Am I right?”

“Hollie might be a prize but she’s not a competition.”

“You owe it to yourself to at least be clear to her about how you feel and what you want.”

She knew how I felt about her.

Didn't she?

“We didn't get a chance to talk about next steps. I mentioned her staying in London though. Offered to put her in contact with some industry people.”

“How very romantic,” Gabriel said, raising his eyebrows.

“But obviously part of the reason I did that was because I didn't want her to leave.” She had to know. I'd been the one to suggest she move into my place so we could spend more time together. I'd been the one to broach the topic of her staying in London.

“You have to say the words. Like, make it very clear. Believe me when I tell you that lots can get lost in translation. You should have learned that from the situation with David.”

There was nothing I could do to get back all the years I'd lost with my brother. And I couldn't bear the thought of even one night without Hollie—let alone the rest of my life.

If I'd bumped into Bridget a decade ago, I might be a different man. If I'd picked up the phone to David earlier, perhaps we would have reconciled years before now. I didn't want Hollie to be another “if.”

Just as the wounds of David and Bridget that I'd been carrying for years had finally healed, Hollie leaving had ripped my heart apart. And instead of leaving this fresh wound to fester and bleed, I wanted to stop wasting time. I wanted to heal.

I wanted Hollie back in my life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Hollie

I abandoned my suitcase, peeled off my coat and collapsed on our second-hand, brown velour couch as if it was good to be home. It wasn't.

"I don't know what you did to Buck Newland, but thank God," Autumn said, handing me a glass of water and coming to sit next to me.

My first stop on the way back from the airport hadn't been our trailer, but Buck Newland's—Greg's dad. I hadn't managed to get him to lower the rent, but I had managed to get us an extra month to find another place to live. Buck had known our family a long time, and he knew the burden of sorting out new places to live was going to fall on me. He'd taken pity on me.

"It's still not long," I said. "Did you find the listings?"

"You think he might still come around?" She handed me a newspaper and flipped to the rentals page.

"I doubt it. We've been here a long time and arguably we should be paying more rent."

"Not triple the amount."

"No. But Buck knows that apartments around here are few and far between. And he's punishing us because . . ." Autumn already felt responsible for what had happened. I didn't need to rub it in. "I need to focus on getting a rent deposit together for an apartment. We'll have to live together and you and I will have to share a room until you leave." The next few weeks I'd have to do a lot of extra shifts at the factory. It still wouldn't be enough. All that extra work to go backward—back to living with my parents. At least Autumn would be able to leave Sunshine. "Mom is going to

have to contribute from her work at Trader Bob's and she's going to have to keep working there if we're going to have a hope of making what we need." I was going to have to keep an eye on Mom, make sure she kept her job.

"You think you're going to miss London?" Autumn asked.

That reminded me—I needed to unpack my carry-on and then the last traces of my trip to London would have left me. "It's nice to be back to see you," I said, avoiding the question.

"What about Sexy Dexter? Will you miss him?"

"Oh, I'm sure he's moved on. You saw him." I desperately wanted to know if he'd won the competition. It was late in London. The winner would have been announced by now. There would probably be an article about it online tomorrow. Dexter was sure to win. I'd seen the designs from the other competitors and there was no comparison. Dexter had some kind of instinct or genetic programming that allowed him to see what would work and what would be too much. It was the elegance and simplicity of the Daniels & Co jewelry that I'd take as inspiration from my trip.

I wasn't giving up on jewelry, but I would have to shift my dreams a little and focus on my Etsy store. We needed the cash, and we needed it fast.

"Did you text him? Call?"

Dexter had emailed Autumn and asked me to call. But what was the point? I needed a clean break. I couldn't look back. The sooner I resigned myself to my life in Sunshine, the better off I'd be.

"No, and you promised you wouldn't respond to his email." If I had something to say to Dexter, I'd say it to him myself. I didn't need Autumn playing go-between.

"I haven't. But you were living with him, Hollie. You two were serious about each other."

"It meant we got more time together, that's all. I'm sure I wasn't the first woman Dexter lived with. And I won't be the last. He's a great guy."

"So, you're not going to do the long-distance thing?"

"You think he's the kind of guy who does FaceTime sex? Long distance is for relationships that are either super casual or super serious. It's either 'I'll see you next time I'm in New York' or 'We'll bear this time apart before our wedding.' Dexter and me? We weren't either. Whatever we had always had an expiration. Long distance would never have worked." I'd thought about it. In fact, I'd thought about nothing else on the flight home. This was easier. No expectations. I'd go back to life as usual. The last thing I needed was to

torture myself by pretending things could be different. Because things *weren't* different. As my gramma used to say—deal with what you've got, not what you'd like. It was advice to live by.

My sister was staring at me. “So, what, you shook hands, thanked each other for the orgasms and said ‘see you around’?”

“I need to finish unpacking,” I said, getting to my feet and heading to my room. The last thing I wanted to do was pick through the leftovers of my relationship with Dexter. As if leaving him wasn't bad enough, I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye.

Heat roared in my chest at the thought of not being with him again. I was resigned but that didn't mean I was happy about it. Just because I'd accepted the way things were didn't mean it didn't hurt every time I thought about him. It didn't mean my heart wasn't broken.

“Are you okay?” Autumn said from the doorway.

“I'll be fine,” I said, unzipping my backpack. I knew I would recover. Somehow. Someday. I had to. “I just need a good night's sleep.”

“Nothing like your own bed, right? Although I imagine Dexter's bed wasn't so bad.”

I pulled out a sweater and a pair of sneakers from my bag. “Yeah, I was okay with slumming it for a while.” I tried to squeeze out a smile and make a joke of it, but I felt drained—like my battery was running low and my body was fuzzy and my limbs were stuck in mud.

“At least we've got an extra month, right?” she said.

“Exactly.” It was the absence of bad news that equaled sunshine in Oregon. Things didn't have to go right—if they just didn't go wrong, that was a good day. I had to push down the memories of my time with Dexter. He'd been from a different time in my life. Now I needed to get back to my reality.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Hollie

I plastered a grin on my face, trying to stop the hopelessness breaking through, as I ran my finger down the schedule. “And that one there,” I said to Pauly.

“Are you sure? It means you’ll have four double shifts that week and only one day off.”

“I’m sure,” I said.

“Babe, it’s your first day back and you’re one shift in. You’ve forgotten how you’re going to feel after a week back in the saddle.”

“Pauly, seriously. Just put me down. I don’t want to lose out. And call me before you put the next schedule up, will you?”

“I heard you were thrown out of the trailer park,” Pauly said.

Gosh darn it, I was sick of people knowing my business. “So, we’re all set?” I didn’t want to get into it with him. There was no point. I needed the money and working was the only solution.

He shook his head and typed in my employee ID. “We’re all set.” Anyone would think I was asking him to do my shifts for me, he seemed so glum about it. I should be the one picking up whiskey on the way home to get me through the next few months.

I squinted as I opened the door into the daylight of the Oregon afternoon to find my sister waiting for me.

“Hey,” I said. “You need a hand with that?”

She seemed to be weighed down with a thousand bags. What had she been buying and where did she get the money for any of it?

“You can take the whiskey,” she said, pulling out a bottle from her purse. “It was making my shoulder ache.”

“What are you buying whiskey for?” I asked as we made our way through the parking lot. Not toward a car, because I walked the ten minutes it took to get to work. Even in the rain, it was fine as long as you didn’t try and take the shortcut across the field.

“You got plans tonight?” she asked, setting quite a pace back home.

“You mean apart from that conference call with Paris and pilates at the country club?” I asked.

“Good. You have plans with me then. We’re just going to make a start tonight. We won’t get it all done, but we can get an idea.”

I peered into one of the shopping bags she was carrying. Whatever it was, it wasn’t groceries. “Make a start on what?” I said. “I’m happy if whiskey is part of the equation but all I want to do is go home and watch Bravo.” Anything to keep me distracted from thinking about London. About Dexter. About the life I’d left behind. At some point I’d maybe start designing again. I had a couple of ideas but no energy to put down on paper something I wasn’t going to be able to make.

Buck was at the entrance of the park. “Hey, Buck, can’t stop. Gotta get back and pack,” Autumn said, pulling me by the sleeve when I slowed to say hi.

What the hell was up with her. “What have you been buying? You better not have thrown away your textbook money on something stupid and whiskey.”

“Come on and I’ll show you,” she said, marching toward our trailer.

It seemed like time slowed with every pace toward home. It was the last place I wanted to be. Being indoors, I was faced with how starkly different my life had been this time last week.

She was first up the steps, through the door and was emptying her bags before I’d even finished taking my hoodie off.

“What are you doing?” I asked as she spread out what she’d brought back on the table. There were about a hundred Sharpies, each a different color, and a ruler and sticky notes. And then a huge roll of paper.

“Is this an elementary school art project?” I asked, pulling out two shot glasses and setting them next to the whiskey.

“Nope. This is planning HQ.”

I poured out the whiskey, careful not to spill a drop.

“What are we planning? How to not run out of Sharpies?”

She ignored me, came over, picked up her shot glass and held it up. “Here’s to getting out of here,” she said and tipped back the shot.

I’d drink to that. And I did.

The warm, sleepy liquid slid down my throat, loosening my limbs and making the world slightly more bearable. A couple of more shots and I might be able to call Mom and Dad to make sure they were packing.

“So,” she said, screwing the lid back on the bottle. “No more until we’ve done some work. We need to keep a clear head.”

I was hoping a lot of whiskey was the plan to get out of here, but apparently Autumn had something else in mind.

“Come on.” She shooed me over to the dining table like I was cattle.

Autumn clearly meant business. And I figured it was easier to just play along. I’d sneak a couple more shots and just let her talk. And then I’d go to bed, hopefully before the dark and quiet could leave room for thoughts of Dexter to take over in my mind.

She sat opposite me and rolled open the large sheet of paper. “So, I’ve been doing some research. We can do flights to London for five hundred dollars as long as you don’t mind a bit of a layover.”

London? I sat back, the soothing effect of the whiskey lifting like a pigeon when a car backfired. I was totally confused. Autumn removed the lid of the bright pink Sharpie with a pop and wrote “out” at the top left of the page, underlining it twice.

“You want to fill me in on what we’re doing here,” I asked, a little uncomfortable. I didn’t understand what London had to do with a pile of Sharpies, and there was no need to figure out the cost of flights. If I ever went back, inflation would have been around the block a few times and who knew what the price would be. “Because I really want to go and watch some housewives scream at each other.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She looked at me as if I was being deliberately dumb. “We’re hatching a plan to get your ass back to London.”

I groaned and went to stand.

“Sit down,” she snapped. My sister never snapped at me and I could count on the fingers of one hand how often she’d told me what to do.

“I was just going to get the whiskey,” I lied.

“I told you. We need clear heads.”

“For what? I’m not going back to London.” I needed to be here—to earn

money, to keep an eye on Mom so she kept bringing in a salary. “I don’t have anything to go back for.” My internship was over. I’d not made any friends other than Dexter really, and well . . . that was over. And now I couldn’t bring myself to find out who’d won the competition. I would be devastated for him if Daniels & Co hadn’t, but if they had, I was worried I’d be so bitter about not being there that I’d take that bottle of whiskey and down the entire thing.

“You have the rest of your life to go back for,” my sister said. “You have Dexter. And your career.”

I watched her, scribbling numbers down on this huge sheet of paper. She wanted to help and my bones ached I was so grateful, but there was nothing she could do. I was stuck.

“I think on this side,” she said, indicating the right-hand side of the huge sheet of paper, “we need things that don’t cost money but you’ll have to do before you go. I’m going to write ‘job’ up here and then we’ll do a bubble where we put all the preparation you need to do to get a job—you know, applications and stuff.”

“Honey,” I said, placing my hand on her arm. “This is so sweet of you. But I’m not going back to London.”

She turned to me, fire in her eyes. “Of course you are. I’ve never seen or heard you so happy as when you were over there. And Dexter’s there and you’ve never been into a guy like you’re into him. Ever. In. Your. Life.”

Into him. It sounded so cute but so completely inappropriate for what I felt for Dexter. I tried to push it down but it kept bobbing to the surface—the realization that I was in love with him. I tried to think back to when I’d transitioned from wanting to rip his clothes off to being in love with him. It was somewhere after I’d started to like him, then really like him, and it had morphed without me realizing into something much deeper—respect and admiration mixed with an understanding that he enjoyed making me happy just as much as I enjoyed doing the same for him.

I loved the bones of the man.

I loved the heart of the man.

I loved the soul of the man.

I glanced at my phone. It would be so easy to call. Too easy.

“I have responsibilities here,” I said. “I need to be realistic.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I’m not planning on robbing a bank. This chart is a real plan. We can do this. You saved up the first time. And now I’m

about to graduate and get a job, we'll get there a lot quicker. Which reminds me," she said, flipping over the paper. "I need a column because I need to find a job that pays. None of this interning without a salary shit," she said. "I've started applying and I have a couple of interviews lined up. But I'm not going to put all my eggs in one basket. I'm going to keep applying."

It was the first I'd heard about her applying for jobs already. "You're going to apply around here?" There weren't many good jobs in Sunshine.

"No, I thought Portland. And I've even applied for a couple in New York."

New York? That was more expense. I'd have to pay for her flights and hotels. But good for her that she wanted to spread her wings. There was no point in two of us being stuck here. After all, giving her a future was what the last years of sacrifice had been about.

"And before you start worrying, I got a scholarship to pay for travel and accommodation to and from job interviews. There won't be any additional expense." Autumn was beaming at me.

My heart rose in my chest. "What kind of scholarship?"

"The kind that pays for kids like me to go to job interviews."

"Wow, I had no idea there even was such a thing."

"Well, there was and I got it. And then you're not going to have tuition to pay for anymore."

I nodded. I just had to get past the bottleneck of deposits on our new apartment—first month, last month, security. Once I did that, I could relax a little. Until the next disaster.

"Let's put rent for parents down here," she said, scribbling down a figure in the costs column. It was probably useful to look at my expenses and get a handle on how long it was going to take to get back to something like normalcy, but Autumn's insistence on including a return to London in our grand scheme was wishful thinking.

"That's not the rent," I said, seeing the number she'd put against it. "It's going to be double that just for their apartment. Let alone mine."

"Yeah, but I'm going to be paying half."

God, I loved my sister. And her imagination wasn't even the best part of her. "How do you think you're going to be doing that?"

"I told you," she said. "I'm going to get a job."

"Yeah, and you'll have to pay rent and bills and buy clothes—"

"I know. Which is why I need a *paying* job. I'll have expenses and one of

those will be half Mom and Dad's rent."

There was no point arguing with her. She'd find out soon enough that life wasn't that easy.

"What was your rent in that studio in London? We're planning for worst case because you'll probably live with Dexter again, right?"

I wanted to dive into her fantasy and believe what she was planning could be a reality, but I was afraid I'd never be able to pull myself back into real life. And then what would happen? Too many people were depending on me. I couldn't afford to have my head in the clouds. I needed to be real, keep my feet on the ground.

Autumn kept putting down numbers and I sat and watched, occasionally eyeing the whiskey bottle.

"It really hinges on you having a job," she said. "So that should be your first priority. Can you hit up some of the people you met in London and see if anyone's hiring?"

I could call Primrose. And Teresa from Sparkle. They might know where I could start looking. No—what was I thinking? "It's impossible," I said. "Even if we both got jobs and split the rent, I can't just up and move to London."

"Why not?"

"You want a list?" I asked. What about my situation wasn't she getting?

"Sure. Let's hear your excuses."

"I only need two. Mom and Dad."

"They are grown adults. If we're keeping a roof over their heads, they can figure out the rest themselves."

I half laughed, half sighed. "That's not how they work. You know it's just a matter of time before they get into some disaster that I'll need to bail them out of."

"Mom still has her job, which, may I remind you, she got while you were in London. Maybe they got themselves into trouble because they knew you'd be here to save them. Once you left . . ."

I rolled my eyes. That wasn't true. Mom and Dad had been getting themselves into trouble since long before I was capable of cleaning up their messes.

"And even if that's not true, they're not your responsibility."

I pushed out of my chair and headed over to the whiskey bottle. "Now you're being ridiculous. Of course they're my responsibility. Who else is

going to look after them?”

“Hollie, they’re not children or dogs. They can figure it out. We can come back and visit but you’ve sacrificed your dreams long enough. Your entire life has been about providing for me or cleaning up after the two of them. I haven’t deserved your sacrifices, but I’m forever grateful for them. But you’ve done what you set out to do. I’m graduating. It’s time for you to live your life.”

I grabbed the bottle and brought it and the two shot glasses back to the table. Autumn’s growing independence had lifted a cloak of responsibility from my shoulders. I’d always be there for her in any way I could be, but the fact I wouldn’t be paying tuition would be a game-changer. “I’m so freaking proud you’re graduating. You worked hard for this. In and out of class.”

“I know,” she said. “But it wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for you.”

I’d supported Autumn because I loved her, and because it was the right thing to do. It was as simple as that.

“But now it’s time for you to focus on you.” She turned back to our plan. “You’ll be back in London in three months by my calculations. I’ll have a job by then. Mom gets healthcare if she stays at Trader Bob’s for twelve months.”

“Just like that?” I said, pouring out the whiskey.

“No, not just like that. With hard work and double shifts and weekends spent applying for jobs. But you can do it.”

I looked at her spreadsheet. It seemed to work on paper. “How can I just abandon Mom and Dad? What if Mom loses her job?”

“You’re not abandoning them. You’re just making something of your life. You’re not letting them dictate your future. They have a place to live and we can both come back and visit.”

She made it sound possible, like I could actually have the life I wanted rather than the one that had been assigned to me since birth.

“I suppose I could build up some savings and send them money if things get bad.”

“Yes. And you never know—they might actually pull themselves together a little bit if they know they don’t have us catching them every time they trip up and knock themselves out.”

Maybe Autumn was right. Perhaps I could let my parents figure stuff out themselves. As long as they had a roof over their heads, and I could send money if they got into a scrape, I supposed I didn’t need to be in Oregon to

make it work.

“Okay, let’s go through the plan again,” I said.

Maybe I’d even give Dexter a call if I ever made it back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Dexter

I thought it rained hard in London, but Oregon made London's precipitation look like amateur hour. I hadn't been able to sleep; the sheeting rain had been so heavy against the hotel windows. Then again, my sleeplessness might have been thanks to my anticipation of seeing Hollie today. I shoved my hands in my pockets, trying to be patient as I waited for the car to be delivered at the hotel entrance.

It had been over two weeks since I'd last seen her, since I'd last slept next to her and felt her warm body next to mine. Each day without her had felt three times as long. In our brief time together, I'd gotten used to rushing out of the office so I could go home and put my arms around her, hear her take on the day and press my body against hers.

Without her, life was laborious and empty. I wanted her and there was no point in pretending otherwise. Gabriel had been right—I needed to tell her how much she meant to me. I had to be completely clear I'd done everything I could to get her back. She was far more important to me than the competition, and if I was prepared to work so hard for that, I was happy to work doubly hard for Hollie.

A black car pulled up in front of the hotel. "Mr. Daniels?" the driver asked me as he got out. He handed me the keys and I got in, putting the trophy Daniels & Co had won the night Hollie had left London on the passenger seat. I'd wanted to share it with her, even if the celebration was delayed.

As I punched the address into the satnav, it came up with a route and an

estimate of three hours and twelve minutes to arrival. When I got there, I didn't even know if she'd be in. But I'd wait. For as long as it took.

I pulled out into the traffic and began to rehearse what I wanted to say that I hadn't already perfected in the two weeks since she'd left and on the twelve-hour plane journey over here.

As I got out of town and onto a road that was simply numbered 84, I picked up speed. Driving in America wasn't like driving in Britain. The roads were almost empty, and the monotonous drive gave me time to think. To imagine what it would be like to see her again. I pressed my foot on the accelerator, focusing on my destination.

The steps leading up to Hollie's front door were dry because of the yellow awning. After I'd discovered neither Hollie nor her sister were home, I took a seat beneath it. From the top of the fifth step, I could get a better view of the road from the park entrance than I had from the car.

I checked my watch. It was a little after twelve. I could be waiting all day. I had no idea when she'd finish work, but at least I'd found the place. The guy on the gate had been more helpful than I'd been expecting and given me directions right to the door. So, my plan was to sit here until someone came home. It wasn't like I could turn up to her work, even if I did know where it was.

"Hey, there," an older woman wearing a blue housecoat called from the pavement. "You waiting for Hollie or Autumn?"

"Hollie," I replied, grateful for the confirmation I was in the right spot. "My name is Dexter. Do you know when she'll be back?"

Her face broke into a grin and she came closer. "I'm Mrs. Daugherty. You've got an accent on you. Where are you from?"

"England," I replied. "London."

"London? Do you know the queen?"

I stood and stepped down to meet her at the bottom. "I have met her a couple of times, actually, but I wouldn't say I know her."

"You've met her? What does she smell like?"

The first question I might have been prepared for, but being asked about

the scent of royalty was a new one for me. “I don’t remember a specific perfume but she was very charming.”

“Your accent is so pretty,” she said. “Can I get you anything? You’re welcome to come and wait inside. I could fix you a sandwich? You like bacon?”

“That’s terribly kind of you, but I’m going to wait here so I don’t miss her coming home.”

“They are lovely girls,” the lady said. “So polite. And the younger one’s at college, you know?” I nodded, glancing up the road to see if anyone with treacle-colored hair was coming toward us. “Did the queen go to college?” she asked.

“I don’t believe she did,” I said.

“Prince William did,” she said. “It’s where he met Kate Middleton. Although officially, she likes to be called Catherine, you know. They met at St Andrews University. They were studying the same thing until William changed to . . . geography,” she said, poking the air as she remembered. “I like the royals.”

“Did you say you knew when Hollie might be back?” I asked.

“Well I didn’t see her leave this morning, which must mean she’s on an early shift. So . . . she should be back around one unless she’s doing a double. But it’s a Friday so probably not. One, I’d say.”

I checked my phone. If this lady’s intel was right, Hollie should be back any minute.

“If you need anything I’m just there.” She pointed at a home a few doors up from Hollie’s.

“Thank you,” I called as she made her way toward a friend calling her over.

The two women chatted while shooting me glances. I kept my eyes fixed on the road into the park. Eventually, Mrs. Daugherty and her friend scurried off, leaving me in the rain and wondering if I was going to be able to convince my love to come back to me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Hollie

The hood of my jacket kept blowing off in the wind. I'd been planning on taking a shower when I got home, but I was getting one for free on my walk back instead. My hair was soaking and my shoulders ached. Pauly was right. Four double shifts in a week was too many. I couldn't wait to collapse into bed.

I pulled up my hood for the nine millionth time, angled my head into the wind to keep it from flying off and turned into the park.

I managed to get to our trailer without it flying off again. I started up the steps, flipping back my hood as I got under the awning and fell back a step when I saw there was someone waiting by our front door.

Not just any person.

Dexter.

"Hi," I said, because what else could you say when the man you were in love with appeared on your doorstep. I was rooted to the spot, unable to process Dexter Daniels against the backdrop of the Sunshine Trailer Park. He looked so out of place. It was as if everything else faded into a blur of gray, but Dexter was every color in the rainbow.

"Hey," he replied, reaching for my hand to pull me up the steps. How did Dexter manage to get sexier, even under the Oregon sky? And here I was soaking wet and aching after too many double shifts.

"You look beautiful."

I gave him one of my best don't-BS-me looks. What was he doing here? "You're a long way from home," I said.

He shrugged. “Maybe not. You’re here.”

My insides hurt I missed him so much. But he didn’t belong here.

I pulled out the keys from my jeans pocket. He’d flown five thousand miles, the least I could do was invite the guy in. The danger was I wouldn’t ever want him to leave.

“Thought you might want to know about this.” He reached down to the floor beside him and picked up a sleek, glass trophy.

I wanted to throw my arms around him. I was so proud. It was what he wanted most in the world and I’d wanted it so badly for him too. “You deserve it. And the entire team. I’m so happy for you.”

“I wish you could have been there.”

I sighed. I wished I could have been there too. Although it was wonderful to see Dexter—he was achingly familiar despite having only been in my life a few months—it was almost beyond painful. I’d hated walking out on him and not even getting a chance to say goodbye, but at least I hadn’t had to endure this. At least I hadn’t had to look in his eyes knowing it would be the last time.

“I had a speech prepared,” he said. “I think it got lost in the rain.”

“A speech?” I asked.

I didn’t need a speech from him. He deserved an apology from me. He’d emailed Autumn over and over and I’d told her not to reply. Although she must have ignored me at some point. How else would he have known where to find me?

“I’d rehearsed it. But now I can’t remember how it starts.” He stopped abruptly. “I let Autumn have my number and you didn’t call.”

Shame circled my chest. “I know. I’m sorry. Once I was back here, I couldn’t bear to look back. I thought a clean break would be easier.”

“Was it?”

I thought I’d go back to Oregon and be able to put London in a drawer. Away from real life. But it didn’t fit. I couldn’t hide it away, pretend it had never happened. “It was harder than anything I’ve ever done before.”

He sighed, his chest expanding and contracting, his nearness suddenly so much closer. I just had to stretch out my arm and slide my palm up against his cheek.

“Woohoo,” Mrs. Daugherty called from across the street.

“Hi, Mrs. Daugherty. I’ll catch up with you later,” I said, picking up my backpack. “You’d better come in.”

I unlocked the door and we went inside.

“What’s this?” he said, immediately honing in on the far wall of the trailer where Autumn and I had pinned up my making-it-back-to-London plan.

“My plan to come back to London.”

He turned to me, fixing me with a stare. “You were coming back? To me?”

Was I going back to Dexter? Or was it a plan to go after my dreams? Both, I decided. “It’s going to take months. Longer maybe. And I didn’t expect you to wait, I just—”

He stalked over to me and cupped my face in my hands. “You were coming back? Then why didn’t you call?”

I tried to push down the emotion swirling in my belly. I wanted everything but him to melt away, for the world to condense around just the two of us, existing someplace outside of reality. But that’s not how life went. I pulled away from him and he looked at me as if I’d lost my mind.

But it wasn’t my mind I’d lost.

This man had stolen my heart.

“I had things to figure out, Dexter. I didn’t—don’t expect you to wait for me. And hoping for you . . . Hope is something in short supply around here. I’d rather deal in facts and certainty.”

Dexter pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay, let’s get some facts on the table. If you want to be in London, why are you standing here in Oregon?”

Dexter made it sound so simple.

“I have to find somewhere for my parents to live. For Autumn and I to live. We have to leave the trailer park. It’s a long story but I’ll figure it out. It’s just going to take time.”

“That sounds simple enough. If it’s just money you need, I can help with that.”

I closed my eyes, wishing he wasn’t quite so near. Quite so generous. Quite so wonderful. “Dexter, I’ve got this.”

“But, Hollie, why can’t you let me help?”

My family wasn’t Dexter’s responsibility. He wasn’t a white knight, riding to my rescue, or even Richard Gere carrying Debra Winger out of a factory. This was real life. “I don’t need you to save me, Dexter.”

“I’m not trying to save you, Hollie. I know you’re perfectly capable of saving yourself. I’m trying to share my life with you.”

Warmth gathered in my heart at the thought that he still wanted me. The idea of sharing the rest of my life with Dexter . . . Well, it was more than I could imagine and certainly more than I deserved. “You think you’d want to wait? You know, until I figure out my plan?”

“I don’t want to wait a single second. I want to be with you night and day. I’ll do whatever it takes, but the plan is bullshit, Hollie.”

It looked more complicated than it actually was because of all the different colors. “It’s a good plan,” I said, defensive and sheepish at the same time.

“I know you don’t want to be rescued. I know it’s hard to rely on anyone because no one has proved reliable to you. But let me be the first person in your life who you can count on. Yes, you’re perfectly capable of saving yourself, Hollie. But you don’t have to. I’m here to help.”

It was as if I’d been trying to balance a week’s worth of groceries in my hands and someone had just fired off a shotgun, made me jump, and everything had come crashing to the ground. I couldn’t take anymore. I covered my face with my hands and turned to face the door in a futile attempt to stop him from seeing me cry.

“Hey,” he said, smoothing his hand across my back and gathering me in his arms. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He hadn’t upset me. I’d just let go of what I’d been holding onto for so long.

“Let me lighten your load,” he whispered as he held me. “Now I remember how my speech started out.”

I looked up at him, waiting for him to tell me.

“I love you, Hollie Lumen.”

I paused, wanting to say the words back. “That’s a short speech.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I forgot the next bit. But what I don’t have to remember, because it’s etched on my soul, is that I’ve never felt this way about anyone in my life. I miss everything about you. I hate waking up without you. I need to tell you every single thought in my head, and hear about every single thought in yours. I’m head over bloody heels in love with you.”

“I just need some time,” I said, my head spinning from the idea that Dexter Daniels could love me.

“I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” he said. “But that can’t start until we’ve figured out how we get you back to London. What good is

any of my money if I can't use it to help the woman I love?"

"I don't want your money, Dexter. It's not why I love you."

He pulled me so close I could feel his heartbeat against mine. "You love me?"

How could he doubt it? "I think I loved you from the moment I first saw you across the ballroom that first night."

He closed his eyes in a long blink like he was drinking down a glass of cool water after being lost in a desert. "We'll figure this out, Hollie. Your parents. Your sister. We'll do whatever it takes. Do you trust me?"

He'd flown halfway around the world to come and find me. And he hadn't slung me over his shoulder and demanded I get the first plane back to London. He loved me and I loved him and he wanted to help. How could I say no?

I reached up and clasped his face in my hands. "I love you so much. Will you marry me?"

He grinned. "Every day of the week and twice on Sunday."

I had the feeling it wouldn't be the last time that Dexter Daniels would do anything I asked of him. And that was only one of the reasons I loved him and would do anything he asked of me.

"I just need one more thing from you," I said.

"Name it," he asked.

"Kiss me?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Dexter

Three hours was a long drive when I'd won back the love of my life and all I wanted to do was strip her naked and bury myself in her. But I was a patient man.

"I thought you'd be staying at the Heathman," she said as she took in the hotel room I'd checked into yesterday.

"You want to move?" I thought the place was okay but if Hollie wanted something different, we'd check in somewhere else.

"No, I like this place—it's blingy. And it's big. Like twice as big as our trailer."

"You make it sound like you were living in a caravan." I set down her case and toed off my shoes.

"It has wheels, Dexter."

"Do you think you want to keep living in the flat or shall we move somewhere else? It might be nice to have a place that's been ours from the beginning."

She linked her finger into the waist of my trousers. "You are a sweet and thoughtful man."

"Shhh," I said, putting my finger to my lips. "Don't tell anyone."

"Secret's out. Everyone who knows you, loves you." She pulled out my shirt from my trousers and slid her smooth, warm hands up my torso. Christ, I'd missed her touching me. I'd missed holding her. I'd missed hearing her laugh, listening to her snore, watching her dress and undress.

"Promise me we won't be apart for this long again," I said, pulling at the

zip of her jeans.

“I promise. I don’t ever want to miss you like I did these last couple weeks.” Relief funneled into my chest at the thought that she’d missed me. She’d said she loved me. She’d even proposed, but I wanted more. I wanted her near me all the time. I didn’t want to miss out on a second, and I couldn’t imagine a time when I’d ever feel differently.

She pulled her hands from my chest and I shuddered at the loss of warmth. She fingered the hem of her top and then pulled it over her head, revealing that silky skin. “You want to eat first?” She blushed. “Not me. I mean like get room service or something?”

I chuckled. She was adorable. “First you. Then room service.” I picked her up and she wrapped her legs around my waist.

“When we’re back in London, I’m not going to let you leave our bed for a week.”

She pulled me closer. “*Our* bed?”

“Yeah. *Our* bed. And no more escaping to the guest room wardrobe if you want to make a call. We can convert a bedroom into an office for you.”

“You know how to turn a girl on.”

I set her down on the bed and unhooked the bra strap from her shoulder, dropping a kiss in its place.

“Oh baby, if you think that’s good, you’ve not seen anything yet.” I trailed my tongue over the globe of her breast and took her nipple in my mouth, first flicking it with my tongue and then catching it between my teeth and applying increasing pressure until she moaned. God, I’d missed her sounds. Her touch. Her everything. I never wanted to be without this woman.

“I like you like this,” I said. “Half-dressed because neither of us can wait.” I sank to my knees, opening her thighs and pulling her underwear to the side. I took a deep breath, taking in her perfectly sweet scent, and skimmed my hand up her stomach before I took my first taste.

Making Hollie happy, giving her pleasure, had overtaken everything to become my first priority. I couldn’t rest until this woman had everything she wanted, anything that would make her happy. We were going to stay in Oregon until we had her parents and Autumn relocated and then we were going back to London. Together.

Everything was perfect.

She groaned as I pressed my tongue on her clit and then delved into her folds, savoring the velvety warmth, letting her moans move through my body

like a roll of thunder. A twist of her hips signaled she was ready for more, but I wasn't sure my fingers were going to be enough. I hooked my thumbs into her underwear and stripped them off in one smooth movement.

"I want you," she whispered. "My entire life I won't want anything more than I want you inside me at this moment."

Blood surged to my cock and I struggled to my feet, my head fuzzy with lust and impatience. I wasn't done tasting her. I'd never be done tasting her. But I wanted to give her whatever she desired. "Flip over," I said, unbuttoning my shirt. If I had to look into her eyes as I pushed into her, I'd lose it. I pulled up her hips, getting her onto all fours. But seeing her like this was a sensory storm and my dick strained against the zip of my jeans. The way her breasts swayed as she shifted—the way her skin glistened like ice and her hair coiled around her body like ivy—was sheer perfection. Watching her was like taking a class-A drug. Too big a dose after enforced abstention could stop my heart.

I pressed a kiss at the base of her spine, the muscles of her back that created mountains either side of a ravine I wanted to lick dry. Smoothing my hands over her arse, she bucked. "Please," she cried, her fingers greedily grabbing the sheets as she arched her back. "Please Dexter. I can't wait any longer."

Nor could I. I stripped off my trousers and pants and placed a firm hand on her lower back, steadying her. I grasped my cock in the other hand and circled her entrance with the tip—just a hint of what was to come.

"Dexter. For the love of God, will you please fuck me."

"Shit," I said, shifting my hips away from her. "I forgot the condom." The blood pounded in my ears as I glanced around for my wallet.

She turned and sat up on the bed. "Do we need one?"

She was looking at me, her gaze heavy with questions. We were talking about more than condoms.

"I haven't been with anyone but you," she said. "Not since we met. But if you have . . ." Her voice wavered at the end.

"Of course I haven't," I said, crawling over her, onto the bed. "There's been no one since we met." And no one of any importance before her, I understood now. "If you don't want to use condoms, then that's fine."

"You don't want to know if I'm on the pill?"

I shrugged. "What's the worst that could happen?"

She grinned. "Oh, I don't know. You could knock me up."

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” I said quietly, the confession formulating in my head at the same time as it appeared on my lips. “I’d like to have children with you.” I’d never thought of having a family. I’d been so focused on my business, and I’d just assumed that kind of life—a family life—had been out of my reach since Bridget left me. But with Hollie, it was possible again, maybe for the first time. I wanted us to build a life together—to bring new life into the world.

She pushed her fingers into my hair and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “I’d like to have a family with you too. But not yet. I’ll stay on the pill for awhile yet. That okay with you?”

Everything was okay as long as I was with Hollie. Storms could rage, frogs could fall from the sky and Daniels & Co could go down—nothing mattered except being with her. Everything else was white noise.

“But we can practice in the meantime?” I asked, tangling my legs with hers and bending to scrape my teeth over her collarbone. I wanted to map out her body with my mouth. I wouldn’t rest unless I knew every centimeter in the dark with just a lick of my tongue.

She pulled her legs up, pressing my cock against her clit. “Well you *are* a perfectionist, and practice makes perfect.” Her fingertips trailed up my sides and then around to my back, then slid behind and up over my shoulders. I didn’t know what it was about that movement that made it feel like such an intimate act of familiarity—as if I was a part of her, and she’d been absentmindedly touching herself. It floored me. It struck me that I wasn’t on my own anymore. For the first time ever, I had someone in my life who was part of my soul. Someone who would be with me forever.

“We’re going to have the most perfect children because we’re going to be doing a lot of practicing.” My life was perfect in that second and would be every moment I was with Hollie. I couldn’t want anything more.

I pressed up on my hands, driving my cock into her as she whimpered for more. I had to block out everything but the very second I was in. If I thought about how she’d proposed or how she was going to be mine forever, how I’d get to touch her and hold her for the rest of my life—if I thought about anything but that very moment, it would be too much for me to bear. I just needed to focus on the pressure of her heat. On the drag of my dick as it pulled out and then slammed in, deeper this time. I just needed to press my lips to the dip at the base of her neck, eliciting a groan as I licked up to her ear. Then everything in the world was how it should be.

I felt like a clumsy teenager where everything was a new experience and you didn't want to wait, didn't want to hold back. I grabbed her hands and pressed them over her head, and she smiled at me. "I love you," she said.

Would I ever get tired of hearing those words from her? For a split second, I was catapulted into the future, both of us gray and slow, wild horses still galloping across my chest every time I heard those words from her lips.

"I want you every way," she said. "I want you in my mouth and my pussy at the same time. I'm greedy for you."

Lust fizzled up my spine like the fuse on a stick of dynamite. The feeling was entirely mutual. For now, she'd have to wait for my dick in her mouth. My tongue would have to satisfy her. I kept thrusting trying to get closer and closer to her as sweat coated my skin like I was running a marathon. She twisted her hips, bucking beneath me, and a groan roared up through my chest and echoed through the room. I fucking loved fucking this woman. And I fucking loved her.

"Dexter," she called out, pulling me closer as my head fell to her neck.

"Hollie," I gasped, feeling my climax spiraling and twisting in my body, trying to break free.

She pulsed around me and sucked in a breath, her eyes open and on me as she came. The look of fulfilment in those green-blue eyes was all it took to sever the last delicate strands of my desire, and I pushed in one more time, pouring myself into her and collapsing over her.

"I love you," she said, pulling me closer as I tried to move off her.

"I love you too," I said, moving to the side. "Will you marry me?"

She sat up with a jolt. "I asked you already."

"I know but that can't be *the* proposal. To be fair, the perfect proposal isn't when we've just had sex. Even though it was mind-blowing. We need something we're going to be able to tell our grandchildren about."

"Okay, I'll think of something."

"Hollie," I said, my tone warning. "I love you. And I know you are fiercely independent because you've had to be your entire life, but let me have this, will you? Let me figure out how I'm going to propose, make a ring and surprise you, okay?"

She rolled her lips back. "Relationships are supposed to be two way, Dexter. You should know, because you're the one who taught me."

What Hollie had yet to realize was that just being with me, just choosing to exist in my orbit, was more than I could have ever hoped for. "I want to

give you the world, Hollie. But I'll settle for the proposal, for now."

She wasn't just a prize but a jewel, the most precious creation I'd ever held. I'd spend a lifetime protecting her, looking after her and trying to give her half of what she gave me.

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Dexter

A year ago, I would have thought the idea of Daniels & Co hosting a party in London, let alone opening a store in Knightsbridge, completely ridiculous. As I glanced up and saw Hollie coming toward me, it was clear to me that this one-woman whirlwind had altered the entire course of my existence. If she'd never been at that launch party and I hadn't noticed her enjoying my parents' jewelry, my life would be very different.

I wouldn't be opening my London showroom.

My brother wouldn't be here to celebrate with me.

And I wouldn't have an engagement ring in my pocket.

But how could I have not noticed her? In a roomful of priceless jewels, she outshone them all.

We had thirty minutes until the start of the party, and I'd convinced my family to be here early. I was just waiting on the final stragglers.

"Well done, the place looks incredible," my brother said, tipping his head back to take in the glass-domed roof of the triple height ceilings. My mission when it had come to this place was to communicate calm and relaxation. The carpet was a deep, lush cream, the furniture classic and sophisticated, and the jewelry was displayed in the walls, as if it were the art in an expensive drawing room. "Mum and Dad would be so proud of you."

"They certainly would," Primrose said. "They'd be very proud of both of

you.”

I swallowed down my ever-fresh grief and nodded. “Thanks. I’m just grateful they gave me this passion.” The only thing wrong with this evening was their absence.

“But you put in the hard work,” David said. “This is all you, Dexter.”

The hard work opening the London store hadn’t been physical, it had been emotional. Getting to the point where I felt comfortable opening in this city had taken years and longer than it should have done.

“Did you show David the cabinet?” Primrose asked.

I guided my brother over to the middle of the room, where there was a large, waist height, mahogany display cabinet lined in black velvet that was the centerpiece of the store. “Do you remember this?” I asked, pointing at the brass plate screwed into the back of the case. Both the case and the plaque were a replica of the original that had been in our parents’ shop.

“Is this from their shop?”

“No, I had it made. But I wanted to honor them, you know?”

Hollie’s familiar hands slid around my waist as she came to stand by my side. “You do that every day by being the man you are,” she said.

“You’re biased,” I replied.

“She’s right,” my brother said. “But I like this too,” he said, brushing his fingers over the brass. “It’s a nice touch.”

“They’re with me in everything I do.”

My brother nodded, blinking back the tears. In his eyes, I saw sadness that my parents weren’t here, regret that he and I hadn’t reconciled sooner, and disbelief at the passing of so much time. It all stuck in my throat too.

“Here’s the rest of your crew,” Hollie said, glancing over to the door where Joshua, Andrew, Gabriel and Tristan made an entrance. Beck and Stella had already arrived and knowing Beck, by now he’d have convinced Stella she needed another piece of jewelry.

“Thanks for coming,” I said as my friends all approached, each of them pulling me into a hug.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Tristan said.

“Right,” I said. “Now that everyone’s here.” I slipped my hand into Hollie’s and led her to the top of the three stairs that led to the private rooms and overlooked the rest of the shop.

“Are you making a speech?” she asked.

“I think I should, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.” She twisted her hand out of mine. “But I don’t need to come with you. This is your moment.”

“Not a chance.” I scooped up her arm. “You’re the reason I’m standing here with so many people I love. You’re staying with me.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I started. Gabriel had asked me if I was nervous and I had to answer no. He’d said when he’d proposed to his wife, he’d shaken like he was jelly. But it wasn’t like she was going to say no. She loved me. I loved her. It was that simple.

“You’re all here to help me celebrate the opening of the first Daniels & Co London store.”

“Finally,” someone shouted out. “About time,” another person commented.

“I think you’ll agree we’ve found a great space. It doesn’t hurt that it’s a five-minute commute on foot from where we live. Not that that influenced my decision at all.” Hollie and I had found a perfect home on Montpelier Square, which meant I was close to the office and to the new store. I’d insisted that we convert the entire top floor to a studio for Hollie. She’d decided she enjoyed being her own boss and wanted to produce her own line, so she worked on that while I went to the office. I kept trying to invest in her but she insisted on using my contacts but not my wallet. She still didn’t get that everything I had was hers.

“But the reason we’re here is because of the woman standing next to me,” I said.

“Dexter,” Hollie whined. She hated to have the spotlight shone on her but she deserved it—tonight and every night.

“Hollie Lumen, you captivated me from the first moment I saw you and you continue to make my world a better place every moment you’re in it. You’re the most thoughtful, giving, generous, wonderful woman. And I am very grateful that you put up with me.

“The first time we spoke, I interrupted as you were mesmerized by a ring my mother designed and my father made. And I’m pretty sure you were wondering whether it would suit you.”

Hollie widened her eyes. “I was not!”

I grinned at her and pulled out the black ring box from my pocket. “I suggest you try it on to be sure.”

Hollie’s mouth opened like it did when I caught her checking me out coming out of the shower, which I positively encouraged.

“This is for me?”

It turned out the queen of Finland was sentimental. And when I’d met her to present the princess with her wedding jewelry and told them both about my parents, they had offered me the ring. I’d insisted on making a substantial donation to their foundation in return, but whatever I’d paid wasn’t enough for the look on Hollie’s face now.

I didn’t take my eyes off her as I opened the box.

“Will you marry me?” we both said at the same time.

The crowd dissolved into laughter.

“Dexter,” she said. “It’s so beautiful.”

Hollie’s eyes and the emerald, princess-cut solitaire were a perfect match as I knew they would be. That ocean-deep green with hints of blue was as ethereal as the northern lights, as unique as Hollie Lumen.

I took the ring from the box and slid it onto her ring finger. A few months ago, she would never have accepted jewelry from me, let alone anything so beautiful. She kept saying that I’d changed her but she’d completely upended who I was.

“All I can do is try to make you happy. And if I succeed, it still won’t be enough because you’ve made me a better man.”

“You’re perfect to me already,” she said. “I love you so much.” She looped her arms around my neck and pressed her lips against mine.

“Is that a yes?” I asked.

“That’s a yes. In American.”

Hollie

I pressed cancel on my phone. “It’s impossible. I couldn’t have just had that call.”

A knock on the door of my office interrupted the conversation I was having with myself.

“You don’t have to knock,” I called out. Dexter insisted on knocking every time he came up here, even though I’d told him repeatedly he didn’t have to. We’d gotten rid of all the walls on the top floor of our four-story house and it was one enormous studio. Dexter had bought me a computer with all the best software for jewelry design, and he’d put me in touch with people who could fabricate my designs so that I could then sell. It took years to perfect the engineering and craftsmanship and that wasn’t where my

passion lay, so I'd decided to concentrate on designing. If I got a chance to expand, I'd eventually employ someone who could manufacture the designs in-house. Dexter told me I had an eye for what worked, and given I'd never known him to tell a lie, I was prepared to believe him, even if I didn't have the confidence in me that he did.

"Do you know a Clarissa Michaels?" I asked, wondering if Dexter was behind the phone call I'd just received.

"Doesn't ring a bell," he said, stalking toward me, his hair a little ruffled but his starched white collar revealing the most edible neck. "Should I know her?"

"I thought you might. She's the fashion editor of *Vogue* in the UK," I said, trying to sound casual.

"Why would I know—never mind, why are you asking?" he asked, flopping on the small gray couch under the window.

"She just called me." I spun in my chair to face him. "I wondered if you'd mentioned me to her."

"Well I didn't. Did she say I had?"

"No, she said someone had given her one of my bracelets for a birthday present and she loved it. She wanted to talk about me supplying them for a couple of photo shoots."

"In *Vogue*?"

I slid off my seat and went to join him. "Yeah. Is that even possible?"

"Sounds like the kind of advertising money can't buy." He reached out his arms to me.

"Right. And I've only put out those twelve pieces."

"But they're beautiful, Hollie."

I beamed and took a seat next to him, hooking my legs over his while he draped his arm around me.

"You've clearly caught people's attention, which I told you would happen."

London was definitely some magical fairyland where everything that happened was almost unbelievable, it was so amazing. "I can't believe it," I said, giving way to a shy grin.

"Well, I can," Dexter said, shifting to pull me onto his lap just as the doorbell rang.

"That will be Gabriel," I said.

Dexter glanced at his watch. "He's always right on time."

“He’s making the most out of the babysitter.”

Dexter chuckled. “Speaking of which—”

“I booked in to see the gynecologist a week on Wednesday.”

“Who would have thought the word *gynecologist* would make me want to bang my fiancée?”

I sprang to my feet and hauled Dexter up after me. “Come on. It’s bad enough we have a chef for nights like these. The least we can do is show up and say hi to our guests.”

We rarely took the elevator, although Dexter had insisted on buying a house with one. He said we’d need one when we had kids. But we used it now to go down the four floors to the kitchen.

“Gabriel,” I cried, pulling him into a hug. “Thanks for coming.” We were having the gang around for a “casual Friday supper” as Dexter referred to it. To me that meant a bowl of Cheerios and a night in front of *America’s Got Talent*, rather than a seated dinner for ten with a private chef and a server. I was still getting used to life with Dexter. At least no one was dressing up.

“Did I tell you Autumn is coming over next month?” I said to Gabriel while Dexter answered the door to the next arrivals.

“Really?” he asked. I could have sworn I saw a hint of pink in his cheeks. She’d never mentioned anything but there was definitely something between them when they’d met during her birthday visit.

“She’s on a graduate trainee program that has international assignments. She’s going to spend six months here.”

“That’s great,” he said, nodding. “She’s staying with you guys?”

“I nodded. How sweet is my fiancée to have her here?”

Dexter’s arms came from nowhere to circle my waist. “She’s family. Of course she should stay with us.”

I greeted Beck and Stella and noticed that Stella was wearing the earrings I gave her. They looked beautiful on her. I was still getting used to people actually wearing my jewelry; the thought that *Vogue* might be featuring me was just surreal.

“We should get married while she’s here,” I said.

“If that’s what you want,” Dexter said. “But we can get her a plane ticket over anytime. And your parents.”

“I just want it low key. Like, you and me and, you know, your gang—”

“That better include me,” Stella said.

“You’re in the gang,” Beck said as he placed a kiss on Stella’s head.

“I don’t care how we do it as long as I get to marry you,” Dexter said.

“Bethany has said she wants to be a bridesmaid,” Gabriel said. “I’m warning you because she’s probably going to ask you. Don’t worry, I’ll be the one to shatter my four-year-old’s dreams. I seem to do it on a daily basis at the moment, so I’m well practiced.”

“Bethany’s part of the gang,” I said. “We can pick out a pretty dress and a posy,” I said. “It will be nice.”

I glanced up at Dexter to check he didn’t mind but he was just beaming at me.

“So, we’ll go to the Knightsbridge courthouse?” I suggested. “We’ll pick a Saturday and just have a casual supper back here?”

Dexter grinned at me. “You’re wonderful,” he said.

“What did I do?” I asked. Dexter seemed to find the wonderful in everything I did, and I was still getting used to being someone’s priority. I felt constantly spoiled by him—not just materially, but simply by getting to share my life with a man as special as Dexter. Married or not, it didn’t matter. He was the man who saw the light in everything, including me. There was no one else I wanted to spend forever with.

Keep reading for Gabriel’s story

MR. SMITHFIELD

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CHAPTER ONE

Autumn

He was a thirty-three-year-old single father of an adorable four-year-old, and just happened to be the only man I'd ever met who made my insides *actually* quiver when he looked at me. Where would he keep his spatulas?

I'd looked in every single drawer and cabinet in the kitchen and found nothing. All I wanted was an omelet. I'd been looking for about thirty minutes and had found Tupperware, an old Good Housekeeping recipe book from the seventies, and even what looked like a shrunken version of one of those tools to plane wood. But no freaking spatulas. Perhaps the British had a habit of storing vital kitchen equipment in their bathrooms or something? I pulled out my phone and called my sister. Hollie understood the British better than I did.

"Where do Brits keep their flippers?" I asked.

"Like diving equipment?" Hollie responded.

"Yes, Hollie, my stomach's rumbling, it's almost nine o'clock at night, and I'm searching the kitchen for diving equipment." I collapsed onto the soft, navy cushions that covered the long wooden bench that ran the length of the kitchen table. "I just want an omelet."

"Well first of all, they call that kind of spatula a fish slice," Hollie said in her typical no-nonsense tone.

I was pretty sure English was still the language of both England and the United States, but since moving to London a few weeks ago, sometimes I had to check out Wikipedia to make sure nothing had changed. Just being in the kitchen required a translator. I'd discovered that burners were *hobs*. Kitchen

counters were *work surfaces* or *sides*. Sides of what? According to a Google deep-dive I wasn't entirely proud of, a "side" could mean any raised, horizontal surface in any room—so precisely not a *side* of anything. And now spatulas were fish slices. "What if I don't want to prepare fish with it? Or slice anything?"

I could almost hear Hollie shrug. "Still a fish slice."

"Well, do you know where I might find . . . *that* in an average kitchen?"

"As far as I'm aware, they keep them in the same place as Americans do. Kitchen, drawer, pot on the counter—that kind of thing."

Maybe Gabriel didn't have kitchen utensils, or maybe he hid them behind that locked door at the back of the kitchen. It was the only room in the house outside of the bathrooms that had a lock on it. Gabriel's clear, unspoken message to me, the hired help, was *Do Not Enter*. And therefore, of course, I desperately wanted to get inside.

"Are you okay?" Hollie asked.

"Well, I'm a little hungry," I said, standing and heading to the fridge. Omelets were off the menu, so I'd have to find something else.

"Gabriel's still at work?"

"Yes." No wonder he needed a live-in nanny for Bethany. He'd left the house just after six this morning and still wasn't back. Everyone had tried to convince me not to take this job. Even Gabriel had tried to discourage me by telling me he needed a nanny who would work long hours for the next few months, as he was going through a particularly busy stretch at work. I'd be working weekends and overnights, too. Still, I wasn't put off. How could I be? Bethany was adorable and Gabriel lived in a mansion that looked like it was something straight out of a Dickens novel, right in the center of London. I could never have afforded to live in Smithfield on a graduate paycheck. Which was another reason why my program being delayed until September wasn't the end of the world. This way, I'd get to enjoy London without the pressure of starting a career at the same time. It was a silver lining I didn't even have to squint to see.

At first it wasn't easy to see a bright side to my program being delayed by six months. The recession that started at the end of last year had thrown so many businesses into a tailspin, even the Fortune 500 company that was going to employ me. I'd been so excited to start, especially since the first assignment was in London. By now I'd thought I'd be having cocktails with my coworkers and laughing about photocopier jams, or whatever it was

people in offices laughed about at happy hour. I was supposed to have one foot on the career ladder, rather than one hand wiping a four-year-old bottom.

But taking care of Bethany was a job in London, period. And *any* job in London was bound to be more exciting than *every* job back in Oregon, especially since Hollie and her soon-to-be husband lived here. My sister wanted me to wait tables, be her assistant, or do basically anything other than move into Gabriel's house. But I had pediatric first aid training from summers as a lifeguard at the community pool, plus plenty of babysitting experience. This job came with rent-free accommodation, which meant I didn't need to rely on my sister at all. Hollie had been putting a roof over my head for twenty-three years, and I was desperate to set her free and stand on my own two feet.

Nannying wasn't my first choice, but it could have been a lot worse. I was in London. I wasn't relying on my sister. And my boss was as hot as holy hell. Life wasn't shaping up to be exactly what I'd planned, but it was good.

"Well, maybe you should have an early night," Hollie said.

"I need something to eat," I replied, pulling out ham and cheese from the refrigerator. Gabriel even paid for my food, so everything I earned I could save and spend on travelling next summer. I made a mental note to spend some of my paycheck on a spatula. "And anyway, I'm not tired."

"Of course you're tired. You've been running around after a four-year-old all day."

The truth was, nannying was hard work. I wasn't about to tell Hollie that—I didn't want her to worry. Bethany had an infectious giggle, loved to be tickled, and her curiosity knew no bounds . . . but she had the energy of a cocker spaniel on crack. At the end of every day, I felt like I'd been run over by a Mack truck.

"Gabriel will probably want you out of his hair when he comes in," Hollie said. She was trying to sound breezy, like she wasn't suggesting I keep as far away from Gabriel as possible. Even if I wanted to keep my distance—which I didn't—it was impossible. We lived under the same roof, and he was frequently the only other adult I saw throughout the day. "He'll have worked really hard and will want to decompress. But he'll be far too polite to say so. You should go to bed."

I glanced over at the locked door at the far end of the kitchen. Last night was my first night living with Gabriel and Bethany, and we were all still

learning each other's habits. When Gabriel had gotten home, he'd disappeared upstairs and changed out of his beautiful, navy blue suit—the one that made his green eyes light up like he was some kind of god. He'd looked so delicious. So powerful. So like a man who would kiss me out of my shoes. He'd returned in faded jeans that clung to his strong thighs and an old t-shirt that lifted up just slightly when he reached for a wine glass, so I got a glimmer of his muscular stomach. And the hole on the seam of the shoulder was begging for me to push my finger through and find out exactly how hot, how smooth, how touchable his skin was. I wanted to beg him never to wear anything else again. I'd felt my mouth go dry as I tried to find something to say to such a serious, commanding, beautiful man before he abruptly excused himself, and disappeared through that locked door without explanation.

Did he *decompress* behind that door?

And if so, what did decompressing involve when it came to a man like Gabriel Chase?

I could think of a few suggestions that didn't involve him wearing either the suit or the jeans. In fact, esteemed decompress-ologist Doctor Autumn Lumen suggested a shower for two and kissing the nanny for optimal relaxation.

"We should have a talk about Gabriel," Hollie said, her tone shifting when she realized I wasn't taking her trying-to-be-subtle bait. She was using her Sensible Sister voice—the same one she'd used when we'd talked about me dating Darren from Eagle Creek and Stuart from Portland. "He's a father and a very serious lawyer. And he's—"

"You know that we're not dating, right?"

"I know. But I also know that you just moved into his house and you're going to be around each other and—"

"You're worried that I'm going to seduce him and take advantage?" I wasn't quite sure what her problem was. I got it with Darren and Stuart. Back home, she'd been trying to protect me. She didn't want me ending up pregnant by some guy who would never amount to anything, which would lead to me dropping out of college and ruining my life. But I was different now. Gabriel was different. He'd already amounted to something. We were in London, not Oregon. And I was pretty sure I'd have to be having sex with him to get pregnant.

"Hardly. I'm not sure Gabriel ever does anything that he doesn't want to

do.”

Interesting. I hadn't seen that side of him yet, but I hadn't known him that long. I liked the idea that he had steel-like resolve.

“I'm just concerned because he's . . . you know . . . He's handsome.”
Putting it mildly, sis. “I'm concerned you might develop a crush.”

“Oh, don't worry, I can remove any ambiguity for you. My crush is fully developed. But that just means I'm human. I'm sure every woman in London has a crush on Gabriel Chase.”

Hollie laughed. “Okay, well that's probably true. I just don't want you to get into a situation you might regret.”

I sighed. “Look, Gabriel's not going to be interested in some chick from the wrong side of the tracks who's looking after his kid. I'm well aware of that.” I may have resisted changing into my favorite flannel pajamas, and lately my messy bun came with a side of mascara and blush, but I wasn't kidding myself. I wasn't a sophisticated woman of the world who wore five-inch pencil heels, smelled of expensive fragrance even when she wasn't wearing any, and had a weekly manicure at her favorite spa, like most of the women Gabriel was sure to encounter at his law firm. His gaze might light a fire in me that I needed a trip to the arctic to douse, but I wasn't stupid. I was the hired help. My crush was, and would remain, a one-sided fantasy.

Down the hall, the clunk of the three front door locks caught my attention.

My crush was home.

CHAPTER TWO

Autumn

The air shifted when Gabriel came through the door at night. He seemed to carry with him the grey drizzle of the April weather. The constant frown across his brow and the tense line of his mouth suggested a storm constantly raged inside him.

“Hello,” I called out. Last night and tonight, I’d spent the hours after Bethany had gone to bed unpacking, getting to know the layout of the house, and studying maps of London’s public transportation system.

“Good evening.” His voice was almost a growl, and it sent a sensuous shiver up my spine.

I spun around from where I was standing in the kitchen and came face-to-face with my deliciously handsome employer. I didn’t know how it was possible but every time I saw him, I wasn’t expecting him to be so tall. Or his jaw to be quite so sharp. Or his glossy, black curls quite so touchable. It was as if my memory couldn’t handle someone so attractive, so dialed it down until I was faced with reality again. Tonight his glare was a little more intense than usual. “What’s this noise?” he barked, shaking the ever-present London rain from his hair and then toeing off his shoes, which I found to be an adorable habit. Who couldn’t appreciate a man in a hand-made suit who didn’t like to wear shoes?

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by noise and then I realized he must be referring to my phone. I grabbed it and turned down the volume. “A musicals mash-up,” I said, wiggling my cell at him. “Sometimes I like to deep dive into the entire soundtrack but sometimes you just want to hear the greats. Am

I right?”

He tilted his head as if he was looking at an animal he didn't recognize in a zoo.

“Musicals,” I repeated. “You know, like *Showboat*. *West Side Story*. *The King and I*.” He still looked blank. There was only one thing for it. I had to sing. “*The hills are alive with the sound of music*’.” Surely that was the one musical everyone in the northern hemisphere had heard of?

He winced. “You're singing.”

“Of course I'm singing. Everyone should sing. *I feel pretty. Oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and bright*’.” I stopped partly because he didn't look amused but mainly because I couldn't sing a *West Side Story* song without dancing, and I'd learned from experience that I couldn't dance in socks on this floor without falling flat on my face. I shrugged. “I don't know what it is about that song, but I can't be anything but happy when I sing it. Musicals have that effect on people. You should try it.”

“I don't think so,” he said, moving toward the fridge. “And honestly, with your voice, I'm not sure *you* should be singing either.” He peered inside and then pulled out a beer.

“Well, that was rude. Granted, I'm no Idina Menzel, but few of us are.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” he said and set his beer onto the kitchen table while he shrugged off his jacket.

“Never mind,” I said, determined not to take offense at his terse manner and his less-than-favorable assessment of my singing ability. “Have you eaten? I was going to make myself an omelet. Can I fix you something?”

“I've got stuff to do.”

I glanced toward the locked door at the back of the kitchen. What was behind that door? A dungeon? A man-spa? Perhaps he was an amateur taxidermist. But why did he have to lock it? Was it to keep what was in there from getting out, or anyone else from getting in?

“So, Bethany had a wonderful day. We went to a sing-a-long, as it happens. Presumably, it's okay for your daughter to sing?”

“Well, yes, she's four. And she has rather a good voice, I think. For her age.” His eyes widened as if he was waiting for me to agree. The only time his manner lightened was when it came to Bethany. Just talking about her seemed to lift him out of his brooding darkness for a few minutes.

“I love her singing voice. It's delightful. And she has excellent rhythm. She's been invited for a play date with one of the kids from the class. Would

that be okay with you?" I asked.

"You'll be there with her?"

"Of course. I'd never leave her."

"Then yes, if you think she would enjoy it."

"And if we can fit it in. She has quite the schedule. We have swimming tomorrow. Gymnastics on Thursday. Music on Friday. And all this on top of pre-school. But from what I heard from the other nannies today, all the kids are scheduled like they're the Obamas."

He chuckled and I stared at him, fascinated. His smiles were rare and certainly, I'd never elicited one before. Perhaps he just needed to get to know me a little better and he'd warm up.

"I guess it's the same in New York," I said. "Or any big city with lots of pushy, successful parents." A far cry from Oregon, and my parents. They didn't even know if I was in school, let alone keeping up with any extracurricular activities that might have been offered. Which they weren't. There might have been a chess club active for a semester, but chess wasn't really my game. I'm pretty sure that if I'd gotten a job at the trailer park where we lived or in the factory where my sister used to work, they would have been as proud as Idina Menzel's parents when they watched *Wicked* for the first time. Or they might not have noticed at all.

Gabriel pulled open one of the cupboard doors and retrieved a bottle opener from where it was hanging on a rack inside the door.

"Spatulas!" I squealed, spotting the elusive flipper. "How did I not spot these here? You've got them hanging up like they're in a tool shed." Why didn't he just put them in a drawer or something? "You Brits."

"I never thought a fish slice could make someone so happy," he said, looking at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"It's always the little things that feed hope, Gabriel. Always the little things."

He scooped up the fish slice from its hook and held it out to me.

"Are you sure I can't fix you an omelet?" I asked, taking the implement. As my hand wrapped around the handle, our fingers brushed—and it was like a bolt of heat shot up my hand, warming my entire arm. I sucked in a breath.

It was just an accidental scrape of his fingers, but the touch was as intense as if he'd grabbed me and kissed me.

"Sorry," he mumbled. What was he apologizing for? He hadn't grabbed my boob or anything. He cleared his throat. "I must get on."

I glanced at the locked door. Back to stuffing bats or whatever it was he did in there. “If you’re busy, I’m happy to keep Bethany’s monitor.”

“Bethany will have you running around and playing hide-and-seek, riding her bike, and taking her to the park tomorrow. Don’t burn yourself out.”

I flexed a bicep. “I can handle her.” I winced. “I think.”

He pulled out a single key from his pocket and slipped it into the lock. A moment later, he disappeared behind the closed door, shutting the entire world—and me—out.

CHAPTER THREE

Gabriel

A crash downstairs drew my attention to the clock on my computer. Shit. Seven thirty. I'd been on this video call for two and a half hours and it was a Sunday morning.

"I'm going to have to go," I said. I'd mentioned having to ring off before seven when I answered the call at just after five. But as usual, Mike Green, my biggest client, liked to push boundaries.

"We're just making progress," Mike said. "I think if we keep going, we can have this deal hammered out by noon your time. You'll get the rest of the day."

"I have a four-year-old, Mike. I'll catch up with you tonight. Just don't engage those useless environmental analysts. I'll find someone else."

"Gabriel, they're the best in the business."

"They were four days late with the last report. They can't be trusted."

"Can you just give me a few more hours? We can get this done."

When I didn't respond, he sighed and gave me a disappointed nod of the head. He'd make me pay for this. People thought that when you made partner at a law firm, you were your own boss, but that was bollocks. Clients ruled my life in a way that other people's bosses made their lives hell. Mike was a dickhead. But he was a successful dickhead and headed up one of the few private equity houses that was still doing deals in this recession. Probably because he had nothing else to do.

I left the meeting and headed out of my office, toward the sound of the crash. Bethany woke between seven and seven thirty every morning like

clockwork, and although she normally just played in her bedroom until I came and got her, she may have wandered downstairs.

I walked into the kitchen and instead of seeing smashed crockery and four-year-old bare feet, I found Autumn at the hob, with Bethany sitting on a bar stool.

“Good morning,” I said, scrubbing my hands through my hair and then kissing my daughter on the head. “Can we turn that music down?” What was it with Autumn and musicals?

“We’re making pancakes,” Bethany announced as she continued to stir the mixture in the mixing bowl in front of her. “And singing.”

God help us all. Autumn sang like she was drowning in a pit of cats and Bethany was four, so naturally sounded like one of the said cats. The two of them together might be handy as a form of defense if we were fighting off the Taliban, but my eardrums wouldn’t survive another chorus of *Let it Go*.

I glanced at Autumn, wondering if she’d heard my request to turn down the music, and she beamed at me. I’d never known a person so happy all the time. I wasn’t sure if she was trying to impress me or if she was genuinely, thoroughly enjoying herself. Constantly.

“I picked up maple syrup and blueberries this week, so we’re giving it a try. Are you willing to be a guinea pig?” she asked. More smiles. It was seven thirty on a Sunday. What was there to be so happy about?

“Please, Daddy,” Bethany pleaded.

“Okay.” I had no defense against my daughter’s request. I picked up Autumn’s phone and silenced the incessant screeching, hoping to dissuade any amateur participation, and took a seat on the stool next to my daughter. I hoped Autumn’s cooking was a lot better than her vocal ability. “But I don’t expect you to have to cook Bethany breakfast. Or me for that matter. I know it’s a Sunday.”

“I was awake. And I’m cooking us all breakfast. I hope.” She winked. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had winked at me. It might have been the gardener we had when I was a child. These days, I was far too serious for anyone to wink at me.

Except Autumn, apparently.

“Here we go. Are you up for first taste, Bethany?” Autumn slid the first pancake onto a wooden plate. “Not too much syrup and lots of blueberries, please.”

“Hot!” Bethany said, staring at the piece of pancake on her fork and

giving it an ineffective blow.

Before Bethany had given her verdict, Autumn slid three pancakes onto my plate and handed me a knife and fork.

“Yummy!” Bethany declared. “Daddy, you eat.” She jabbed her finger at my plate.

“I’m out of objections,” I replied and took a mouthful.

“How are they?” Autumn asked.

I nodded, trying to match her enthusiasm. She’d accused me of being rude last night, and I didn’t have time to look for a new nanny if Autumn decided to throw in the towel. I’d been accused by more than one nanny of being hostile and unappreciative.

“Secret family recipe,” Autumn said as if she’d just served up a Michelin-starred dish.

“Daddy, bear soldiers today, ’member?” Bethany said.

“She’s been talking about soldiers non-stop,” Autumn said. “I’m a little concerned you’re signing her up to some kind of teddy bear army.”

“I’ve promised I’ll take her to the changing of the guard. She thinks the busbies they wear make them look like bears.”

Autumn swallowed a mouthful of pancake. “Changing of the guard? Like Christopher Robin and Alice?” Her face was plastered in sheer delight, like someone had just given her the moon. “Does that actually happen?”

“Of course it does,” I replied. Why would she think it wasn’t real?

“Can I come?” she asked, pouring more pancake batter into the frying pan. “That poem—” She shook her head as if it didn’t matter. “I heard it a lot growing up. I’d love to actually see how it all works. Does the Queen come out?”

I hadn’t expected company today. Weekends were for me and Bethany. I didn’t see my daughter much in the week, so I tried to make weekends count.

“Yes, Autumn, come! Please, Daddy!”

My daughter had me wrapped around her finger. And it wouldn’t hurt to be nice to Autumn so she wouldn’t leave me high and dry and without a nanny. Again. Work was manic at the moment and it was going to get worse over the next couple of months. Autumn was due to stay until the end of July, when all my clients went on holiday and I’d have time to find a new nanny. “Of course, Autumn is welcome, darling. But she might not want to come because we won’t see Her Majesty. Just a lot of busbies and tourists.”

Autumn shrugged, her eyes sparkling like sunshine hitting water. “I can’t

wait. What time do we need to leave?"

Instead of disappearing until it was time to go, Autumn pulled out Bethany's rucksack and started to pack.

"Here," she said, pulling out a laminated sheet. "I prepared a list of everything we need when we're going out for the day."

"You laminated a list?" It was strange having help at the weekend. It had been a long time since Bethany's mother had left.

She shrugged. "Of course. That way you don't forget anything. I have one for going to preschool, too. I find it's best to be prepared in life. It frees you up to deal with the unexpected."

I wasn't sure what she was talking about, and I was concerned if I asked her to explain, she'd just confuse me more.

Thirty minutes later, Autumn greeted the cabbie as we piled into the cab. "Thank you for taking us to the Palace." She did know he was getting paid, didn't she?

"Tip up. Tip up. Just like Paddington," Bethany sang to herself as she pulled down the tip-up seat and clambered on. I leaned to fix the seatbelt and my hand collided with Autumn's. A flash of energy chased up my arm and lit me up from my center, starting in my bollocks. Jesus. I thought when I handed her the spatula last night, the spark of electricity between us had been a fluke. Apparently not.

Autumn gasped as she pulled back her arm.

Had she felt that? It was like some kind of explosion.

"Are you okay?" I asked, not looking at her but finishing securing Bethany in place.

"Yes," she said, quieter than I was used to. She'd also felt something then.

Autumn was an attractive girl. I'd seen it the first time I'd ever laid eyes on her. I'd stopped noticing women after Penelope left, swearing myself to a life of celibacy. I wanted to focus only on the things that deserved my attention: my daughter, work, and the five men who were more my brothers than my friends. Autumn had interrupted that focus for a split second. But that's all it had been—a momentary intrusion. She'd been unmistakably striking and beautiful and a little haunting, and something in my physiology had reacted. But that moment had passed. Hadn't it?

By the time we pulled up on the Mall, I'd put our collision out of mind. Autumn likely had too, with all her chattering on to the cabbie. I was

surprised she hadn't been invited to the man's thirtieth wedding anniversary coming up next month. She'd made fast friends with him as she peppered him with questions about his celebrity passengers and near misses when it came to women almost giving birth on the back seat. Her sunny nature didn't appear to have been put on for my benefit. Or if it had, it was extended to the cabbie as well. She seemed genuinely happy. All. The. Time.

At least she hadn't broken out into song.

We stepped out of the cab onto the street, and I lifted Bethany onto my shoulders like we normally did. This time of year, the crowds wouldn't be too bad, but I wasn't taking any chances. Bethany was safe and also had the best view.

"Could there be anything more iconically British than going to see the changing of the guard in a black cab?" Autumn asked, her wide smile lighting up a very dull April morning.

"Bears!" Bethany said, pointing toward the palace.

"Let's go," I replied. "We need to get a good spot." There were just a few people here right now but within ten minutes, thousands would appear from nowhere like ants on ice cream.

I felt the vibration of my phone in my pocket before I heard it and my gut swirled like week-old gravy. I knew it would be Mike. I wanted to dump him as a client but with the economy in the ditch, he was the only person making sure I wasn't pushed out of the firm. I pulled the phone from my pocket, holding both of Bethany's legs with one hand. Even with my daughter's splayed hands across my forehead and one eye, I could make out that it was indeed Mike.

"Work?" Autumn asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I have one particularly demanding client. Doesn't have kids so doesn't get wanting to be away from the office."

"But, man, it's the weekend."

"Says the woman who's hanging out with her boss and her charge."

She laughed. "I suppose. But this is fun." She clapped her mitten-covered hands together and turned to Bethany. "I can see the bear soldiers!"

If she was having fun, she'd stay for her full term. Bethany seemed to like Autumn, and other than her love of musicals, she wasn't a terrible lodger. I was barely at home anyway and when I was, I spent most of the time in my workshop. For me, our arrangement was a perfect fit.

We got to the palace gates and huddled into one of the remaining slots in

front of the tall black railings surrounding the palace.

“Honestly, I’ve been waiting to see this since I was nine years old,” Autumn said.

“The changing of the guard?”

“Yes. And London. And the world,” she said, tilting her head back as far as she could, as if she was trying to make out Jupiter.

“You’ve always wanted to travel?” I asked.

“Always. And when Hollie got to come to Europe first, I knew I wouldn’t be far behind. I can’t wait to see the Colosseum. The Eiffel Tower. I want to go and watch the . . .” She made pincer movements with her fingers. “You know, in Seville.”

“Flamenco?” I suggested.

“Gah,” she replied, closing her eyes and inhaling as if she was breathing in a bouquet of summer flowers. “I can’t wait. I thought I’d have to wait for paid vacation but turns out not having my job start until next September means I can spend the whole of August travelling. Things have turned out for the best.”

“Poor gold lady. She can’t see,” Bethany said, interrupting my tumble of thoughts. She patted my head and pointed at the statue of victory on top of the Victoria memorial.

“No, darling, she’s looking in the wrong direction,” I replied.

“I think she’s making sure everyone is happy,” Autumn replied. “And I’m sure someone will show her photos.”

“Yes!” Bethany said. “The Queen.”

Sometimes I wondered what thoughts raced around Bethany’s head in between her random statements. Did she think the statue came alive when the people had gone, and Victory joined Her Majesty for tea and a giggle about the ceremony? Being a father was the most rewarding, confusing, challenging thing I’d ever done and despite Bethany’s mother leaving us, I’d do it all again exactly the same in a heartbeat. Bethany was a constant reminder that someone other than myself was at the center of everything I did. It was an important reminder—one that kept me focused and determined even in the face of nightmare clients like Mike.

“Spin,” Bethany demanded, and dutifully, I turned around three hundred and sixty degrees on the spot. Bethany tilted back as she always did when she was on my shoulders, and I tightened my grip on her ankles. “Again.” This time I went the other way twice. Soon I knew I’d been crouching down and

springing up and rocking my shoulders left and right like I was Bethany's own personal fairground ride. Anything to hear that giggle.

"You two are wonderful together," Autumn said, grinning up at us both.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned to find an older woman, pulling one of those baskets on wheels that elderly people transport their shopping in. "Excuse me for interrupting you, but I have to tell you that you three make a very good-looking family."

I couldn't have been more shocked if she'd told me I'd unknowingly come out in my boxers. I was lost for words. I glanced at Autumn, who I expected to interrupt and correct the woman, but she seemed to be studiously focused on the preparations behind the railings.

The woman looked up at Bethany. "You are going to turn out just as pretty as your mama."

She thought Autumn was my wife. That she was Bethany's mother. Couldn't she see I was far older than Autumn? That I was the man who signed her paychecks?

She patted me on my arm. "You have a beautiful family. Take care of them."

If only she knew.

I'd spent five years with Penelope trying to create a beautiful family. I was now certain there was no such thing. Apparently, I hadn't learned that lesson from my father. My ex-wife had to burn it on my soul.

I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Now I was determined to be the best father I could be to Bethany. That meant I lived my life with very exacting standards. I would be a role model for her. A provider for her. And most of all, I'd be her anchor—an unbreakable tether that would give her consistency and certainty. I knew what it felt like as a child when the ground was constantly shifting beneath you and you didn't know whether your parents would both be there when you woke up. Bethany's mother had cut herself loose, but that just made me bind myself more tightly to my daughter.

That meant no overnight trips for work, so I was always there if she woke in the night. It meant no women in my bed, since a relationship might confuse or hurt Bethany. And it meant I had to stop burning through nannies like stationery supplies. Whether she knew it or not, Autumn's place with us was a sure thing for as long as she was in London.

CHAPTER FOUR

Autumn

I wouldn't normally take so long to get ready for a Saturday night dinner with my sister. I certainly wouldn't have bought something new. But I was in London now. It felt like a fresh start even if I was in a kind of limbo until my real career started. Plus, Hollie ran in the kind of circles now where people's sneakers cost more than my entire closet. It might just be dinner with my sister, her husband, and some of their friends, but it was in Knightsbridge. The only person I knew who was richer than my future brother-in-law was my current boss, which meant dinner at Dex's warranted a new dress.

Especially because the aforementioned uber-wealthy boss would be in attendance.

It wasn't like I was trying to impress him exactly. But I suppose I did want Gabriel to think I was pretty—because I thought he was heart-stoppingly gorgeous. Yes, he was cold and standoffish when it was just him and me, but when I saw Gabriel with his daughter, I could see the man he was beyond the gruff exterior. And it made me melt like snow in the Sahara.

The dress I'd picked wasn't fancy. It was plain red jersey that hit just above the knee with a tie waist. As I turned in the mirror, I couldn't decide whether I should wear the slash neck off one shoulder or not. I'd decide on footwear first.

I owned four pairs of shoes and had brought them all to London. Flip flops—even if the weather was better, I couldn't wear those to a Knightsbridge dinner party—sneakers I might have gotten away with had they not been as scuffed, a pair of heels I got on sale for six dollars at

Century 21, and finally a pair of black knee-high boots I'd saved for three months to buy and had had for years, though they looked almost as good as new. I settled on the boots. If I wore the heels, my sister would think I was trying to impress someone. And she'd think that someone was Gabriel. And it would become *a thing*.

"Are you ready?" Gabriel called up the stairs. Even though we were only going together because he was one of Dexter's best friends and not because he was my date, his question triggered a ripple of excitement deep in my belly. Like my body thought he was my boyfriend, even if the reality was I'd barely seen him since we'd watched the changing of the guard nearly two weeks ago. He had softened that day. Now he was back to being in a perpetually bad mood. Warm, friendly Gabriel was reserved for whenever Bethany was around. Even when he hid that part of him away, I knew it was there. And I wanted to know why it was buried so deep.

"Coming," I replied, picking up the wrist wallet Hollie had bought me for Christmas.

As I got to the bottom of the stairs, I waited while Gabriel finished giving instructions to the sitter.

"I should be babysitting," I said as Gabriel closed the front door behind us.

"No," he said in a way that left no room for argument. "You should be having dinner with your sister. It's Saturday night."

"But nannies are supposed to do babysitting and we agreed that—"

Gabriel opened the door to the cab waiting at the curb.

"You do plenty of babysitting," he said as he took a seat next to me, scanning my dress. I followed his gaze as it rested on the slit up the side of my thigh. God, was it inappropriate? I'd had dinner with Hollie, Dexter, and their friends before, and thought I'd chosen well. Was my choice of outfit totally off-base?

"The dress is new. I thought it would be okay for tonight," I said, almost embarrassed at his apparent disapproval. What did I know about London dress codes? I grew up in a trailer park. Paper napkins with printed designs were fancy to me.

He kind of growled before he looked away. "You look beautiful," he mumbled to the window.

I tried to bite back my smile. Rather than disapproving of my outfit, had he been checking me out? Heat pooled between my thighs and I swore I

could feel the warmth of his body across the foot of space between us in the cab.

“Thank you,” I whispered, half breathless from joy at being thought beautiful by a man like Gabriel, and half wondering why he looked so pained to give the compliment. Was it difficult for him to be nice to anyone but Bethany?

He sighed and shook his head like the words tortured him.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Fine,” he replied, still fixated on the view outside the window. “I shouldn’t have said it. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not offended,” I said. “It’s nice to get a compliment. Especially from you.”

“*Especially* from me?” He glanced at me and then back to the window, as if he were trying not to look at me.

Especially from someone so impossibly handsome. Someone so worldly, so clever and caring and careful. Someone I had a huge crush on. “Yes,” I replied, simply. He must know that every woman within a mile radius had a crush on him. I was no one special.

“How was Bethany yesterday?” he asked, his tone changed as if he’d been sleep talking and had just woken up.

“She’s adorable. I took her swimming, like I said. She loves the water.” I didn’t mention that I thought there should have been a lifeguard on duty even though there had been two instructors. I knew I could be overcautious about stuff like that because of my lifeguard training, and I didn’t want him to worry.

“I took her to Greece last summer and she just wanted to be in the pool the entire time.”

“Greece?” I asked, imagining whitewashed villas and bright pink flowers contrasting perfectly with the blue of the sea. “I’ve always wanted to go. Is it wonderful?”

“We didn’t see much of it outside the pool. I thought you said you wanted to go to Paris and Rome.”

“I do,” I said. “Greece too. I want to feel the Mediterranean breeze through my hair and white sand between my toes, not just have *Mamma Mia* as my point of reference. Same goes for Paris.”

“Let me guess . . . *An American Werewolf in Paris* is your current point of reference?”

Had Gabriel Chase just made a joke? I felt honored.

I grinned in silent victory. “I was thinking more *Moulin Rouge*.”

“Never seen it.”

“Stop. You’ve never seen *Moulin Rouge*? It’s non-stop Baz Luhrmann genius. Like, it could be my favorite of all time. And *Mamma Mia* is a musical as well, if you didn’t know.”

“Yeah, never seen that either.”

I wanted to reach for him, turn his face in my direction so I could see his expression and know he wasn’t joking. *Surely* he was teasing me. The entire world had seen *Mamma Mia*. I shuffled forward in my seat to see as much of his face as I could. “Holy shit, Gabriel.”

He turned to me, his broad shoulders taking up half the width of the seat. “Is it a federal offense in America not to like musicals?”

“Absolutely,” I said, incredulous. “I see I’m going to have to broaden your horizons. One night when you’re not back too late, I’ll begin your musicals education. Oh God—”

“What?” he said, glancing ahead of us as if I’d spotted something.

“Are you telling me you’ve deprived Bethany too?”

He rolled his eyes. “I think she watched *Mary Poppins* with her last nanny. Or it could have been *The Wizard of Oz*.”

I snorted. “Amateur stuff. She’s *four*, Gabriel. *Four*. She should have seen *Singin’ in the Rain* by now. And *An American in Paris* and—”

Gabriel’s frown softened, his shoulders seemed to lower, and he looked at me. Really looked at me, as if he were trying to read my instructions or something. Was I so odd to him?

“I have work to do,” I continued, grinning to myself. “Leave it to me and I’ll make sure Bethany isn’t forever deprived.”

“If you say so,” Gabriel said, back to his crotchety self.

I tapped the side of my nose just as the cab pulled up in front of Hollie and Dexter’s house. Before we were out of the cab, Hollie had opened the door, a grinning Dexter behind her.

“It’s so nice to have you here.” She pulled me in for a hug and squeezed so tight I was concerned she cracked a rib. “Hey,” she said, releasing me and looking me up and down. “I like your dress.” She paused while Gabriel kissed her on the cheek and followed Dexter inside. “Are you trying to impress someone?” She had moved on from Sensible Sister voice and was now firmly in Concerned Older Sibling mode. Previously, I’d confidently

been able to tell her that despite my crush on Gabriel, nothing would ever happen. I wasn't in his league, and he didn't seem like the type to tumble the hired help. Given his demeanor whenever I was around, I was sure he barely noticed me. Until tonight.

Tonight? He'd definitely noticed my dress. And he definitely told me I looked beautiful. But he also looked like it had been painful to admit. What was going on in that big brain of his?

"It was on sale at Uniqlo, Hollie." I sighed.

"Sorry. You look beautiful. You've always been able to make anything look like it cost a hundred times what it did. I just expected you in jeans. That's all."

"Maybe I'm reinventing myself," I replied. "Can I come in now? I'm cold."

"Yes. Come and help me get drinks. All the boys are here and they're on whiskey—well, apart from Beck. What can I get you?"

"What've you got?"

She shrugged. "Dexter brought up some champagne," she said, her eyes twinkling conspiratorially.

"Who from the Sunshine Trailer Park would believe this is our life?" I linked my arm through hers as we headed to the kitchen.

"I know. It's like I'm engaged to royalty or something."

"Dexter doesn't have a stick up his ass like most of the royals do." I glanced to where Dexter and Gabriel and their friends sat by the fire. Gabriel sat back, his arm resting on the back of the couch as Tristan, the most gregarious of the bunch, made hand gestures that looked like he was describing a bomb going off. Gabriel looked so calm. So in control. As if he was taking everything in and not letting anything of himself out.

"How's it going?" Hollie asked as she pulled out a bottle of champagne from the ice bucket on the linen-clothed table set up with drinks. "With Bethany."

"Good." It was always the answer I gave her when she asked me about college, too. Even when things weren't exactly going to plan, an all-encompassing "good" accompanied by a smile seemed to stop her worrying. "Bethany's lovely. And I've been getting to see more of London as we go to her different classes and groups. We're going to the Barbican on Monday. Although, I'm not entirely sure what it is. Someone said a theatre and another person said it's a library, but people live there? Apparently, kids love it.

Sounds weird but—”

“Who gave you that idea? Gabriel?” Hollie pushed the first filled glass toward me.

“No, one of the other nannies from Bethany’s nursery.”

“Do you see much of each other?” She held up her glass and I clinked mine to hers. “You and Gabriel, I mean.” My sister’s subtlety hadn’t improved since the last time she’d warned me about her fiancé’s best friend.

“Not really. He works a lot. But we message each other about Bethany.” That was true, but it was also true that it *felt* like I saw a lot of him. Everywhere I turned in the house, I was confronted by some little piece of him. The inexplicably passionate literature beside his bed. His pictures from school and university. His cologne that stayed in the air long after he’d left, and smelled as moody and complex as the man himself. Every reminder of him was a morsel of temptation that made me hungry for more. The small snippets of him in person left me famished. I’d make sure I had a great view when he reached up to get something from the kitchen cupboard. Or when he bent down to scoop up his briefcase. And the way his voice was almost a growl still made me shudder. I collected all the pieces of him and put them together in my imagination. In the dark of my bedroom. Under my sheets. It was Gabriel I thought of when I touched myself.

“That’s good,” Hollie said, taking a sip of her drink and pretending she wasn’t fishing for information.

“Is it?” I loved my sister. She’d provided a future for me that I couldn’t have dreamt about without her sacrifices, but sometimes she needed to back off and not worry about me so much. And if I wanted to fantasize about a man like Gabriel, that was my prerogative.

“You know, it’s good that you’re not in each other’s pockets.”

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about.”

“With your job being postponed and you having to be a nanny and everything, I don’t want you to have any more disappointment. I just want everything to work out.”

I grabbed her hand. “It will. It always does. We make lemonade out of lemons. That’s what the Lumen sisters do.” There was no point in focusing on the bad that had been or could be. Whatever was coming would come whether or not I worried about it first. Better to make the most of the good stuff in between, so the not-so-good stuff would be slightly more manageable. I placed a kiss on her cheek and took a sip of my champagne,

wanting to change the subject. “Although I’d take this over lemonade every day of the week.”

Hollie might have been taking care of me for her whole life, but I could take care of myself now. And a crush on my boss wasn’t the worst thing that was ever going to happen to me. I didn’t have to tell her that I was pretty sure he’d been checking me out earlier. It had been a momentary chink in his armor that would have healed over by now.

“So, have you assigned seating?” I asked, sure that she would have placed Gabriel and me at opposite ends of the table.

“No.” She glanced at her watch. “We should take a seat. That way Howard won’t get irritated.”

“Howard?”

Hollie winced. “The chef. Dexter insisted we take him full time.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. The idea that my sister now employed a full-time chef, when growing up we worried about having enough food to eat, was so bizarre.

“I know. I’ve told Dexter it’s completely ridiculous.” We wandered toward the dining table, which was beautifully set with endless sparkling flatware and about six glasses per place setting. It looked like there would be a lot of washing dishes after we’d left. Presumably Dexter insisted on someone taking care of that, too.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed. I think it’s amazing that you don’t have to worry about cooking, let alone whether you’re going to be able to make twenty dollars buy a week’s worth of groceries for both of us. Are these flowers real?” I asked, bending to take in the scent of the peonies arranged in mini goldfish bowls dotted about the table. Yup, they were real.

“It’s a different life, that’s for sure,” she said.

It was an easier life. One with less expectation of disaster hiding around every corner. And I couldn’t have wished anything better for my sister.

Hollie took a seat at the head of the table and I sat on a chair right at the other end. This was a close-knit group of friends, and I didn’t want to just crash into the middle of everything.

Gabriel and Dexter were the next to the table. Dexter took a seat next to my sister and to my surprise, Gabriel sat next to me.

“You okay?” he asked in a half whisper, his gaze only meeting mine for less than a second.

Goosebumps scattered across my body like dropped change onto marble.

To an outsider, it was such a barren question, but from Gabriel? To me?

It was all intimacy.

All I could do was nod. How could I be anything but okay? He was sitting next to me.

The spell was broken as the rest of Dexter and Hollie's friends took seats around the table and a waiter came around with wine. At least *he* knew which glass he was using, because that was at least three levels above my paygrade.

As the evening went on, the waiter in charge of the wine managed to use each of the six glasses. My glasses—and Gabriel's—were the only ones that remained mostly untouched.

"You're not drinking," he said, without looking at me. It was the first time he'd spoken to me since he'd first sat down.

"*You're* not drinking," I replied. The rest of the table seemed oblivious to our conversation as they continued to banter and laugh.

"I have Bethany to think about," he said, still staring straight ahead. "You're off the clock. You should be able to enjoy your evening with friends."

My evening with friends? Is that what this was? I didn't really know anyone around this table other than my sister. "Are we friends, Gabriel?"

His chest expanded as he pulled in a breath, and as he exhaled, he pressed his thigh against mine and left it there. This was no casual brush of hands or inadvertent nudge of my knee. He was pressing his body against mine in answer to my question. And it was as erotic as if he was trailing his tongue over my breasts. My breathing grew shallow, my pulse drummed in my wrists, and the heat rose in my cheeks like he'd worked his fingers into my underwear.

I couldn't control my body's reaction to him when we were both fully clothed. What would become of me if Gabriel Chase and I were ever naked together?

CHAPTER FIVE

Gabriel

I rehearsed the conversation I'd have with Mike in my head as I sat in the back of the cab heading home. We were going to have diametrically opposing views on how we wanted to spend this weekend. I wanted to hang out with Bethany. Mike would want to work. I peered out of the raindrop-speckled window, fascinated with the people milling about on the streets. Where were all these people headed at just gone three on a Friday afternoon? Was I one of thousands heading home early? Was it what the rest of the world usually did while I stayed chained to my desk?

Before I left the office, I'd gotten to the end of the draft contract I'd received overnight on one of the Mike Green deals. Other than a couple of drafting issues and a correction on a tax point, I knew this was where we'd end up. I also knew Mike was going to try to make me negotiate it for the next sixty hours straight. If I lost our battle, I wouldn't get to go home for two nights and kiss my sleeping daughter. I'd miss the entire weekend with her, and I'd risk Autumn being pissed off. So I'd jumped in a cab before Mike had a chance to call me. That way, at least I'd get to see Bethany this afternoon.

My phone buzzed in my hand. Mike could fucking wait. I flipped it over to see Gillian Jones's name flashing on the screen. My stomach sank to my feet. I wasn't expecting a call from her. She was my personal lawyer, and I hadn't spoken to her for months. There would only be one reason why she'd call.

"Gillian, what can I do for you?"

“I’ve heard from her lawyers.”

She didn’t need to tell me who *her* was.

Her was Bethany’s mother, my wife, and the woman I’d thought I was going to spend the rest of my life building a family with. When she’d walked out nearly three years ago, I’d been devastated, blindsided. Heartbroken that our family was shattering into pieces and that Bethany had been left without a mother.

Now I was just numb.

“Her lawyers have sent over the paperwork to start off the divorce proceedings.”

It wasn’t pain I felt exactly. More the memory of pain. A bruise reminding me what had happened; a shadow that would never fully disappear.

“Good,” I replied. “If I hadn’t been so busy, I would have started the process before now.” She’d filed for a legal separation almost immediately after leaving, but this was the first I’d heard about divorce. “What does she want?” I asked. My father’s money had made me a wealthy man. But Bethany was the most valuable part of my life. One, she was welcome to. The other, I’d fight to the death to protect.

“Nothing,” Gillian said.

Relief swept through me. She could have had the money. She must have known that. She could have had enough never to work again. But she didn’t want anything? It was the best possible outcome for me. It also added a layer of clarity. She’d never seen our family the way I had, never loved our daughter the way I did. She couldn’t have. Otherwise, she would have never walked away. But I should have learned that lesson already. I knew some people weren’t capable of loving their children in a way they needed. I just wished I’d realized Penelope was that kind of person before I’d married her.

“Good. Well, get it done.”

“I’ll courier a document over for signing.”

I hung up and dialed a familiar number. “Gordon, the Globe-Wernicke piece that I looked at a month or so ago. Is it still available?”

“The bookshelf you said needed too much work?”

I ignored him. “Is it still available?”

“I sold it yesterday. I’m due to ship it out this afternoon.”

“I’ll double whatever they paid. Have it delivered to the house in the next hour.”

“Absolutely,” Gordon replied.

I’d bought a number of interesting pieces of furniture from Gordon over the years. He had a great eye. Best of all, he was a man of few words.

My next call was to Mike. I wasn’t in the mood for his bullshit, and I was going to bring the fight to him.

“Mike, did you see the agreement?” I asked when he answered.

“I’ve just finished going through it. It’s outrageous. I can’t believe they’ve asked for a retention and there’s no—”

“Nothing they’ve asked for is unreasonable. Other than a correction on a tax issue, this document is signable.”

Mike started his usual expletive-ridden tirade I’d endured during every other phone call I had with him. I ran through my emails and ignored him. When he quietened, I turned back to the phone.

“It’s a waste of our time and your money to argue these points. The cost outweighs the gain.”

“I don’t care. If they’ve offered this deal, we can get better—”

“No, Mike. They’ve offered this deal because they don’t want to fight over non-material issues for the next week, only to end up exactly where this draft puts us. If you want to negotiate this contract any further, then you need to do it yourself or get another lawyer.

Silence filled the cab before Mike chuckled, his furious mood seemingly having passed. “You’re refusing instructions?”

“If you won’t take my advice, there’s no point in us continuing like this.” For the last year, I’d put up with Mike’s demands and outbursts and I was at the end of my tether. I’d been through the terrible twos with Bethany, and it felt as if I were back there with Mike. The difference with a toddler was that they grew out of the phase. I’d accepted Mike’s attitude to keep the work coming in, but I was done. I was an excellent lawyer who gave great advice. If he didn’t see that, then he could go elsewhere. That might get me fired from the firm, but if I could survive Penelope walking out on our family when Bethany was just a year old, I could survive anything.

“You really think this is as good as we can get?” Mike asked, his voice bristling at the edges.

“I do. And you know it’s fair. It’s what we both thought you’d end up with.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

I didn’t try to convince him. Mike knew I was right.

“Okay. Let’s get it done. This way I suppose it means I can still take my wife to dinner tonight.”

I hadn’t realized he was married. “You can thank me later.”

“I’m not sure my wife will thank you. I’m sure she would have preferred the jewelry I’d planned to buy her to make up for missing dinner.”

I chuckled. “I’m sure she’ll be delighted to meet you again. No doubt it’s been awhile. I’m going to get this deal done and then we can enjoy our respective weekends. Have a good one, Mike.”

I tucked my phone in my pocket and found the tickets I’d bought and pulled them out. Two tickets to the matinee of a *Sound of Music* singalong this coming Wednesday. I stared at them, not quite recalling why I’d bought them. I’d never made suggestions of activities for Bethany to previous nannies she’d had, but I knew when Autumn saw these tickets, her eyes would light up like I’d just made all her dreams come true. She was unlike any woman I’d ever met. Overenthusiastic about everything. Always smiling. She seemed happy just to wake up in the world. She was also stunningly beautiful. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d noticed what a woman wore, but I couldn’t ignore her red dress last Saturday night. The dinner at Dexter and Hollie’s was also the first time I’d seen her a little unsure of herself, and I’d found myself feeling oddly protective of her. I didn’t want her spending the night fending off the competitive flirting between Joshua and Tristan.

I felt an urge to shield her from that.

But I shouldn’t have touched her. For a few seconds I’d forgotten myself and given in to the desire I had to feel her—just my leg against hers. The call from Gillian was a stark reminder of why such behavior was foolish. I wasn’t going down that path again.

The cab came to a halt outside the house. I settled the fare and took my keys from my pocket.

I could hear the sounds of strangled cats before I’d even opened the front door. I stood in the hallway, trying to make out what they were singing about. Oh yes, even I’d heard the dulcet tones of Dolly Parton, belting out “9 to 5.” I just hadn’t heard it overlaid by the two worst singers in history.

I opened the door to the main family area. “Good afternoon,” I said, a little taken aback by the scene in front of me. Autumn’s long dark hair was divided into various bobbles and clips and bows, and her face was blobbed with color. Was that paint?

“Daddy!” Bethany screamed as she ran toward me and jumped into my

arms.

My daughter's face looked like she was also in training for clown school, although her hair seemed to have fared better than Autumn's.

"What's going on in here?" I asked, needing an explanation for why my daughter looked like she was starring in a Steven King film.

Thankfully, Autumn turned off the music before I had to ask.

"We're playing makeup parlor, Daddy. Do I look pretty?"

Bethany was the only person in my life I lied to. "You look gorgeous." *Somewhere underneath all that color.*

"And Autumn looks pretty, doesn't she?" Bethany pointed at her nanny, clearly wanting me to agree with her.

The fact was, it was easy to see past the smeared lipstick, comically red cheeks and lopsided hair that made her look like she'd had a fight with a puppy. There was no doubt Autumn was more than pretty.

"You like my eye shadow?" Autumn asked, grinning at me. "Bethany's a natural, isn't she?"

"You both look pretty. Very . . . colorful."

Autumn laughed and took Bethany's hand from around my neck and wiped it of something gloopy. I wasn't sure whether or not it was perfume, but Autumn's scent reminded me of sunshine. Of spring blossom and roses. She winced and dabbed my shirt collar. "I think she got you," she said, pressing her fingertips into my neck. "Sorry."

"It's not a problem." It had been a long time since a woman had touched me that way. Our eyes locked. We were just a few centimeters apart, so close I could feel her body heat, feel myself wrapped in her scent. For just a moment, those promises I'd made to myself years ago and reminded myself of just a few minutes ago in the cab disintegrated. I wanted her.

Autumn looked away first.

"You think your Daddy would like a makeover?" Autumn asked.

Bethany's eyes went wide. "Yes!" Before I had a chance to object, she'd slid out of my arms and was pulling my hand, trying to guide me to the sofa. "You sit here, Daddy. You need lipstick."

"No, Bethany. You're not putting makeup on me." I shrugged out of my jacket and loosened my tie. I needed to breathe. "Men don't wear makeup."

"Not true," Autumn said, shooting me a smug smile. She knew she was setting me up. "And I think it should be encouraged. If women have to go through all this, I don't see why all men shouldn't make more of an effort."

“Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?” I asked Autumn as she began to gather and tidy.

“I’m on the side of developing Bethany’s motor skills. I’m surprised you’re not encouraging her to develop in all areas.”

I sighed and took a seat on the sofa. I’d won my battle with Mike this afternoon. I suppose it was only fair I lost this one. “Okay. Maybe a little lipstick won’t hurt.”

“You’ll feel like a million dollars when Miss Bethany’s through with you,” Autumn said. “It will relax you. You might even start singing along and enjoying show tunes with us.”

“Speaking of,” I said, reaching for my jacket. “I got you two these for next week.”

I handed a ticket to each of them.

“What is it, Daddy?” Bethany asked, looking at the ticket.

“Are you serious?” Autumn asked, a grin the size of Ireland stretching across her face. “Really? You bought this for me? For us?”

Anyone would have thought I’d just bought her a small private island. “It’s just theatre tickets.”

She held her hand up in a stop gesture. “These are not *just* theatre tickets,” she said. “Bethany, we get to go to a musical sing-along. Have you ever heard of anything so wonderful?” She sighed and collapsed onto the velvet footstool as if her legs had given out. “This show came to Portland once but we—” She stared at the ticket, shaking her head. “I can’t believe I finally get to go.” She fell into silence as she held the ticket in her hand as if it were made of gold. Finally, she glanced up at me. “No one except Hollie has ever done anything so nice for me.”

I swallowed, completely taken aback at how delighted—moved even—she was at the tickets. The idea that she’d never had anyone do anything nice for her troubled me. Why not? Surely she’d had parents. Boyfriends? “Well, I don’t want to be accused of neglecting my daughter’s education, now do I?” I was rarely the one to lighten the mood, but the situation called for it.

Autumn looked at me, a small smile creeping over her face. “As if you’d neglect anything when it comes to Bethany. You’re an amazing father.”

A ball of heat burrowed into my chest. There wasn’t a better compliment. It was the only thing that meant anything to me in this world.

A knock on the door interrupted my imminent makeover. That would be the Globe-Wernicke—my distraction from my impending divorce. Except

that I hadn't thought about it once since I'd gotten home.

CHAPTER SIX

Gabriel

I pushed the door into the Mayfair pub around the corner from Beck's place. It had been his turn to choose the venue for the regular gathering of my brothers in everything but blood. This place felt like an old school gentleman's club with good beer, friendly staff, and comfortable leather armchairs. We didn't need anything else.

"Did you know that the only time you're on time is when we meet on a Sunday night?" Beck said, pushing a pint of Guinness toward me as I took a seat at the round polished table.

Joshua clinked his glass to mine. "You okay, mate? You look weirdly rested."

I nodded. The weekend with Bethany had been just what I needed. In the end, I'd escaped lipstick and managed to go two full days without a call from Mike. It had been blissful. "I'm usually late because I'm at work. I just managed the weekend off."

"You're always so busy. I thought we were in a recession," Joshua said.

"Not for me," Tristan replied.

Joshua, Andrew, Tristan, Beck, and Dexter were as close as it got to family. Dysfunctional, frustrating, and more than a little irritating at times, but unquestionably loyal and one hundred percent in my corner. Being as busy as I was, I would have skipped our weekly drinks if they'd been held during the week, and it felt good to be able to make it. Even if we sat around and talked about nothing, I knew I'd walk away feeling like I had a spine of steel.

“Yeah, and not for me either,” I said. “I have a round-the-clock job attending to Mike Green’s asshole, apparently.”

“Why is it that when Gabriel says something like that, it’s like hearing my dad swear?” Tristan asked.

“I wouldn’t wish asshole-attending on anyone,” Joshua said. “But Mike Green? What did you do to deserve that?”

Mike Green was known as the client from hell. And Joshua knew better than most, because if it wasn’t for Joshua, I wouldn’t be working with Mike. “Yeah, I must remember to thank you for introducing him to me,” I said.

“You have to get rid of him. Walk away,” Joshua said. “I’ve never been so happy to lose a client.”

“Easy for you to say. If I wasn’t doing three deals for Mike, I wouldn’t have any work. Law has been hit hard in this recession. Especially M&A.”

Tristan mumbled something in Dexter’s ear and Dexter just shook his head.

“Ever thought about retiring?” Beck asked.

“I’m thirty-three. You want me to take up golf and bowls?” I took a sip on my pint. As if I was just going to give up my career. Law was long hours, that was just how it was. And it wasn’t like Beck left the office at five thirty every day.

“No, but you could give up law,” Tristan said.

“I like my job. It’s Mike Green I don’t like.”

“At least you have a reliable nanny for Bethany now though, right?” Dexter said, quite obviously changing the subject.

“Oh yes, how is *Hot Autumn*?” Tristan asked. “That red dress on her the other night looked incredible.”

I tried not to crack my jaw as I clenched my teeth. *Tristan had better keep well away from Autumn*. “Bethany likes her a great deal, and it’s nice not to have to worry about finding someone.” I tried to keep my tone even, but I was sure it sounded like I wanted to wipe that lecherous look from his face. With a hammer.

“You seem tense when I mention her, mate. Protective. Has anything happened between the two of you?” Tristan said. “Have I missed something?”

“No,” I barked.

“If you even look in her direction, I’m going to have to kill you,” Dexter said.

I glanced up, ready to reassure Dexter that no lines had been crossed. But he was addressing Tristan, not me.

“So do me a favor,” Dexter continued. “Just don’t ever mention her again. And don’t even think about asking her out.”

It wasn’t as if I was about to ask her out, but I wondered if she was off limits to me too. Dexter probably thought I was so responsible, I’d never even consider making a move on Bethany’s nanny. Or that my manhood had shriveled up and fallen off. But it hadn’t and . . . there was something about Autumn. Something compelling that drew me to her. Something that had me buying tickets to musicals to make her happy. Something making me sit next to her at dinner parties. Autumn just had me thinking about possibilities far more than I’d done before. Far more than I should be.

“Fucking hell, what is the matter with everyone?” Tristan asked. “I was talking about a hot woman that I’m sure all of us around this table would happily bang. Why am I in the firing line?”

“Why do you make every relationship between a man and a woman about sex, Tristan?” I asked. “It’s like you never grew up past fifteen.”

Tristan looked as if I’d slapped him. I instantly felt bad.

“Sorry,” I said. “I got draft divorce papers by email this morning.”

The obligatory *I’m sorrys* followed and I nodded as if their condolences helped. It was just good to be with people who knew me.

“What has she asked for?” Dexter asked. “Can you say yes to it to get it over with?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “She wants nothing—not her daughter, not her husband, and not any of his money.” That’s what I’d assumed when she’d first gone. That she’d been a gold-digger all along. I’d been stupid enough to be in love and hadn’t bothered to ask for a postnuptial agreement to protect what I’d inherited from my father. But when she didn’t ask for anything during the legal separation, I’d started to wonder why she’d left. I’d never come up with an answer.

It was like Bethany and I had been some huge mistake she’d rather just pretend never happened.

Erasing me from her past was one thing, but her daughter? Her own flesh and blood? Penelope was abominable.

“You know what I think?” Joshua said, his voice brightening. “It’s about bloody time. It’s not like you’d take her back anyway, is it?”

“Of course not.” That ship had sailed the moment she’d walked out

without discussion or explanation. And anyway, she wasn't about to come back. She hadn't been in contact other than through her solicitor since she left. Each special occasion after she'd abandoned her daughter, I braced myself for a phone call, a letter, even a surprise appearance. But every birthday, Christmas, and milestone passed in silence. She'd disappeared. And now she was just a ghost. Not even a memory for Bethany.

"Have you met Gabriel?" Andrew asked. "He's hardly the guy dishing out second chances to anyone who turns up on his doorstep."

"So, it's good," Joshua continued. "This way, you can move on."

"I've moved on already. What choice did I have?"

"You've put one foot in front of the other," Joshua said. "That's not moving on. That's surviving."

Joshua liked to think he gave tough love—so he called it. I called it bullshit. "Whatever, Joshua."

"I'm saying this for your own good," Joshua said.

"So, what in your learned opinion would constitute moving on as opposed to surviving?" I asked.

"I'm saying you need to get out and fuck another woman."

I'd been given this talk by the guys before. Hollie had tried to set me up with a girl she'd met at a photoshoot. People didn't understand—I wasn't going to date. Maybe not ever but certainly not until Bethany was grown. I wouldn't subject her to it. I clearly didn't have good judgement when it came to choosing a woman. I'd gotten Penelope so wrong. Even when she left, it wasn't as if I suddenly understood who she was and why things hadn't worked out. Even three years later, she had the ability to surprise me by not asking for anything from me financially.

I didn't like surprises. And I wouldn't risk more. I'd had enough to last a lifetime.

"Thanks for the advice, Joshua."

"He's got a point," Dexter said.

Autumn had been the only woman I'd even thought about since Penelope. I didn't know what it was, but something about her drew me in. She was beautiful—that went without saying. She was bright and sunny and saw life how I'd like to see it—all birdsong and fresh mountain air. But there was more to her than that. Her reaction to those theatre tickets had been proof. It was as if she was trying to out-sing some dark melody forever playing in the background of her life.

“Gabriel’s a lost cause,” Tristan said. “But Autumn shouldn’t be. I don’t see why I can’t have her number.”

“You haven’t got a chance, mate,” Dexter said.

I couldn’t have put it better myself.

“How the hell would you know?” Tristan asked.

“Because when Hollie told her not to go near you, she burst out laughing and said you weren’t her type.”

Warmth settled in my gut. And I desperately wanted to know what Autumn had said when Hollie had warned her off me.

“Bullshit,” Tristan spat. “She was just covering it up well.”

Something told me Dexter wasn’t lying. Tristan wasn’t Autumn’s type.

But I was beginning to wonder whether I was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gabriel

All the signs were there—the whiny voice, the hands balled into fists, and the clock about to strike seven thirty. We were about to enter Planet Meltdown.

“Where is he, Daddy?”

“I don’t know, darling. What about Audrey?” I asked, holding up a faded grey donkey who had seen better days.

“I want Bear Bear,” Bethany said, talking about the grotty-looking bear Joshua had bought her when she was born that she wouldn’t be without.

I tossed Audrey aside and pulled out everything and everyone from her soft toy box. Again. I’d done it three times, but I was grasping at straws. “I know, but Bear Bear’s not here. Where did you last have him?”

“He was here before,” she said, peering under her bed.

I knew I shouldn’t call Autumn. She was having a well-deserved day off, and she’d been talking all week about doing some kind of walking tour. I didn’t want to interrupt. But shouldn’t it be over by now? It was late. And I didn’t want to have to deal with Bethany losing it.

“Let me check the bathroom again.” I padded out into the corridor and into Bethany’s bathroom. No sign of Bear Bear. “Did you go up to Autumn’s room with him?” I called out. Would it be bad to go up there and check? I didn’t want to invade her privacy. I hadn’t been into her room since she arrived. But I was slightly curious to see how she’d arranged it. Did she have photographs up or keepsakes by the bed?

“No,” Bethany said from behind me.

I spun around and pulled my phone from my pocket. I was going to have

to call her.

She answered on the third ring. “Hi,” she shouted over the background noise. Where was she? It sounded like a football match.

“I’m looking for Bear Bear,” I said. “Any idea where he might be?”

“I can’t hear you,” she shouted.

“Bear Bear,” I said, raising my voice. “Do you know where he is?”

“Autumn,” a man in the background called. “I don’t mind,” she called back. She hadn’t said anything about meeting a man. Did she have a date?

“Where are you?” I asked.

The sounds became more muffled. “I just came outside. Some of us from the tour are just having some drinks. Such a cute little pub in Whitechapel called The White Hart.”

Was there such a thing as a cute pub in Whitechapel?

She was having drinks with friends. That was to be expected, wasn’t it? It was good for her.

“Well, I’m sorry to interrupt. We’re looking for Bear Bear.”

“Oh, yes. Last place I saw him was in the playhouse. He needed a nap apparently.”

I headed toward Bethany’s castle-shaped playhouse and dove inside. There Bear Bear was, tucked up as cozy as a bear could be. I unceremoniously pulled him from his bed.

“Found him,” I said.

“Bear Bear!” Bethany called.

“Thanks,” I said as the noise on the other end of the phone increased.

“Glad you’ve got him,” she said. She was interrupted by the sound of breaking glass. A woman’s scream pierced the line.

“You okay?”

The phone went dead. Bloody hell. I called back but it rang out.

“I’m tired, Daddy.”

I followed as Bethany padded across the room and slid under the duvet. I pressed a kiss onto Bear Bear’s forehead. “Goodnight,” I said as I kissed Bethany’s cheek, wondering whether Autumn was about to call me back.

I dimmed Bethany’s bedroom light and headed out. Before I got to the top of the stairs, I hit the call button again.

Still no answer.

I tried to think back to just before the line went dead. It hadn’t been her screaming, had it?

I scrolled through the phone and called Joshua. I didn't want to call Dexter because it was probably fine, and I didn't want Hollie to worry. Plus Joshua was closer.

"How are you?" he answered.

"Can you come over?" I asked.

"Now? Tristan's here. We just ordered pizza."

"Yes, now. Please hurry." I needed someone to watch Bethany. Autumn had grown up in the middle of nowhere from what I'd gleaned. She was young and wasn't used to a big city. And she sure as hell didn't know Whitechapel. If she was caught up in the middle of a bar fight—if it had been her screaming? Dexter would never forgive me if I didn't go and find her.

I scanned the heads of the crowd of people in the pub. There was a circle of people in the corner in motorcycle leather. I couldn't imagine they'd been on a walking tour. Then there was a couple of old guys in the window who looked like they were in the wrong pub, and beside them a crowd of cool kids who were no doubt vegans.

"Have you tried calling her again?" Joshua asked.

"Yes. She's not picked up since the scream," I replied, craning to see if I could spot her.

"And it was definitely her you heard scream?"

"Does it matter? If she's in a situation where there's screaming involved, there's a problem. Can you imagine if Dexter found out that she was in some pub where there was screaming, and I just left her there?"

Joshua didn't reply. When I looked around, he was ordering drinks.

"What are you doing?"

"If I'm going to be your wingman, I need a drink."

"My wingman? What are you talking about? We're here to make sure Autumn's okay."

"Right," Joshua answered, handing me a pint of Guinness. "Couldn't possibly be that you have a crush on Hot Autumn, and you've lost your bollocks and won't ask her out on a date, so you're following her around."

I put my beer back on the bar. "You're being ridiculous. She doesn't

know London. She grew up in the middle of nowhere, never been to a big city before. She could be in trouble.”

Joshua didn't look convinced. “If you say so.”

I didn't have time to argue with him.

“Gabriel?”

I snapped my head around to find Autumn looking quite bewildered. “Thank God. Are you okay?” I asked.

The corners of her mouth lifted slightly, offsetting the slight frown she wore. “I'm fine. What are you doing here?” Her gaze flitted to Joshua, who raised his pint at her.

“I heard a scream and a crash, and I was concerned,” I said, feeling a little foolish now I'd found her and she was patently fine. “I couldn't get hold of you and I thought something might have happened.”

“Where's Bethany?”

“Tristan's babysitting. You seem fine though?”

She glanced back at a table of people over on the other side of the bar. “Yeah, fine. Someone dropped their drink. That's all. Come and join us.”

I was an idiot. I shouldn't be here. I'd chased across town to check on a grown woman who was completely able to look after herself. I glanced over at Joshua, who I expected to be wearing an I-told-you-so expression, but he was too busy talking to the barmaid.

“No, thank you. We're going to go. Just didn't want you to be in any trouble. You've not been in London long and Whitechapel isn't the most . . . Well, it's not Mayfair.”

She rolled her lips together as if she was editing what she was going to say next. “It's very sweet of you to check up on me.”

I shrugged. “I thought you were in trouble. That's all. You're a good nanny . . . and Bethany likes you.”

Autumn laughed. “Oh yes, right. Wouldn't want to lose a good nanny.”

“That came out wrong.” I couldn't find the right words. I'd heard the strange voice then the scream—had I put two and two together and come out with nineteen? It would seem like it, but better to be safe than sorry. Right? I tried to think whether I would have done the same for any of the other nannies we'd had over the years.

I doubt I would have noticed a man's voice in the background of any of the phone calls I'd had with them. Or a scream. Or breaking glass. I would have been entirely focused on Bethany and getting her to bed.

But Autumn wasn't like the other nannies we'd had before.
Maybe Joshua hadn't been so far off.

"Well, we should go," I said. "As you're fine." I tried to catch Joshua's eye, but he was too busy flirting.

"You could buy me a drink," Autumn suggested.

I looked at her, making sure I'd heard her right. It was like she was daring me to step over some unspoken line in the sand. She held my gaze as if she were willing me to set my foot down.

No. I wasn't here to have drinks. Flirt. Touch. I shouldn't be here at all.

"We're leaving. Now it's clear there's nothing wrong. There's no reason to stay."

"Are you sure?" Autumn asked.

I nodded. "Joshua," I called out. "We're leaving."

What had I been thinking coming here? Autumn was a grown woman. I had no business running after her in the middle of the night and leaving my daughter. I needed to remember the promises I'd made to myself to stay away from women. My life and my daughter didn't need complication, disappointment, and disruption.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Autumn

As I wrestled with Bethany's pink and blue swim cap, I had a pang of homesickness. It didn't happen very often, but the summers I'd spent lifeguarding back in Oregon had been fun—perhaps the only fun bit of life in Oregon. I was bummed I wasn't going to be in the water today. Bethany's swimming class didn't have parents and caregivers in the water with the students once they'd reached four.

An image of Gabriel in swim trunks flashed into my brain. Perhaps I should suggest both of us take Bethany swimming some time.

Neither of us had brought up the way he came after me last weekend. He'd been in bed when I'd gotten home that night, and I'd barely seen him this week. When we crossed paths in the kitchen after Bethany was asleep, he'd grunted at me before heading straight to his locked door, still without giving me any clues to what he was doing in there.

I had a bad case of Gabriel Chase Whiplash. One minute he was caring and intimate and a little flirtatious. The next he was all cold and haughty and brick walls. I wasn't sure which one was the real him. But I bet they'd both look great in a swimming pool.

"There," I said, tucking the last of Bethany's hair up into the cap. Her hair was going to look like she'd been back combing like an extra in *Hairspray*, but we'd cross that bridge when we came to it.

"You're going to watch me?" Bethany asked, crossing her hands over her chest and hopping from foot to foot.

"Of course. Wouldn't miss it, and I'm going to take lots of photos for

your daddy.” I gathered up Bethany’s things, put them in a locker, and then grabbed my bag. “You ready?”

She shivered and then grinned. “Yup.”

I cloaked her towel around her shoulders, took her hand and we made our way out to the seated area where the parents and nannies stayed to watch. I glanced around, hoping that this lesson there would be a lifeguard on duty.

“You need a drink?” I asked, as I dumped my bag on a seat nearest the steps.

“No thank you. I don’t want to wee wee in the pool.”

“If you’re thirsty, you should have a drink. You can just ask your teacher to excuse you if you need to wee wee.”

“I’m not.” She shook her head, and I made a mental note to encourage her to drink in the lead-up to arriving to her next lesson. I didn’t want her dehydrated. It was only a forty-minute lesson, but she needed to be alert the entire time. “I really want to dive from the edge again. You’ll take a picture of me jumping in for Daddy?”

“I will, Bethany, but I want you to listen to your teacher and only dive when she tells you to.”

She nodded excitedly and I smiled, glancing around for that lifeguard I kinda knew wasn’t going to arrive. The lesson only had ten children and two instructors, but it niggled me there wasn’t someone outside the water who was looking over everything.

The children filed out one after another and lined up at the edge of the pool. It was such a shame Gabriel wasn’t here. He’d be so proud of Bethany. She was confident and sensible and when she dipped to whisper to the girl who was standing next to her, I knew she was encouraging her. She was a good kid. Well behaved. Kind. And she loved her daddy.

The same as last week, the class started with some basic safety reminders similar to the kids’ lessons back in Oregon, and then just like last week, the instructor in the swimsuit slipped into the pool, while the other kept her red shorts on and stayed poolside.

Bethany glanced over at me as the kids at the far end of the line began to jump into the pool from standing up. I nodded, trying to be encouraging. I knew she’d prefer to try a sitting dive, but she’d get a chance later on.

She jumped in and I got the perfect, mid-air shot that Gabriel would love. He’d told me a couple of times that the next best thing to being with Bethany himself was getting the pictures I took. And while being a nanny wasn’t

exactly what I'd had in mind for a job, getting feedback like that—helping a father enjoy his child—was far more rewarding than I expected. I was lucky to know Bethany and Gabriel. Lucky to get to spend time with them both. Being paid was a bonus.

My phone buzzed and I glanced down to see a message from Hollie. I'd pick it up later. I wanted to focus on Bethany and her lesson and . . . I just felt better knowing I had my eye on her at all times.

They started the lesson having each student take turns collecting a colored band from the bottom of the pool. The water came up to their chests, so they were never out of their depth, but it was a good exercise for water confidence from what I could tell. The kids were well-behaved and seemed to be enjoying themselves, taking huge breaths before they sank below the surface. Next was five-meter swimming. When it was Bethany's turn, she swam like a champ, albeit a champ with a haphazard doggie paddle. As soon as she touched the side, she looked over at me, checking I had seen her. I grinned and gave her a thumbs-up.

The boy who was up next swam half of the five meters underwater and almost reached the side before changing course and swimming into Bethany. He began pulling at her in a slightly panicky way. I was already on my feet when the instructor in the pool lifted the boy up and out of the water, sitting him on the side.

I exhaled and sat back down. Jesus, I wished I was just in there with her. I might talk to Gabriel about taking her swimming at weekends or something. The sooner she swam strongly, the better.

Bethany waited patiently until the last fifteen minutes of the session, which was when they started the sitting dives. She'd been so excited last time when she'd managed to go headfirst into the pool that she'd been talking about doing it again all week. Only a few kids had managed it last time. Some had just refused and sat and watched. Others had tried but ended up inelegantly shuffling into the water feet first.

“Hands either side of your ears and lay one hand over the other.” The instructor in red shorts on the side of the pool wandered from one end of the row of ten children to the other.

The first child got the go-ahead to dive, and I kept my eye on Bethany, who would be one of the last to go. She looked like she was chatting to herself and kept positioning her arms and then relaxing them, practicing her form. She was so darn cute. She did it again and this time, her body started to

move forward, almost as if she was going to go into the water, but she shifted and brought her arms down.

Sit back, I wanted to shout. *Be patient and wait your turn*.

My eyes flitted to the other end of the line-up of four-year-olds sitting on the side, and another child plopped into the pool, taking the attention of both the instructor in the pool and Miss Red Shorts on the side. The instructor in the pool helped the child who had just dived out of the pool while the instructor on the side coached the one about to enter the water.

Bethany brought her arms up again into position and leaned forward, but this time she'd gone too far. I could see the moment her balance failed her. She glanced at me as I stood up, horror splashed across her face—not because she was in danger, but because she knew she was about to go into the pool when it wasn't her turn. She tried to regain her balance, turning awkwardly, but instead of regaining her feet, she slipped into the water, hitting her head on the side with an almighty *clunk* on the way in.

Time slowed and it felt as if everything had been covered in molasses. I dived into the water from the other side of the pool and felt her tiny body in my arms before she hit the bottom.

I was vaguely aware of shrieking as I broke the surface.

“Miss Lumen, what do you think—”

I ignored everything but Bethany, lying her on the edge of the pool. She was unconscious. The blow to the head had knocked her out. I leapt out and rearranged her. People came toward us—I didn't know if it was children or the instructors—and I was vaguely aware of someone screaming.

“Call an ambulance,” I yelled.

Bethany's chest seemed to rise and fall but I put my hand on her belly to make sure. She was breathing, thank God, and I moved her onto her side, pulling her head back so she didn't swallow her tongue just like I'd been taught.

“Why isn't she moving?” I heard a child ask.

“Has someone called a goddamned ambulance?” I screamed.

CHAPTER NINE

Gabriel

I nearly tore off the sliding door at the entry to the hospital as it seemed to take an interminable time to open. Finally, I raced up the corridor toward pediatric accident and emergency. I'd been here once before when Bethany had fallen off the bed when she was four months old; I hadn't realized she had learned to roll over, and while I'd grabbed a new nappy she went right over the side. I'd had the same bitter taste of bile in my mouth then as I did now. The same panic running through my veins. Except this time was worse. I hadn't been with her. I couldn't hold her. I couldn't feel her warmth.

"Gabriel Chase. My daughter's been brought in by ambulance," I said to the receptionist who seemed to be on another call and not in any hurry to do anything.

"Just take a seat, and I'll be with you in a moment," she said in a slow, drawn-out reply.

"I will not take a seat," I bellowed. "I want to see my daughter."

"Gabriel," someone called from the other side of the room.

It was Autumn. The adrenaline chasing around my body pulled me toward her, noting how very sad, serious, and bedraggled she looked.

Please don't have bad news.

Please let Bethany be okay.

I'll do anything. Give up everything.

Was it too late to strike a bargain with God?

"How is she? Where is she?" I said, searching her forlorn face for clues.

She pulled at my arm and we raced around the linoleum corridor, past a

nurses' station. Autumn ushered me through a curtain.

There sat Bethany, in a hospital gown but fully conscious and smiling, a nurse by her side taking her temperature.

"Daddy," she said, beaming at me. "You're here. Not at work."

Relief erupted in my veins at the sight of my beautiful daughter. Nothing was better than this, I said to myself. Being with Bethany was everything I needed. It was why I put up with work, why I vowed not to date. Why I breathed in and out. It was all about this little one with the gangly legs and shiny curls.

"They say she's fine," Autumn said from beside me.

"I want to speak to a doctor," I muttered before stepping toward the bed and lightly pressing my lips to Bethany's forehead. She looked okay, but I had to push down the urge to scoop her up and hold her as close as possible.

"How are you feeling, my darling?"

"Do you have snacks?" she asked.

Well, that was a good sign.

"She's fine, Mr. Chase. Just a bump to the head is all," the nurse said cheerily. "We're going to keep her for a few hours just for observation."

"I want to speak to the doctor."

"They'll be in when they're free." The nurse smiled, filled in something on a chart, and then left. Bethany smiled, glanced at Autumn, and held out her hand for something.

Autumn glanced at me. "I gave her the iPad. The doctor said it was fine. I know she's not supposed—"

"It's okay," I replied.

Autumn handed Bethany the tablet and she set about doing whatever she did on it, which always seemed to involve feeding cartoon food to cartoon dogs.

"What happened?" I said, taking a seat next to Autumn, trying to show her and myself that I was fine. Calm. Relaxed.

"They were all lined up, sitting at the edge of the pool, ready to do sitting dives—"

"I fell in, Daddy," Bethany said, looking up from the tablet.

"She tried to stop herself from falling and ended up turning and banging her head on the side," Autumn explained. "Then she went down."

The bile in my stomach rose again. I should have been there. "No more swimming lessons for you," I said. I might even look into home schooling. I

needed to keep her safe.

Bethany looked up from the tablet. “I like swimming,” she replied, frowning.

Autumn’s phone went off beside us and she opened up a message. “It’s from Hollie,” she replied. “She’s nearly here. She’s bringing me some clothes.”

I turned to look at Autumn properly and noticed her hair plastered to her head. “Are you . . . wet?”

She shrugged. “From the pool.”

“I thought you didn’t get in the pool with her?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t usually. I saw what was happening. Bethany was practicing her diving position but was getting closer to the edge. The instructors were preoccupied with the student diving.” Her eyes started to fill with tears and then she cleared her throat. “She should have swimming lessons. It’s important for her safety. But I don’t want to take her back there.”

I glanced from Autumn to Bethany, but Bethany was preoccupied by her virtual dogs. She wasn’t taking any notice of either of us. I took a closer look at Autumn. It wasn’t just her hair that was wet. Her clothes were soaking. “You went in after her.”

She nodded. “I knew I could get to her first.”

“And thank goodness she did,” a woman said from behind us as someone opened the curtain. “I’m Doctor Todd,” she said and stepped into bay. “The fact that Bethany was breathing when she was pulled out of the water means she’s going to be just fine. We need to keep an eye on her, but you can take her home soon. She’s had none of the indicators of severe concussion other than her being passed out for a minute or so. She was conscious by the time the ambulance team arrived.” The doctor glanced at Bethany and then focused on me. “You don’t need to worry.”

“Then humor me and tell me what makes you say that.”

“She didn’t inhale any water. Didn’t require resuscitation. She’s had no bleeding or fluid leaking from her mouth or ears. She hasn’t been sick and doesn’t feel sick. She’s alert. Lucid. No headache. No bruising. She has none of the symptoms of a severe concussion apart from a lump on her head and a brief moment of unconsciousness. But as I said, we’ll keep her under observation for the next few hours and then you can take her home.”

“Please may I have snacks?” Bethany asked.

“I’ll get someone to bring you something,” the doctor said.

“She can eat and drink as normal?” I asked.

“Absolutely. Like I said, if she’d inhaled the water when she went into the pool, it might be a different story.” The doctor swept out and I turned to Autumn.

“You saved her,” I said.

“I just knew I could get to her first.”

This woman beside me wasn’t just beautiful. And kind. And funny. She’d saved my daughter. I would never be as grateful to anyone else, for anything else, for as long as I lived. “You saved her,” I said again. And by saving Bethany, she’d saved me.

CHAPTER TEN

Autumn

I tried to decide between the racing car and the dog. It was a tough decision. Gabriel had already picked out the top hat, which was just perfect for the surly British gentleman he was. I liked the dog and all, but it would have definitely been Hollie's first choice. I needed something new. "Okay, I'm going for the car," I said.

"Fine," Gabriel said from where he was sitting opposite from me. He was studiously tidying his piles of money, which he'd lined up in front of him on the sturdy oak dining table in the kitchen. "At least you didn't take long to make that decision," he grumbled.

I laughed. I wasn't used to sarcasm from Gabriel. "Oh look, the Strand," I said, spotting the familiar name on the board. "That's where you work, right?"

"Near there, yes."

"I have to try to buy it. Then you can work for me and I'll reduce your working hours." I grinned at him and he just shook his head like I was the most irritating person he knew. I was going to win him over and relax him if it killed me, and then I was going to talk to him about Bethany.

"Is there a Smithfield?" People referred to the area where Gabriel lived as lots of different areas. Smithfield. Farringdon. Clerkenwell. But Gabriel always used Smithfield, so now I did too.

"No. We're not cool enough over this side of town."

"It's super cool around here," I replied. "Especially when we're actually allowed out," I said, dropping a hint as subtle as a knee in the balls.

“Do we have to do this?” he asked, ignoring my hint the size of Montana. “I hate Monopoly.”

“Yes, we absolutely have to do this.” It wasn’t my favorite game, but I needed common ground and a way of stopping Gabriel from just stalking off into his private, locked lair, which he had been doing more than usual in the last few days. Anyway, I was used to the New Jersey version of the game. It would be kinda fun to play with the London street names. “Think of it as you giving me a tour around your city.”

“There are plenty of tour buses that have stops a hundred meters away. You could see the real thing.”

I sighed. “It’s warmer to do it like this.”

Gabriel hadn’t been himself since Bethany’s accident. He’d insisted on working from home and she and I hadn’t been allowed to leave the house so Gabriel could check on her regularly. It had been five days. Work seemed to be stressing him out and I knew he’d cancelled drinks with Dexter and his other friends tonight. Enough was enough. I was going to talk to him about getting things back to normal. But I had to get him in the room long enough to be able to bring it up. If Bethany wasn’t around, as soon as I walked into a room, he walked out. Mainly through that locked door to who-the-hell-knew. Tonight I’d insisted on taking him on in a game of Monopoly, and somewhere during the game I was going to tell him he needed to back off. Go back to business as usual or Bethany was going to become a timid little mouse. I also wanted to ask him why he was avoiding me, but that might take a bottle of wine and a win at Monopoly for me to get the courage up. Did he blame me for what had happened? I wouldn’t hold it against him if he did. I was so angry at myself for continuing to take her to lessons despite not being one hundred percent happy with the safety of the classes. I should have said something.

“Ladies first,” he said, nodding toward the dice.

“I vote for equality. Highest throw of the dice goes first.”

“Highest number on any one die or highest number when the results of the two dice are added together?” he asked.

“Wow,” I said, narrowing my eyes and looking at him like he was a fossil in a museum. “Do you ever stop being a lawyer?”

I swear the side of his mouth curved up a fraction. “Details are important.”

I grabbed the dice and tossed them onto the board. They both came up as

sixes. I shrugged. “Sometimes they are. And sometimes they’re not.”

He chuckled and threw the dice after me. He got a three and a five.

“And in this instance, they weren’t,” I said, feeling rather smug.

When he didn’t say anything, I looked up to find him gazing at me in that intense way he had for what felt like the first time since the accident. “You know you’re asking for trouble,” he said, his voice so low the timbre reverberated in my knees. “I’m going to have to beat you now.”

It felt like a challenge. A frisson of excitement shot up my spine. “You don’t stand a chance.”

He shook his head and I threw the dice again.

I started counting his smiles—in my tally a little flicker at the corner of those lips counted—and I swore when we got to six, I was going to pluck up the courage to say something. It was my lucky number of the night, after all.

“Kings Cross station,” I said. “I’ll buy it because it’s right by my favorite station, St. Pancreas.”

He smiled. “What are you going to pay for it with? A kidney?”

He seemed pretty happy with himself, but I didn’t get the joke. “What did I say?”

“I’m being cruel by laughing. It’s kind of cute.”

Gabriel was handsome-grumpy after three nights without sleep. I could testify to that because he’d worked overnight for three nights in a row the week before Bethany’s accident. But when he smiled? He was like a goddamned movie star. How was this man a lawyer? He should be plastered on a billion teenage girls’ bedroom walls. Hell, I wasn’t past sneaking a snap on my camera phone and pinning it up over my bed.

“As much as I kinda like that you find me cute, can you clue me in on the joke?”

He held my gaze like he was deciding whether or not to say something. Was he going to deny he called me cute? Tell me he didn’t mean it like *that*. Or maybe he was deciding whether he should kiss me. I’d vote for C.

“You added an e,” he said finally.

“I did what now?”

“Pancras. Two syllables. Not pancreas, like the organ.”

I started to laugh. “Oh my God, I had no idea.” I shrugged. “And I always so liked that it was named after a body part. But it was worth making a fool of myself to see you smile.”

He stared at me for one second, then two. “You couldn’t be a fool if you

tried.” His tone had turned from teasing to low and serious. “You saved my daughter’s life.” He glanced down at the board and mumbled to himself.

I reached over and grabbed his wrist. “She’s fine, you know.”

“If you hadn’t been there,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut for a second before he reopened them. “If you hadn’t been watching like you were.”

“But I was, Gabriel. You can’t torture yourself with what ifs.”

“She’s never going swimming again,” he said with a resolute shake of his head.

“You know that’s not the right decision to make. Give it some time, but she needs to go back in the water.”

“I don’t want anything happening to her again. And the easiest way to ensure that happens is not to let her swim.”

“You’re a clever man, Gabriel, and we both know that’s bullshit. She’ll be safer as a strong and confident swimmer.”

He kinda growled at me. At least he didn’t bite.

“You can’t wrap her in cotton wool all the time,” I continued. “You have to let her be a four-year-old. You don’t want to keep her home like there’s something wrong with her when quite the opposite is true.”

“I should have been there,” he said.

“And that’s another thing. You need to go back to work.”

“What are you talking about? I *have* been working.”

“But you need to go back to the office. One day she’ll leave home and go off to college and if she’s not developed her independence by then, what will you do?”

“Easy,” he said, as if I’d been peppering him with trivia questions and just picked his specialty. “Never let her go to university.”

I laughed. “You’re completely ridiculous.”

He sat back against the chair and regarded me as if he were examining a rare object. “I can’t remember ever being called ridiculous before.”

My heartbeat thundered and a siren of panic filled my ears. I’d taken it too far. I’d offended him. “Oh God,” I said, covering my mouth with my hand. “I’m sorry, I just meant—”

He smiled, almost as if he had been embarrassed to admit it. “I didn’t say it was a bad thing.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t want to get myself fired here but I’m telling you, I didn’t mean it as a compliment.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I took it as one. Well, not that I’m ridiculous—”

that's just patently not true. But the fact that you'd call me so. I appreciate it."

"You like people calling you names?"

"Not people. You. And not names—just the truth."

I didn't know what to say. The way he said it suggested that I was . . . special somehow. "You like me telling you the truth?"

He nodded, looking pained by the confession.

"I'm sorry she got into the accident, Gabriel. I should have told you sooner that I didn't like the setup there."

"It's not your fault. You weren't in charge. And if you hadn't been there—if you hadn't gone in after her . . ." He closed his eyes and inhaled sharply as if he were trying to bear the pain of even the thought that something worse would have happened.

"They should have had a lifeguard on duty—someone who wasn't involved with the class who was just watching over everything."

"I guess you fulfilled that role."

"I'm just pleased I got to her. And she's fine." I smoothed my hand over his, trying to reassure him. "Will you let me take her swimming? Just the two of us. I can teach her. She'll have my complete attention."

He glanced at my hand over his. I was making him feel uncomfortable. When I pulled my hand away, he said, "No." Then slid his fingers between mine. A wave of release pushed through my body and I exhaled.

This.

This was what I'd needed from him.

I'd needed him to touch me.

"I know I'm being overprotective," he said, his thumb stroking the palm of my hand, setting off tiny firecrackers in my underwear. "I just worry."

"I know," I said, half surprised anything came out when I'd tried to speak. I'd expected his touch to take my words away.

We sat in silence for long moments, me getting pulled closer to him with every rhythmic stroke of his thumb. "I shouldn't be touching you."

"I know," I replied.

"We shouldn't be holding hands," he said.

I nodded. "I don't want you to stop."

"I know," he said with such confidence that if I'd been on my feet, my knees would have disintegrated and I would have fallen. "I've tried to stay away."

My heartbeat rammed on my ribcage like a freight train. He'd wanted

me?

With this confession, he slid his hand from mine and shoved his fingers through his hair. "It's not right. For a million different reasons."

Nothing he was saying wasn't true. He was one of Dexter's oldest friends and my employer. He was a father and a serious lawyer, as Hollie loved to remind me. I was . . . just starting out.

But I wanted him.

And now he'd touched me, I knew I couldn't even pretend I didn't.

He pushed his chair out from under the table and stood. Was he leaving? Was he about to disappear behind that locked door?

I stood up too, trying to find the words to ask him to stay. To tell him all the reasons why he shouldn't kiss me would be there tomorrow, but for tonight we could just put them to one side. We could forget about everything for one kiss.

"I should go," he said.

Of course, he was going to pull down the shutters and retreat into his bat cave. What could I say to make him stay? Before I thought of the words, he stalked around the table, took my head in his hands, and pressed his lips to mine. My entire body buzzed as if his kiss conveyed life-giving energy, hot and urgent. I slid my hands up his arms and finally got to feel the hardness of his muscles that I'd seen moving under his dress shirts and semi-exposed by his tees. His skin was as hot as lava and the low moans he was making as he kissed me made every part of me vibrate. I wasn't sure I wouldn't climax right there from just a kiss.

I pushed a little on his chest, concerned I was about to be overwhelmed.

"You want me to stop?" he asked.

"You need to give me a minute," I said, trying to float back down to earth, but it was difficult when I was so close to him and my lips still hummed with the feel of him. "I never know what I'm going to get with you. One minute you're telling me how it's a terrible idea to be near me and then you're kissing me."

"I'm capricious." It was a statement rather than a question.

"You are. But you can't kiss me like that and change your mind. I'm resilient but not unbreakable. Don't shut me out again."

He nodded and cupped my face in his hands. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again." His gaze was determined and focused and fixed on me, and I believed him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gabriel

As soon as I'd touched her, I knew I was sunk.

For days now, I'd had to rehearse all the reasons I shouldn't make her mine over and over in my head, like a mantra. Hoping that somehow, they would sink in and neutralize the urge I had to press my hands, my lips, my body against hers.

But my mantra was silent now. I couldn't focus on anything but her. The feel of her, soft and precious under my fingers. Her scent, warm and inviting. Her large brown eyes, looking at me as if I had all the answers.

My need for her had developed over the months like fine wine, and all the fantasies I'd had of her funneled into this one moment.

She tasted just as sweet as I imagined. I groaned as I pulled my mouth away, wanting to revel in the feel of her lips against mine for days.

"Gabriel," she whispered, smoothing her hand up my chest.

How I'd longed for her touch. Even my name sounded better on her lips than from the mouth of any other. I pulled her closer to me, not ready to let go yet, enjoying the way she molded to me.

I pushed my knee between her legs and she gasped as if I'd lit her on fire.

"Gabriel," she said again, more urgently this time.

I brushed her chin with my thumb and then kissed her again, my dick growing harder by the second. I felt like a kid, unable to shift my focus and keep myself under control. I'd wanted her for so long. Since she moved in a month ago. Since I first laid eyes on her over a year ago. It felt like forever. I'd never just looked at a woman and had an urgent need to *touch* before

Autumn. It was as if she existed on a slightly different plain to anyone else, or she'd cast some kind of spell over me.

She wrapped her hand around my neck and twisted her hips slightly, which pushed her against my leg. She moaned, soft and throaty.

This couldn't happen. I couldn't let this woman hump my thigh when I knew I could make her come much harder with my fingers, my tongue, my cock.

She pulled back from our kiss. "Oh God," she said. "I'm dry humping your leg." She laughed at herself, never afraid to be exactly who she was.

Didn't she realize? Everything she did was utterly intoxicating. If only she hadn't been wearing jeans. I wanted her wet pussy streaking the denim on my legs.

I stroked up her back. "Are you wet, Autumn?"

It was the first time I'd ever seen her shocked, but I was done holding back.

"Between your legs." I dipped my hand between her thighs. "Underneath your jeans. Tell me."

She nodded.

I wasn't sure whether or not it was lust or relief that chased through me. Relief that she wanted me. That this was happening. Or perhaps the reprieve of my red, raw hands now I'd finally conceded the tug of war I'd been fighting so hard to win. Defeat had been inevitable. If I'd had any chance at victory, it had slipped from my fingers the first night she spent under my roof. I'd lain in bed with my dick in my hand, imagining how she'd feel under my fingers, between my teeth, and surrounding my cock.

"Show me."

She held my gaze and without looking away, she undid her trousers and pulled them down over her bottom.

I tensed my jaw as she held her underwear away from her, giving me space to see her sweet pussy.

"I'm not sure that's quite wet enough," I said, pushing my fingers into her underwear and between her folds.

"Oh God," she said, unsteady on her feet, grasping at my arms.

I leaned her back onto the table as I explored her. Christ, I couldn't wait to taste her. Couldn't wait to coat my cock in her soaked pussy.

With my free hand, I pushed off her underwear as I worked around her clit, stroking and pushing before delving into her with two fingers.

“Shit,” she cried out, and I put my mouth on hers to cover her sounds. I curled my fingers into her, pushing and pulling, circling and pressing, trying to take some of the heat out of my cock, trying to calm myself as much as satisfy her. “Gabriel. I’m. Stop. Gabriel. You’re going to make me come.”

I stilled. “You want me to stop?” I asked, smirking at her. I knew the answer, but I was going to make her say it.

She couldn’t catch her breath. “No. Well, yes. I’m going to come so quickly if you don’t.”

I pushed back into her, feeling her tense around me. “I know,” I whispered. “And you’ve wanted this for so long, haven’t you?” I asked, stroking her between her folds, around her clit, delving deep. “You’ve wanted me to feel you, to touch you like this, to make you come?”

“Yes, Gabriel.” Her confession brought her to the brink, and she began to shudder. I slid my free hand over her mouth to muffle her cries and I held her gently as she floated down, free of weeks of pent-up frustration.

Her cries had only ratcheted up my need and I pulled off my t-shirt, wiping my hand on it before discarding it and working on my jeans.

“Well, that should be illegal,” she said, hazy-eyed and pointing at my chest.

“What?” I glanced down.

“You know. All the muscles and stuff. I’ve never even seen you work out.”

“It’s all the manual labor,” I replied. She laughed but I wasn’t joking. The planing and polishing. The lifting and sanding. It was all the exercise anyone needed.

“This is my favorite outfit you have,” she said, unbuttoning her blouse like we were in a race to see who could undress first.

Her confession made me grin. I liked the idea that she noticed what I wore, noticed my body. Why did she like it?

“You only wear it when you’re about to disappear into your secret dungeon.” She shrugged off her top and started untangling her trousers from where they’d pooled around her ankles.

I paused before pulling off my jeans. “My what?” With a nod of her head, she indicated the door of my workshop. “My workshop?”

“What do you do in there?”

“Stuff you do in a workshop,” I said. She stood before me in just her underwear. “God, you’re beautiful, Autumn. So *bloody* beautiful.”

She reached for me and pulled at my neck and I dipped to kiss her. There was no going back now. I was careering down a one-way street with no way out. I'd vowed never to touch another woman after Penelope left. And of all the people I broke that vow for, it shouldn't have been for a woman who was so much younger, was my best friend's future sister-in-law and my daughter's nanny. But this pull I had toward Autumn was stronger than every objection that existed.

"Turn around and bend over," I said. I wanted to see her beautiful skin against the rough oak of the table. The oak I'd sanded and oiled and given new life to. I wanted every part of me to possess her. She lay forward, the dark strands of her hair falling onto the wood as if she were wrapping herself over it.

She looked like a goddess. I kneeled, peeling her underwear off and down her legs, catching a glimpse of her plump, reddened pussy, shimmering for me. "Beautiful," I said, admiring her, pushing my thumb inside her. Unable to be so close without having a taste, I leaned forward and pressed my tongue against her.

Her nails scraped against the wood and her knees buckled. She was sweet—like amber honey—and her pussy quivered on my tongue like it was so close to climax it just needed the slightest touch.

Later.

I stood and pressed her firmly against the table. "Hold on."

She did as I asked and gripped the edges of the table while I rolled on a condom and took position behind her. I took a final look at her, spread out like a feast for me. Legs weak, pussy wet, breath heavy. It was just how I'd pictured her a thousand times, but so much better. Because tonight, it would be her cunt and not my hand that my cock got to push into.

I growled and grabbed her hips, holding her in place. "Are you ready?"

"Please," she whimpered.

I inhaled at her plea and summoned up strength to continue.

In one swift movement, I pushed in, right up to the hilt. I fought against my need to close my eyes at the tightness because I couldn't deprive myself of the sight of her. Her luscious bottom that I stood behind. The smooth, pale white of her back. The tumble of black locks. She was gorgeous and now I was inside of her, just where I'd longed to be since I'd seen her that first time.

I spanned my hand across her back and pulled out, dragging a groan from

her, and then thrust forward. Did I ever think it would be like this? That her skin would feel like silk? That my cock would feel so good filling her up? I leaned over her so my chest was flat against her back, just to feel more of her—I wanted to be surrounded and consumed by this moment.

Shifting up again, I began my rhythm. Slow and relentless, just like the desire I'd had for her for all these months. It felt so fucking perfect that I couldn't believe I'd made it this long. If it had been inevitable, why had I not given in sooner and enjoyed this moment months ago? "I've been wanting this for so long," I choked out. "I've needed to plow into you and show you how good it could be."

She pushed back against me, sending me farther into her if that was even possible. She screamed into her folded arms. "So deep."

I increased the pace, needing her to understand how desperate she'd made me all this time.

"Please. Gabriel. You're. Please. Yes. Please. Please."

The begging was more than I could have ever hoped for. She was always so sure of herself and now this was my chance to make her sure of me.

"You want more?" I pressed again and again. "You think you can handle it?"

I reached around under her and pressed my fingers into her folds. She was gone on a single touch.

Another victory. But I wasn't going to stop.

I slowed as her body shuddered with her second orgasm, then pulled out completely, making her whimper before moving her heavy, slow limbs so she was facing me. I lifted her onto the table and opened her legs.

I wasn't sure what was going to happen after tonight. I couldn't think about it now. I just had to make the most out of every second I had her right now. I unsnapped her bra and discarded it on the floor. Her breasts were perfect. Firm and large and so fucking soft. I weighed them in my hands and then took her nipples between my thumb and forefinger, giving them a short pinch, making her yelp, and then I pushed into her again. She covered her own mouth as she groaned, her head tipped back as if helpless.

"You're mine tonight." And I was going to claim what was mine in every way possible.

"Yes," she whispered, something so reverent in her tone that I had to stop and look at her. "Yours," she said, sweeping her finger over my eyebrow and down my cheek.

She shifted, pulling me out of the trance she'd put me in with a single word, and I kissed her rough and hard before lifting her up and moving to the nearest seat. I sat down so she was astride me and looked up at her.

So fucking beautiful.

I smoothed my hands around the curve of her arse and lifted her slightly, then pulled her down on my straining cock. As I was about to start moving her, she took over, raising and lowering herself over me.

"It's even deeper like this," she panted. "How?"

I brought my hands up to explore her breasts, rolling her nipples between my thumb and fingers, tightening my hold then releasing her if it interrupted her pace.

"It's so good," she said.

"You like my cock," I replied. "I knew you would."

She moaned and slowed, tightening around me. But I wasn't ready to let her come again. Not yet. I stood, her legs wrapped around me. I strode across the kitchen and leaned her up against the wall.

I slammed into her over and over, pinning her to the spot. I fucked and fucked and fucked as if I'd been deprived of water for weeks and was finally able to drink.

"Oh God, Gabriel," she cried.

"You're going to have to be quiet," I said through a series of grunts. "I'm going to make you come so, so hard, Autumn." I thrust into her again as if to make my point. "But you're going to have to be quiet."

Her head fell to my shoulder and as I continued to fuck and fuck, she cried out into my skin, the vibrations from her moans reverberating over my sweat-sheened skin in a sheet of pleasure.

From underneath her, my fingers found her folds and barely a touch sent her spiraling yet again.

I wasn't going to withstand her contracting around my cock this time. I'd held on for so long. So many weeks.

"Autumn," I cried out. Every drop that I thrust up into her was a part of me. I was giving her everything. My abstinence, my composure, my self-control.

In a few moments, I'd taken a hammer to everything I'd carefully constructed over the past three years.

I'd ripped up the rule book for Autumn.

I'd have to deal with the consequences tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Autumn

My limbs were stone-heavy and I wasn't sure I'd ever have the energy to walk again. Sex with Gabriel had been . . . I knew it would be good. I just hadn't expected it to be so completely life changing. And I hadn't expected him to be so filthy. I'd loved it.

"Do you concede at Monopoly?" he asked, fastening his jeans.

I glanced at him with a frown. "Absolutely not. Do you?"

"No, of course not."

I tried to bite back a grin. I liked that the serious, almost gruff side of Gabriel was back. It wasn't as if that wasn't him during sex. Just that he was . . . more. He was open and far less guarded. I liked it all. I just hoped I wasn't about to get a case of whiplash again. There had been a number of times when I thought my attraction to him was reciprocated and then he receded into being my boss and a man I happened to live with. After tonight, I wasn't sure I'd handle it from him.

"So, do we have to have a talk now about how this shouldn't have happened?" If that was the way this was going to go, I wanted to know now. I liked Gabriel and the sex had been the best I'd ever had. Whatever I'd been doing before couldn't really be described as sex anymore. There was no real comparison. "Because, it has happened. And I can't regret it, Gabriel."

He pulled me toward him, circling my waist with one arm. "That's not how this is going to go. I like you, Autumn. There's a connection between us that I can't ignore, however hard I try."

"But I don't understand why you've tried so hard." I wasn't a virus to be

avoided.

“There are a lot of reasons. Dexter. Hollie. You’re young. A great nanny. All that, and my last relationship didn’t go so well. I don’t want to hurt you, Autumn. And I don’t want . . . Bethany’s life disrupted.”

Gabriel usually said so little, but right now he seemed to be sharing almost everything on his mind. I didn’t want to push things too hard. I wasn’t angling for a ring. Honesty and openness were all I wanted.

“I’ll tell you what it will take me to concede at Monopoly,” I said, wanting something from him that was beyond words. “Show me your workshop.” I’d been wanting to get behind that door since the moment I moved in. And now I’d seen him naked, it seemed suddenly unfair that he was keeping it from me.

“Now?” he asked.

I shrugged. Seemed as good a time as any. He looked deliciously ruffled, softer somehow in the afterglow of the best sex I’d ever had.

He shoved a hand deep into his jean pocket and pulled out a key.

“Okay,” he said, like it was no big deal.

I wasn’t sure if my heart was racing like a greyhound out of the gate because I would finally get to see where Gabriel disappeared to every night, or because he took my hand, kissed me on my knuckles, and then slid his fingers between mine. “Don’t touch anything, mind.”

The click of the lock sounded, and he bent to kiss me before he turned the doorknob and pushed open the door.

I didn’t know where to look first. “It’s a . . . workshop.” A huge wooden island sat in the middle of the room, aged with layers of bumps and scratches. Clamps were attached around one edge and a couple of machines were set on the other side. Beneath my feet were bare floorboards littered with wooden boxes full of . . . implements. The walls on two sides were covered in green racks of chisels, hammers, and lots of other tools I had no name for, sitting over built-in wooden cabinets. Along another wall was open shelving, stuffed full of books and cans of paints and tubs and jars. It was like I’d walked into a small factory. How was all this hidden behind that door?

“I told you it was a workshop.”

“I know you did,” I replied, stepping inside. “But I didn’t expect it to be this kind of workshop.” Gabriel Chase, the serious, soulful lawyer, was a secret carpenter on the side. Who would have guessed?

He glanced down at his feet. “I’ve never shown anyone.”

I snapped my head toward him but didn't say anything, feeling sad for him that for whatever reason, he hadn't had anyone to share this with. I was honored to be the first.

"So, you use all this stuff?" I asked, trailing my free hand over a smaller side bench that was up against the near wall. I liked the idea of him in those worn jeans, flexing his delicious muscles as he sanded, painted, and chiseled. It was so earthy. So freaking sexy. And I thought he was sexier than any man I'd ever met *before* I'd known what was behind his secret door.

"Yeah. I'm surprised you've never heard me."

Now that I thought about it, I had heard banging from time to time, but I'd assumed it must be the neighbors. I wasn't exactly used to living in silence at the Sunshine Trailer Park, so I'd just accepted it.

"What kind of thing do you do in here?"

He dropped my hand and moved to the far side of the room. "This is my latest project," he said, pulling off the plastic cover from a huge bookcase, taller than even Gabriel. "I haven't really started yet but it's a Globe-Wernicke," he explained, and his chest lifted with a hint of pride as he spoke.

"It's nice," I said, unsure what to make of the reddish-brown, hulking piece of furniture.

"It's not really. Not yet. And I overpaid for it." He sighed. "I'd wanted to do one for ages."

I grinned up at him. "And when you say you want to do one, what exactly does that entail?"

"Well," he said, bending and running his fingers down the edge of it. "See here? The beading has been knocked. It's splintering all down this side. And this . . ." He pinched the brass knob on the front of one of the shelves. "This is my favorite part."

Each of the six shelves had a glass front and he lifted up the door on one and pushed it back on itself so it stayed up. "Isn't it great?" he said, turning to me, a grin across his face. "These little up and over doors . . . It's perfect. Or it will be. Two of the shelves are broken."

"So you're going to fix it?"

He nodded. "I haven't decided whether or not I'll sand off the entire thing. I doubt it. I'll probably just polish it up. You can't plan too much with these things because there's always something that comes out of left field and surprises you. But if I was going to take the lacquer off and take it back to the wood and then re-stain and re-coat it all, it would take me years. Between

work and Bethany, I don't get too much time in here."

"I've imagined a hundred things that could have been behind this door," I said. "But I didn't suspect anything like this."

"Are you disappointed?" he asked, smirking and lifting me by the waist up onto the workbench island.

I smoothed my hands over his shoulders, taking in the room from this change of viewpoint. "I should have guessed. I mean, I know you're good with your hands."

He chuckled and pressed a kiss to my forehead. "This place saved me after Penelope left."

He'd never mentioned his wife before tonight, but apparently she was a shadow that loomed over him. Was she an ex-wife? Hollie had explained she'd walked out without any warning when Bethany was a baby, but I didn't actually know if they were divorced.

"Distraction is a good thing," I said, trying to keep neutral and not wanting to open a can of worms marked *ex*.

"It didn't work so well with you," he replied with a grin.

I shrugged. "I'm relentless," I said on a yawn.

"We should get to bed." He checked his watch. "It's late and I've got a busy day tomorrow." He took me by the waist and set me down on my feet. "You were right, though. I need to get back to the office."

"Good. Remember this so that next time I don't have to sleep with you to convince you to see it my way."

"Okay," he said, grinning as we filed out of his workshop. "But maybe I like having you convince me."

"Yeah, I don't mind that part so much either."

He smiled one of those rare smiles I liked enough to count. I pushed my hands through his hair. "Thank you for showing me this," I said. Gabriel unlocking that room and sharing it with me felt like a turning point between us. More than the flirtatious glances and the illicit touches. More even than the sex. Him showing the workshop to me was him letting me in. And I wanted to stay. But I knew better than most that real life didn't have many happy-ever-afters. It had for Hollie, and there was no one more deserving, but there was no way London could be my salvation too, no matter how hard I wanted it to be.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gabriel

It had been almost a week since I'd been with Autumn, but I'd barely seen her. I couldn't wait to get home tonight. I'd have missed dinner with Bethany, but I would get to put her to bed at least. I unlocked the door, went inside, and was greeted by music coming from the living room. "Hello," I called but no answer. It wasn't bath time yet. Where were they?

I set down my things and took off my coat and went to investigate.

I poked my head around the door to find Autumn sitting on the floor, her back against the sofa, surrounded by pillows and a duvet over her. She was grinning up at Bethany who was dancing in front of the TV.

"Good evening," I said, wondering what the hell was going on.

"Daddy!" A pajamaed Bethany squealed and ran into my arms, officially making it the best part of my day so far.

"We weren't expecting you so soon," Autumn said, smiling at me.

"It's movie night," Bethany explained. "We have popcorn."

I glanced at the coffee table, covered in plates and drinks.

"We made it in the mic-wave."

"This is very cozy," I said as Bethany put her arms around my neck and squeezed. I swear the girl was half-human, half-anaconda.

"Come join us," Autumn said, patting the floor next to her.

"Yes, Daddy. Eat popcorn. Please stay and don't work."

How could I say no to an invitation like that? "Okay but you've got to tell me what I'm meant to do."

Autumn laughed. "You need instructions to relax, watch a movie, and eat

popcorn?” She shook her head. “It seems we have some work to do on your daddy, Bethany.”

“In my defense, it looks like you have more going on here than that.”

“You want in?” She lifted the duvet.

“Yes, Daddy. You *have* to be under the duvet if you’re sitting down.”

Autumn shrugged. “The rules are the rules.” She offered me the bowl of popcorn and I shuffled under the duvet and took it from her.

“This was dinner?” I asked as I toed off my shoes and took a seat next to Autumn, making sure I wasn’t touching her in case that freaked Bethany. I didn’t want it to look like I was deliberately *not* touching her either.

“We had an early dinner,” Autumn replied. “This is Friday night after-dinner snacks. We have a fruit platter as well. You don’t need to worry.”

“And hummus crunchies,” Bethany said, trampling over our outstretched feet, finding something that looked vaguely like a crisp, and bringing it back and handing it to me. “They’re yummy.”

I took the crisp and took a bite. Not because I was hungry or curious but because my daughter wanted me to. “Yummy,” I said. “So what’s the film?”

“You have to call it *movie*, Daddy. Like Autumn.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling at her. At this rate she’d have an American accent by the end of the month. “What *movie* are we watching.”

“Singing and Dancing,” Bethany said, and I groaned. Not a musical.

“*Singin’ in the Rain*,” Autumn said. “Like I said, she’s four. She should know these songs by heart.”

“Yes, I remember. I’m a terrible father for neglecting her musicals education.”

Autumn’s smile was like a physical touch. It filled her face, lit up the room, and warmed my soul. “Well, at least you’re aware and willing to put things right. Or at least have me put them right.”

“I might leave you to it,” I said, shifting to get up. There was always work to do. “I hate musicals.”

“Sit your butt back down,” Autumn said.

“Butt, butt, butt, butt.” Bethany started jumping on the spot.

“No one hates *Singin’ in the Rain*,” Autumn declared. “It’s impossible. And if you’ve never seen it, you can’t say you hate it.”

“It’s sooo good, Daddy.”

“I can hate it,” I said. “I got dragged to see *Cats* once when it was in the West End. Was up there as one of the worst experiences of my life.”

“Well, Jiminy Cricket, Bethany, what a terrible life your father has had. But what he doesn’t know is that movie musicals are different from stage musicals. And *Singin’ in the Rain* is the best movie musical of all time.” She turned to me. “You hated the show *Cats*. It doesn’t mean you hate all movie musicals. You can’t write things off like that.”

“Why would I waste my time? It’s not like I’m Sam I am. I’ve tried them. I just don’t like them.”

Autumn burst into a laugh. “That’s a perfect name for you—Sam I Am.”

I wanted to grab her and kiss her senseless for teasing me. No one ever dared to tease me. “I’m the opposite of Sam I Am. I’ve already had green eggs and ham.” Oh Christ, I was rhyming now.

“Nope. You saw one musical. One time. Broaden your horizons. Give them another shot. The genre deserves a second chance to impress you.”

She was relentless. I loosened my tie and resigned myself to at least half an hour of hell. After that, surely she’d agree I’d eaten my green eggs and ham. “Okay then. Do your worst, put it on.”

“You’ll stay?” Bethany said. “You don’t have to work?” She landed on my lap with a thud, and I pulled her so she was leaning against my front.

It pinched at my heart that Bethany assumed I’d have to work rather than stay with her and watch a film on a Friday night. I wanted to provide for her and be a good role model, but she should know that I’d rather hang out with her than do anything else in this moment.

“Only if I get some popcorn,” I replied.

“You can have all of it. Can’t he, Autumn?”

“Yes, he can,” she replied.

“You’re going to love this movie so much, Daddy.”

What I was going to love was sitting with my warm, snuggly daughter in my lap, next to one of the most beautiful, bright, kind women I’d ever met.

Every now and then, Autumn would glance at me and smile, seemingly glad that I was making the effort to stay and enjoy the film. Intermittently, Bethany would get up and dance to the music and we’d applaud her and she’d curtsy.

Just as we were getting toward the end, Autumn sat up straight. “This is it. Are you ready?” She glanced at Bethany. “Fingers on lips.”

Dutifully, Bethany put her index finger across her lips and drew her knees up to her chin.

Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds gathered in a doorway to shelter from

the rain. Apparently something important was about to happen.

We all held our breath as Autumn stared dreamily at the screen.

“Gah,” Autumn said as music started playing. “That is the most romantic line in movie history—‘This California dew is just a little heavier than usual tonight.’”

Gene Kelly was dancing his way down the rainy street. “Is that romantic?” Maybe I was missing something.

“Not that line. The next one when he says ‘Really? From where I stand the sun is shining all over the place.’”

I didn’t laugh because I could tell she was serious, but it took some effort.

She glanced at me and then shifted toward me when she saw I didn’t agree. “What? You don’t think it’s romantic?”

“You don’t think it’s a little . . . cheesy?”

She groaned as if I was the stupidest person on earth. “It’s not cheesy if you’re so in love with someone that you can’t even tell it’s raining.”

“I think if you’re out in a rainstorm like that and you can’t tell it’s raining, you need to go to the doctor.”

She shook her head and folded her arms. “Such a cynic.”

We watched the rest of the movie in silence, and I couldn’t tell if she was completely engrossed or smarting at my comment.

“You see,” Autumn said, as the credits started to roll. “Wasn’t it just the greatest?” She grinned as if she was having the best time of her life.

“It’s not as bad as *Cats*,” I said, hoping that would be enough to placate her.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s a phenomenal movie.”

She was phenomenal.

“Although, second time around it looks like it put your daughter to sleep,” she said.

I glanced down at the comfortable tangle of limbs in my lap. She hadn’t fallen asleep on me like that since she was a baby. It seemed like yesterday and at the same time, so long ago. That first year of Bethany’s life I thought I’d finally got the perfect family and now here I was, a single father.

“It’s late,” I said, looking at the clock. “Just gone eight.”

“Another wild, crazy Friday night.”

For a brief second, I wanted to ask her what her Friday nights were like back in America. Had they been wild and crazy? Is that what she wanted? Parties, being up all night? I stopped myself. I shouldn’t be thinking about

what Autumn was looking for. I could deal with right now and not a moment in the future.

We'd not talked about the fact that we'd had sex. I'd been tied up at work and we'd barely seen each other. And I didn't know what to say. For so long I'd kept that side of myself locked away, but Autumn had come along and bulldozed her way into my life. Into my heart. And although I had a thousand reasons why I shouldn't touch her again, whenever I was near her, none of them seemed to matter.

I reached out with one hand and cupped Autumn's face. "You look beautiful," I said, stroking my thumb against her cheek. She slid her hand over mine.

"It was nice that you stayed. Thank you."

"How could I say no?" I asked, wondering if I could dive into those deep brown eyes of hers.

I removed my hand. "I need to get this one to bed," I said as I stood. "Can you bring Bear Bear?"

"Sure," she said, scooping the toy up and following me as I headed upstairs.

I laid Bethany in bed and pressed a kiss against her cheek, tucking Bear Bear under her arm. God, I loved her so much. All the pain with Penelope was worth it to have such a miracle in my life every day. I was so lucky.

"She's beautiful," Autumn said from behind me. I turned and headed over to where she was leaning against the doorframe.

"She certainly is. Thank you for taking such good care of her."

"I have the best job ever—eating popcorn and watching musicals with the cutest kid alive."

I chuckled as we shifted and I closed Bethany's bedroom door.

"I've been thinking about the other night," I said, not quite sure what was going to come next.

Her shoulders slouched and she groaned like it was the worst possible thing I could have said. "Don't say it, Gabriel."

"I haven't said anything," I replied, confused.

She turned her back and headed down the landing to the stairs.

What was happening? "Autumn," I said, catching up with her and putting my hand on her arm. "What did I say?"

She stopped and turned and she looked so sad, so disappointed. It felt like a blow to my chest that I might have caused that. "It's not what you said, it

was what you were about to say. You were going to say how it wouldn't happen again and it's not right and—"

I pulled her toward me, pushed my hand into her hair, and dragged my lips against hers. I delved into her mouth with my tongue, my skin buzzed at her sweetness, my chest lifted at the feel of her. She just felt so *right*.

She pulled away slightly. "Did I jump to conclusions?"

I wasn't sure why a woman who seemed to live on life's bright side would expect me to go back on my word. Her assumption hinted that perhaps the woman who was all sunshine was in fact constantly expecting rain. "You don't need to doubt me," I said. "I was just going to suggest you might not want to broadcast what happened between us. Until we have a chance to figure it out." I didn't know what was happening or how I felt, and I wasn't going to lie to Autumn and pretend I did. But I also knew some kind of watershed had been crossed and there was no going back. More than that, I didn't want to go back.

"Right," she said, smoothing her hand up my chest. "I haven't told anyone."

"I just got my divorce papers recently. I have a kid. A demanding job. I can't—"

"Your divorce papers?" she asked.

"Yes. It's been years but the paperwork hasn't caught up."

She swallowed and nodded. "So there's no chance you'll be getting back together with her?"

Were those the rainclouds she was looking for? "We were over the moment she walked out, and I haven't seen her since. The divorce is just procedural. But it's something I need to get done. Between Bethany and my job, my plate is full. And I'm not sure what I can offer you. I won't make promises to anyone and I don't expect any in return." It was as honest as I'd ever been with anyone. I wasn't sure how to fit her into my carefully constructed, fiercely protected world.

"I'm not asking for anything," she said. "Let's just deal with right now."

Somehow Autumn always knew the right thing to say. I nodded and she brought her hands up my arms, trailing a shiver across my body.

"And right now," she said. "I have a huge crush on my boss."

I chuckled. Yes, that would do for now. A mutual crush. Something that would pass or fade without drama or significance. I would take her advice and just deal with the moment right in front of me. And all I could see was a

beautiful woman I was helplessly attracted to, saying she wanted me too.

I pressed my thumb over her lips in a straight line over her chin and down her neck and between her breasts. "I want to taste you."

She took my hand and linked her fingers through mine. "I'll warn you now, I'm sure I taste like hot, buttered popcorn." She seemed to have an almost magical ability to turn a difficult moment into something easy, to create light where there was dark. Perhaps she'd be able to breathe life into a cold, damaged heart that had been in hibernation for a very long time. And perhaps I'd be able to shield her from any impending rain clouds. Just for the time being.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Autumn

I was surrounded by racks and racks of white tulle. At my feet was five-inch-deep pink carpet and when I looked up, all I saw was sparkling crystal. This must be what it was like to live inside a cloud. Or heaven. Or unicorn throw-up.

“I don’t even know where to start,” Hollie said. “Maybe I should just buy something online.”

“Don’t you dare,” I replied. “You can’t buy your wedding dress online. I think it’s illegal or something.”

“Prison’s got to be better than spending the entire afternoon trying on a million dresses. And I can’t believe I dragged you here. I’m sure you have much better things to be doing than babysitting me.”

It was typical of Hollie to feel bad about trying on wedding gowns. It was my job to get her to enjoy herself today. I’d make it happen if it killed me. “Are you kidding? I get an excuse to day drink.” I took a seat on the cream velvet chair in the ginormous dressing room *suite*, as the sales assistant called it, and sipped from the glass of champagne they’d poured us when we arrived. “And I get to watch my sister look beautiful. What could be better?”

“You’re a good sister,” Hollie said.

“You’re better. Now go into your little hidey-hole and try something on for me to ooh and ahh about.”

One of the assistants swept in like she was on wheels, carrying an armful of clouds.

“Just pick out any one of them and take it behind the screen,” she said as

she added dresses to the rack in front of us. “And then I’ll come round and help you get into it. We’ll quickly get a feel for what you like and don’t like.”

“I would be happy to wear my jeans. Or elope,” Hollie said.

“This is exciting, Hollie. Just think, a couple of years ago, you would never have thought you’d be in some fancy boutique in Knightsbridge, picking out wedding gowns to wear when you marry the man of your dreams.”

“I’m being a Debbie Downer, aren’t I?” Hollie asked.

“Yep. Knowing you, you’re just feeling bad for feeling happy.”

“It’s just so much,” she said, disappearing behind the screen. “And of course I’m happy, but you’re right, I do feel a little weird. Not only did my dreams all come true, but they were surpassed. I never thought this could be my life.”

“So enjoy it.” I knew she was sighing, even though I couldn’t hear it. “You worked so hard for so many years, Hollie.”

“I just hope you don’t think I’m rubbing it in your face,” she said.

I laughed. I loved my sister but she was ridiculous. “How could I ever think that? You spent your entire life making sure I could have a better future. You sacrificed your own happiness over and over. And it worked. I got my degree. I’m in London. Okay, I’m not quite a career high-flyer like you, but it will happen eventually. And in the meantime, I get to look after the cutest little girl and . . .” I could feel the blush start to rise in my cheeks and I knew I had to change the subject before Hollie emerged in her dress and spotted it. “In September I’ll start my job. Before that, I’m going to travel across Europe. You and me, we’re just at different stages.”

“You always put an Autumn spin on things.”

“I’m being honest. Life is good, Hollie. I’m happy. You’re happy. Mom and Dad are actually working. I graduated college and we don’t have to worry about the electric bill or how we’re going to last until Friday with half a loaf of bread and a carton of eggs.” The weeks where we didn’t have enough food to eat were the toughest when I was going through college. It would always get Hollie down. There were a few months in my freshman year where it happened more weeks than it didn’t. During those times, I spent a lot of time over at my boyfriend’s place. I never told Hollie it was because there was always a slice of leftover pizza in the fridge. Or at least some ramen noodles. That way, Hollie got what we had to herself and didn’t have to worry about me. “We need to enjoy how far we’ve come, and you need to

enjoy today.”

“Okay, I’m coming out. Are you ready?”

“I’m always ready.”

She emerged from behind the screen like a princess in some kind of movie. I half expected cartoon birds to start singing and animated squirrels to join in with the harmonies.

“Wow,” I said as she stepped onto a podium in front of floor-to-ceiling, three-way mirrors. “You look really beautiful.” It was a proper princess gown, and she would look right at home in the pages of a glossy magazine.

“This is crazy.” She shook her head. “But I do like it. I didn’t expect to like such a big skirt, but it works.”

“It really works,” I said, so happy to see her fairytale coming true. “It’s like you’re going to a ball.”

“Is it too much?” She turned from side to side, keeping focused on the dress as it swished with her movements.

“Absolutely not. You are beautiful. The dress is beautiful. You’re marrying one of the kindest, richest, most handsome men in London. It’s all great. You just need to allow yourself to enjoy it.” Whatever happened, she’d never have to worry about being hungry again. That was to be celebrated.

“I need to try on more though, right?”

“Absolutely. I want to stay here until I’m properly buzzed.” I raised my glass at her and she stepped off the podium. “Have you decided on a date yet?”

“Well, I wanted to ask you about your plans over the summer. Do you know where you’re going or when you’re leaving?” she asked as she headed behind the screen to change.

My stomach churned. I didn’t want to think about the summer. It was too far off. “It’s months away.”

“It will be June in two weeks. And you’re off at the end of July.”

My stomach stretched and contracted like it was limbering up to sprint out of my body. *Just six weeks.* “I’m sure I’ll get around to it at some point.”

Hollie stuck her head around the screen. “You must have thought about it. I mean, you were so excited to have the entire month of August to travel.”

Did I need the entire month off? “Yeah, I’m still excited. It’s just a way off, that’s all.” I was happy with the now. I didn’t want to think about the future. I spent the day with the most amazing kid, hanging out, seeing London, getting to see how the British did things. And then in the evening . . .

For the past couple of weeks, in the evening, Gabriel would come home and we were together. He'd make love to me in his workshop. Or on the kitchen table. In front of the fire. We'd talk. I'd make him laugh with my ridiculous stories of life back home. He'd make me swoon with the way he talked about his daughter.

My life was good.

Close to perfect.

I just wished I could tell my sister. But she wouldn't approve and would tell me every reason why he wasn't right for me. And I didn't want to hear it.

Gabriel was a good man. Kind. And thoughtful. He was serious, but he seemed to like me poking fun at him. Yes, he was older, but did that matter? And okay, I had a job starting in the fall that meant I wouldn't be his daughter's nanny, but until then?

Gabriel was right for right now.

"Where do you think you'll start? You still wanting to go to Seville? Maybe Paris would be a good starting point because you can just take the train over."

"Yeah, probably Paris," I replied, wondering whether Gabriel and Bethany would maybe come with me. Even if it was for a few days. Gabriel said he'd been to Paris a lot. Maybe he could show me around.

But I wasn't going to suggest it. Gabriel and I had an unspoken policy about not planning for the future. We didn't talk about next week, let alone six weeks from now.

Hollie stepped out in the second dress. It was even more beautiful than the first, if that was possible.

"It's so glamorous," I said, taking in the fitted corset and sweeping fishtail.

"It looks great. But it's not as comfortable as the other one," she said, stepping up to the podium with a shuffle and a hop.

"It makes your ass look incredible," I said, and Hollie turned around and tried to look at the back view over her shoulder.

"I'm not sure a good butt is worth not being able to breathe. What do you think?"

"I think not breathing is a compromise too far," I agreed.

She nodded and tentatively stepped down from the podium and headed back behind the changing screen.

"Dexter is pushing me on the date, but I want to make sure it doesn't

interfere with your plans,” Hollie said. “Could you put together some kind of itinerary and let me know as soon as you can when would be a good time?”

I laughed. “You’re insane. This is one decision where I refuse to let you put me first. You can’t plan a wedding around plans that haven’t been made, or a person who isn’t the bride. Set your date and I’ll work around it.”

“What if you’re in the middle of Russia at the time we’re supposed to be getting married?”

“Well firstly I’m not planning on going to Russia, and secondly, I’ll come back.” I wish we could get off the subject. There was so much to enjoy about life right now. I wanted to soak in it for a little while.

“I don’t want to be responsible for dragging you away from something fun. Can’t you just come up with a plan?”

“Okay,” I said. I wasn’t going to win this battle. Hollie didn’t know how not to put me first. I would have to start looking into what I was going to be doing this summer. “I’ll look into it.” I needed to pull up my big girl pants and start planning. My *right now* wasn’t going to last forever, and I needed to embrace the future. I’d spent my entire life dreaming of travelling around Europe, and I wasn’t about to be sad about the fact my dreams were going to come true. I just wouldn’t allow it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gabriel

The kind of news I'd gotten today would normally have me irritated. Everyone in my law firm knew that I didn't travel. It was the one rule I'd not broken for the sake of a client since Bethany was born. Apparently Autumn Lumen changed everything, because tonight, I couldn't wait to get home and see the look in her eyes when I told her we were going away.

"Hello," I said as I walked through the door. It was gone eight so Bethany wouldn't be awake, but I tried to make it home before Autumn went to bed. I managed it most nights.

"Hey," Autumn called. As I wandered into the kitchen, I found her at the cooker. "I'm making that meatloaf you liked."

I couldn't remember exactly when Autumn started cooking dinner for me. But for weeks now there was always something to eat when I got home from work. She'd said she was cooking for her and Bethany and so it was no trouble to cook for me too. But she didn't have to, and we both knew it. That was Autumn all over—she always gave more than I expected.

"That's kind of you." I walked up behind her, snaked my arm around her waist, and buried my head in her neck.

"You're back early. How was work?" she asked.

"Good," I said, kissing her neck and then going to the fridge to get a beer.

"Really? That's not normally the response I get from you. Usually you groan and complain about Mike."

I chuckled. "Well he tried to be a dick today but it backfired."

"Really?" she said, putting something in the oven and turning to face me.

“He knows I won’t travel. Since Bethany was born, it’s a hard line in the sand that I’ve always had and made no exception for. Today, Mike told me he’s looking at a huge telecoms company in Europe, and he wants me out there for a week to look at the parts of the data room that they’re refusing to put online.”

“Oh God,” she said. “What did he say when you told him no?”

I grinned and stepped toward her. “I told him yes. We’re going to Rome next week.”

Her eyes widened and she grabbed hold of my forearms. “What do you mean we?”

“You, me, and Bethany. I thought we could fly out on the Saturday morning. I don’t have to be in the data room until Monday. I’m not sure how the week will go, but I thought you and Bethany would like to explore Rome together. I might get some time during the day. But you’re probably going to be on your own most of the time.”

“Are you kidding me?” It was a sheen of shock rather than excitement that she wore.

“You don’t want to go?”

She blinked furiously. “I mean of course. I just need to check about . . . I need to figure out whether I have enough savings and—”

This girl took nothing for granted. “Autumn, you’re not going to pay for anything. It’s a business expense. But even if it wasn’t, I’ve got this.”

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I’m not expecting you to—”

“Autumn, please. You’ll be looking after Bethany—you’ll be working. And for the record, when I do take you away just for fun, you won’t be paying for anything then, either.”

“It’s important to me that I’m independent, Gabriel. Hollie’s looked out for me my entire life. I’m an adult now. I don’t want to be dependent on anyone. I need to know I can do life without a handout.”

I pushed my fingers into her hair, unable to help admiring her independence. But there was something in me that wanted to show her the world. “Let’s not borrow trouble. Rome is a business trip and you’re coming as Bethany’s nanny. It’s as simple as that.”

She looked at me like she wanted to argue the point but eventually her frown turned into a small smile. “We really get to go to Rome?”

“You said you wanted to go,” I said, my grin as wide as it ever had been

as she lifted up onto her toes.

“This is beyond,” she said. “We’ll get to see the Colosseum. And St. Peters. The Pantheon. Oh my God. Mike doesn’t mind you bringing us?”

“I don’t care if he minds. Anyway, he won’t know. I’ll make sure we stay at a different hotel to him so we get some privacy. And we can stay the following weekend too if you’d like to.”

She looked up at me, her hands on my chest. “Are you serious? This is going to be so much fun. Rome.”

Before Autumn, I wouldn’t have considered going to Rome. I certainly would never have considered putting fun on the agenda. But now? I would enjoy eating pasta and drinking good red wine in an Italian restaurant. I was thinking about something in my life other than Bethany and work. I was looking forward to something. I wanted to share something with another person, purely for the sake of having her by my side. Autumn was shifting everything—what I ate, what time I came home from work and now, what I was looking forward to.

“We need to pack and—” Her smile fell. “What should I tell Hollie? I can’t exactly say we’re going away together.”

Seeing her so concerned about what her sister would say took the sheen off my pleasure. I still didn’t know what was happening between us, so I wasn’t encouraging her to tell her sister. But the thought that she had to hide something from someone she was so close to didn’t sit well with me. “I’m going for work, Autumn. You’re coming to look after Bethany so I’m not away from her for a week.”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s right. That is what’s really happening.” She grinned up at me. “And anyway, she should be pleased. She wants me to travel and I guess I can cross Rome off my list now.”

“Your list?” I’d make the week really special. I’d organize a room with a spectacular view and get her a guide to show her around while I was at work. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been away. And there was no one I’d rather go away with than my daughter and Autumn.

“I was just looking at it, actually,” she said, pulling away and turning to the kitchen table where a notebook lay open, the pages full of scribbles. “There’s just so many places to go. A month isn’t enough time to see and do everything.”

A month? What was she talking about? We’d be in Rome a week. She slid onto the bench. “Maybe I’ll start a new notebook for our trip to Rome

rather than use this one.”

“So what are you planning in this one?” I said, sliding in next to her.

“Oh just where I’m going in August.”

It was as if someone had handed me a cannonball and pushed me into the ocean.

She was planning life after me.

“Hollie’s getting stressed about a wedding date and wants me to tell her what my plans are, but I haven’t really thought about it. Is that bad?”

It shouldn’t have been, but it was a relief that at least she’d not been counting down the days until she’d be leaving me—leaving us. I hadn’t been as happy as I was at the moment for a long time. Since Penelope. Before that even.

The year before Penelope had abandoned us, life had completely changed for the better because Bethany had been born. I’d felt soaring pride at being a father but also a pressure that it was my responsibility to give my daughter the kind of childhood I would have wanted—one free of anxiety and worry. One that was all about giggles and laughter and being a kid. I didn’t want Bethany to ever have to hear her father berating her mother or hear her mother crying for what seemed like days. I knew what bad was, so I knew how to create perfect for Bethany. When Penelope left, I’d been almost overwhelmed by guilt for not being able to sustain my vision of a perfect family for Bethany. It had eased slightly when it was clear Penelope wasn’t coming back, but Autumn arriving seemed to bring back the hope into our lives. She made everything more manageable somehow. She made every obstacle feel surmountable. She was like some kind of joy fairy that came in and made everything better. There was more laughter in the house. More fun.

I didn’t like the idea that at some point she’d take her magic wand and move on. But that had always been the deal. I’d always known that was going to be the case. And it was the right thing for her and for us. She was young. She’d never travelled before. She should go out and find her place in the world. And I wasn’t ever going to make promises to another woman. That ship had sailed. Our parting was inevitable.

“I can help you,” I said, shuffling closer to her. “If you want me to. I can tell you where I’ve been and what I liked. And what to avoid. Like the *Mona Lisa*—get there early, see it, and then get out. Go and see the other Da Vincis in the same gallery, which are just as spectacular, but everyone wanders past them looking for the *Mona Lisa*.”

“That’s a really good tip,” she said, scribbling away.

“And in Barcelona, make sure you just spend a day wandering in Gaudi’s park. It’s so beautiful; you won’t want to rush it. And in Venice, make sure your hotel is just off St. Mark’s Square—you want to be part of the hustle and bustle of the place.”

She’d stopped writing. “You’re like the best tour guide ever.” The light in her eyes dimmed slightly. “It’s a shame I can’t take you with me.”

I nodded, trying my best to make my smile spread to my eyes. “You’ll have the best time.”

She turned back to her notebook, nodding. “Yes. It will be great.”

Until she left, I’d hold on tight to her, and try to bring her some of the joy she’d brought me and Bethany. Even if Autumn’s joy meant the end of mine.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gabriel

I'd always enjoyed dinners at Hollie and Dexter's place. It was like being with family—or how families were in my imagination. Food. Wine. Good conversation. But tonight, I'd rather be anywhere else. That wasn't quite true. I'd rather be at home with Autumn. Just the two of us. The fact that she'd be at dinner tonight only made things worse. The bubble the two of us had existed in up until now had disintegrated, and I was being forced to think about all the reasons why I shouldn't be with Autumn.

I paid the cab and headed to Hollie and Dexter's front door, pausing before I knocked. I hated that I was lying to my friends. I'd done exactly what Dexter had warned me not to—slept with Autumn. And worse, I couldn't stop. Even worse than that, I didn't want to. Tonight, being with Autumn seemed so much more complicated than it usually did. Autumn and me, together, was so right. So simple. I didn't want to think about any reason why that wouldn't continue to be true.

She made me happy.

And I had forgotten what that felt like.

Not that I would have considered myself *unhappy* before she arrived. I loved Bethany. We had fun together. I enjoyed working in the workshop. But the dull cloud of grief that had been hanging over me ever since Penelope left had lifted.

Life was good. And I wasn't ready to give it up. I wasn't ready to give Autumn up. Not yet. But being here tonight was bringing me face-to-face with the reality that I might have to.

I was pulled from my thoughts by Dexter and Hollie's front door swinging open.

"What are you doing out here?" Hollie said. "I saw you skulking from the window."

"Sorry," I replied. "Just finishing off a few messages." The lies had started already. "Am I late?"

"You're always late," she replied. "Come in and get warm. Thanks for letting Autumn get a sitter."

"No problem," I replied. "Sorry, I didn't bring anything. I meant to stop and buy—"

"Gabriel, don't even think about it. Having you here is all we want."

I'd liked Hollie since the first time I'd met her. Dexter had been an idiot, obviously, and nearly let her slip through his fingers, but he'd figured it out in the end. It was obvious to anyone who saw them together that they simply adored each other. I'd never asked but sometimes I wondered if anyone had suspected all wasn't well with my marriage. Had outsiders seen something I hadn't? I tortured myself enough without knowing the answer to that question.

Everyone chorused hello from where they were already seated around Dexter and Hollie's dining table. I swept my gaze across the room as I waved, trying not to catch Autumn's eye, nodding at Tristan, Beck, and Joshua. "Hey, Stella," I said, seeing Beck's wife and going to give her a brief kiss on the cheek. If Autumn hadn't been working for me—if we hadn't been living together—I probably would have greeted her the same way. Tonight, I'd have to avoid all contact in case someone saw a lingering or too-familiar touch that would give us away. I needed to stay out of her way. I had to remind myself that I couldn't just reach for her. Couldn't just slide my hand around her waist. Couldn't just smooth my thumb over her cheekbone and kiss her.

"You made it before the food came out, Gabriel. Are you slacking at work?" Joshua asked.

"Just because I have a responsible job and don't fuck around being *creative* all day . . . Whatever that means." I took an empty seat opposite Joshua who was sitting next to Autumn.

She smiled and I smiled back. Did she know how much I wanted to kiss her right then?

"I don't draw chalk pictures on Trafalgar square, Gabriel." Joshua turned

to Autumn and rolled his eyes. “Did you forget I’m the CEO of the international marketing agency that I founded?”

“You never let us forget.” It was a cheap shot, but if I hadn’t thought he was trying to impress Autumn with his money and power, I wouldn’t have said it. Joshua didn’t brag. It wasn’t him.

“Wow. Mr. Sunshine has arrived. Mike Green infected your mood again?” he asked. “You need to sack him as a client. I keep telling you.”

“Let’s not talk about my work. Not when we’ve got food to eat,” I said, turning as Dexter approached the table carrying a board full of chateaubriand.

“This is why we come here so often,” Tristan said.

“Don’t forget the wine,” Dexter said.

“It’s the reason I’m marrying him,” Hollie said, bringing in pots of vegetables. Friday night was a guaranteed feast in this house.

“Can we help?” I asked.

Dexter chuckled and a wave of laughter followed him as if everyone was having a joke at my expense. “Everyone pitched in before you arrived, Gabriel.”

“We know it’s why you’re late. You just want to get out of chores,” Tristan said. “I bet he doesn’t lift a finger at home, does he, Autumn?”

All eyes turned to my housemate. Bethany’s nanny. My lover.

“Of course he does,” she said. “He can’t do things if he’s not physically there, though.”

“And that’s my theory proved,” Tristan said. “He avoids places if there are chores to do.”

I wasn’t about to argue over something so petty. I glanced over at Autumn, who seemed to be avoiding looking at anything in particular. God, she looked beautiful—warm and relaxed. I just wanted the world to melt away until only the two of us remained. It was so much easier that way. She was wearing a necklace I hadn’t seen before. Perhaps it was one of Hollie’s designs. It rested delicately on her collarbone. I longed to trace it with my tongue.

Later.

“What’s he like as a boss?” Joshua asked. “Bad tempered and so serious?”

“Oh, he’s not so bad,” she replied, scooping broccoli from the dish. “And Bethany makes up for anything negative.”

I laughed. “Thank God for Bethany.”

“She’s the best.”

“She still go to bed with Bear Bear?” Joshua asked.

“Sure does,” Autumn replied. “Wouldn’t be without him.”

“Grotty little thing,” I added.

“He’s not grotty, Gabriel,” Autumn said. “He’s just well-loved.” She said it in that same even-tempered, patient way she had with Bethany. But it worked. She was always utterly convincing.

Finally, Dexter and Hollie sat, and Beck filled my wine glass with a red that was bound to be good. Dexter had an incredible collection.

“So, Autumn, how are you finding the men in London?” Stella asked.

My throat constricted and the wine I’d just swallowed stuck in my gullet. I tried to choke as quietly as I could.

“You don’t like that Barolo?” Dexter asked. “I can get you something else.”

I managed to swallow. “It’s good. Just . . . fruitier than I was expecting.”

Dexter frowned but didn’t say anything.

“I haven’t started husband shopping quite yet,” Autumn replied with a grin.

“I know a few single guys,” Stella said. “What’s your type?”

Oh, this was going to be interesting.

“I don’t have one really,” she replied.

“Not blond, six one, owns an ad agency?” Joshua asked and Autumn laughed.

I gritted my teeth and pretended I didn’t want to grab her across the table and tell her to leave alone.

“That’s not true,” Hollie interrupted with a sigh. “She likes losers.”

I felt the corners of my mouth twitch.

“No one would be good enough as far as my sister’s concerned,” Autumn replied.

“Well, your sister loves me,” Joshua said.

“So you think,” Autumn said, gifting him one of her big, bright grins.

“Do I have to ask Hollie’s permission to take you out to dinner?” Joshua asked.

I stared into my wine glass and tried to fix my expression in case anyone saw the rage inside me. Joshua could *not* take her out to dinner. *I* hadn’t even done that. There was no way I would allow it. I didn’t want her coming back, giddy from an evening with him. And what if he tried to kiss her?

“Joshua!” Dexter warned as he stood. “Drop it. And, Gabriel, can you help me with something?”

I snapped my head around. There was no way I wanted to leave the table while Joshua was on the prowl. He might come across as a nice guy, but I knew his history with women. And if Hollie knew what I did, there was no way she’d allow it.

Dexter nodded toward the doorway and reluctantly, I took my napkin from my lap and stood. Why the fuck wasn’t he pulling Joshua to one side and having a word with him, rather than having me help him with God-knew-what?

I followed him out into the hallway. “I want to pick out a bottle you’d prefer to the Barolo,” he said, leading me into a wine room with a glass door and low lighting. “Let’s pick something.”

“Can’t this wait,” I snapped. “Everyone’s eating.”

Dexter didn’t say anything, so I gave in and stalked into the room. He closed the door behind.

“I don’t care,” I said. “This one.” I pulled something off the shelf without even looking at it. “Can I go back to my steak now?”

“What’s going on, Gabriel?”

“I’m hungry. That’s what’s going on.”

“I mean with Autumn.”

My stomach sank through the concrete floor. Shit. Was it that obvious?

“What are you talking about?” I hadn’t rehearsed what I would say if I was confronted. Autumn and I hadn’t discussed it.

Dexter took a deep breath. “I’ve known you a long time. You’ve been the dad of the group even before you were an actual dad. Steam was practically coming out of your ears when Joshua was flirting with her.”

I didn’t know what to say because I wasn’t quite sure what he was saying. I just nodded, trying to say nothing at all.

“Look, I can tell you there’s no way Joshua’s taking her out. You don’t need to worry there. And I get that you’re protective. She’s your employee. You don’t want her bringing Joshua back to the house and them doing . . . anything.”

The idea was like curdled milk in my stomach. Autumn with anyone else was completely unthinkable.

“She’s not going to be disrespectful. I know she cares about Bethany a lot.”

“I know,” I said, still wondering if he’d figured out there was something between Autumn and me.

“You don’t need to worry about her,” he said, patting me on the shoulder. “Anyway, Hollie said that guys flock to her. It’s only a matter of time before she’s dating someone who isn’t Joshua.”

“Right,” I replied.

“And that you can’t really do anything about. Remember she’s only here until the end of July. And then she’s gone.”

I nodded. He didn’t seem angry with me. And he wasn’t telling me to keep away from Autumn. He thought I was looking out for her out of concern for my employee. Which was true. In a sense.

“I’m just wound up about work, Dexter.”

“Look, mate, I know work is important. I respect that you don’t want to live off your dad’s money and you want to be a role model for Bethany, but it’s good to have other things going on as well. Now that the divorce is going through, you might want to take a woman out to dinner. I’m not saying you need to get serious with anyone, but I think it would be good for you to have some balance in your life.”

I nodded again. If only he knew that I’d taken his advice before he’d given it. I hated to lie to him and if Autumn was anyone but his soon-to-be sister-in-law and Bethany’s nanny, I knew he’d be cheering me on. But I couldn’t say anything. I’d not discussed it with Autumn and even if I had—what would I say? *I’m banging Autumn? I’m having some short-term, non-complicated sex with your sister-in-law?* He’d accuse me of using her to get over my divorce. Even if that was partly true, I liked Autumn. Cared about her. Enjoyed her company and her outlook on life.

“Can I let Hollie set you up with someone?” he asked.

“If you promise that we can go back to the table now, I promise to consider it. How about that?”

“Okay. I can live with that. For now.”

I’d consider being set up. And I’d say no. I didn’t want anyone but Autumn or anything but what we already had.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Autumn

I almost couldn't breathe, the view was so spectacular. Gabriel had us in the penthouse suite, enjoying what must have been the best view in Italy. We could see for miles from up here. I took in the domed churches and higgledy-piggledy buildings from the doorway of the balcony, Bethany on my hip. "That must be St. Peter's," I said, pointing to the large grey dome. "I just can't believe I'm here with you guys."

"I can't believe it's bloody raining," Gabriel mumbled from behind me.

I tutted. "It's *California dew*. Not rain. I come from the Pacific Northwest, and California dew doesn't even get me wet. More importantly, we're in Rome. That's *Italy*, in case you didn't know. We brought raincoats and rainboots. We're all set." I wasn't about to let a bit of H₂O spoil this trip. "Bethany, Rome is the capital of Italy. It's on the river Tiber and it was founded in 753 BC."

Bethany nodded solemnly, squinting at the view as I lectured her.

"And did you know that it has the best ice cream in the world?"

"Really?" she asked. "Can we eat some?"

Gelato was definitely on our itinerary. "Sure. We have to make sure your dad tastes some too."

"And we can play hide-and-seek as well?"

As soon as we'd gotten into the hotel, Bethany's eyes had lit up with the idea of hiding in all the different nooks and crannies of the hotel. The thought terrified me.

"We gotta make a deal on this, Bethany," Gabriel said.

“Okay, I can deal,” she replied.

“The deal is, when we come in that door, into our bit of the hotel, we can play hide-and-seek. You and me or you and Autumn. But outside that door, you need to be able to see Autumn or me all the time.”

“Okay,” she said, looking a little confused. “Deal.”

“No playing hide-and-seek until we’re in our suite. Okay?”

She nodded. “So, now we can?”

“Now is good. I’m going to count to twenty-five.”

“Did you lock the suite door?” I said, concerned she wouldn’t know which door led out into the hotel corridor.

“Yeah, and I put the chain on. She’s not getting out of here.”

“This balcony could be a problem,” I said. Rome was going to be exciting, but I was going to worry about Bethany a hundred times more than I did at home.

“Not if your California dew keeps up. We’ll have the doors shut.”

“You have to learn how to dance in the rain, Gabriel. Haven’t you heard? You can’t just wait for the storm to pass.”

“I’m not dancing anywhere,” he replied, his eyebrows furrowed together.

I spun around in the middle of the sitting area. “Well, you’re going to miss out. And I refuse to let you. Let’s go and find your daughter—who by the way, is hiding behind the door of the bathroom on the chair in there. Then let’s go and get gelato.”

“How do you know where’s she’s hiding?” he asked.

I shrugged. I wasn’t about to confess that she’d started on again about playing her favorite game as soon as she’d seen that little seat. “If we find her there, you have empirical evidence that I know what I’m talking about, so you’ll have to come out to eat gelato with us.”

“Are you the second woman today that I find myself making a deal with?”

I grinned at him. “Absolutely.”

He pulled me into his arms and pressed his lips against mine. Instantly I became boneless and forgot everything except the hot press of his skin on mine. It took all my willpower to place my palms on his chest and withdraw from his kiss. “We need to find your daughter.”

“Okay,” he said, before cupping his hands around his mouth. “Coming, ready or not.” We headed to the bathroom to find Bethany. But she wasn’t behind the bathroom door.

Gabriel beckoned me to follow him with a tilt of his head, and we wandered up the corridor toward the bedroom. “I have an idea.”

As we entered the bedroom, I spotted Bethany lying on the bed, having tried to burrow under the pillows and cushions. “Where can she be, Autumn?” Gabriel asked, pretending he hadn’t seen her and her socked feet poking out from the blankets. “Behind the curtains maybe.” He went over and made a show of scooping up the drapes. “Nope. What about under the bed?”

Bethany giggled as he stepped closer to her, and then he pounced, grabbed her, and fell back onto the bed, his daughter in his arms.

They were beautiful together. They always were. They had a bond that seemed to be unbreakable. And I’d been proven wrong—Bethany hadn’t been hiding where I thought she would.

“Looks like I lost our bet,” I said.

“I had an advantage and didn’t tell you.” He tapped his nose. “Historic knowledge.”

He was such a good father. Yes, he worked hard, but he paid attention and gave Bethany all his time at weekends. He was a wonderful man. No wonder Hollie hated all my loser boyfriends if there were men in the world like Gabriel.

He began to tickle Bethany and she giggled and squirmed before he set her on her feet and announced, “Ice cream in the rain is next on the agenda, I believe.”

“But I lost,” I said.

He shrugged and led Bethany out. “Apparently we can’t wait for the storm to pass.”

We headed out in our rainboots and slickers, with directions to the best gelato in Rome. Bethany insisted on walking between us, holding both our hands as we dodged puddles and pedestrians and navigated the narrow streets that led into open square after open square. We managed to squeeze past a moped coming in the opposite direction through a narrow path under some buildings, and then we were out in the open again. This time, surrounded by tourists. “Keep hold of her,” Gabriel said, and I could tell by the dark tone of his voice he was in Sensible Dad mode. I tightened my grip on Bethany’s hand. “We’ll look but won’t stay long.”

“Look at what?” All I could see was people.

He lifted his hand above the crowd and pointed. “The Trevi Fountain.”

I followed his hand and looked up. It was the wildest thing I'd ever seen. We were in a tiny square but on one wall was a huge building that seemed to have a marble Triton bursting out of it in his chariot, bringing the crashing waves of the sea with him. "It's . . . wonderful," I said.

Gabriel grinned and then his face turned stern. "Keep close. I'm going to get us to the front."

He moved into the crowd with the confidence of a man who knew he would get to wherever he was headed. It must be why he was such a great lawyer.

Sure enough, we got to the front and it seemed even more majestic, more imposing from up close. "Can you see the horses?" I asked Bethany, pointing at the marble statues of the sea horses riding through the water. "It's like they freeze-framed an invasion," I said as I stared up at the onslaught of marble.

"Yes, it's very baroque."

"You hold tight to Daddy while I get some euros out." I rummaged in my purse and pulled out some change. "Here. You have to throw over your right shoulder," I said, tapping her gently to indicate the correct side. "Turn around." I handed her a coin in her right hand. "Throw it back over your shoulder and make a wish."

She did exactly what I'd said. "I wished for really good ice cream," she said, and I laughed.

"I hope that one comes true for all of us," Gabriel said.

"Now you," I said, pressing a coin into Gabriel's hand.

He rolled his eyes but turned around and threw the coin over his right shoulder just the same.

"What did you wish, Daddy?"

His gaze flitted between his daughter and me. "I wished to stay as happy as I am right now."

My stomach flipped and I reached for him, wiping the raindrops from his wet cheek.

"What about you?" he said, as he took Bethany's hand.

I turned around and tossed my coin over my shoulder.

"What did you wish?" Bethany asked.

"I cheated," I confessed. "I made two wishes in one. I want great ice cream and to stay this happy."

Gabriel held my gaze. When I'd left Oregon, I'd expected to come to London, start my job as a trainee executive, and have the time of my life. I

had no idea that the time of my life would be had hanging out with the best man I'd ever met and his daughter. Unexpected as this was, nothing could have made me happier than I was right now.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gabriel

I couldn't remember when I'd had a better day. And now the skies had cleared and the view through the balcony doors was breathtaking. Autumn was putting Bethany to bed. She was sleeping in a rollaway in my room and Autumn had the second bedroom in the suite.

Autumn appeared in the doorway in her pajamas. "What did you do?" Her face broke into a grin as she took in the laid table.

I shrugged. "I made a few calls." Room service had delivered dinner, champagne, and flowers, and set it all out on the dining table that overlooked the floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the city.

"I feel underdressed."

"I would argue the opposite," I said, pulling her toward me as I reached under her top, smoothing my hands around her waist.

"I had the best day," she said. "Rome is so much more than I expected. So . . ."

"Italian?" I offered and she laughed.

"So beautiful and over-the-top extravagant. It just feels full of life."

"Sounds a bit like you." I dropped a lingering kiss on her lips.

"You think I'm extravagant?" she asked.

"I think you're full of life." I kissed her again. "You breathe life into me."

Her hands slid around my neck. "I'm not sure your friends would believe how romantic you are." She stood on tiptoes and we kissed, our mouths meeting and tongues colliding, the lights of the city behind us. Everything just felt completely right. Completely perfect.

She pulled back and put her head on my chest as we looked out at the view.

“Speaking of my friends,” I said. “We need to agree what we do if one of them asks straight out if there’s anything going on between us.” I shifted and started to pour out two glasses of champagne, my arm around Autumn while I did.

She shifted away slightly. “Did someone say something?”

“I thought Dexter was going to the other night, but he just talked about me being an overprotective employer. We need to be prepared.”

“Okay,” she said, frowning.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t.”

I passed her a glass of champagne. “Cheers to your first trip to Rome.”

She clinked her glass to mine. “I’m so bummed you have to work this week.”

“I know. But—” I almost said that we could come back another time, but I stopped myself. There wouldn’t be another time. Not for Autumn and me. “You get to enjoy it with Bethany.”

“Let’s not think about it and just enjoy dinner,” she said, taking the cloche off a plate in front of her. “Pasta. If your kiss didn’t make me giddy enough, this might push me over the edge.”

I took a seat kitty corner to her so we could both see the view.

“I think we should be honest,” Autumn said after she swallowed her first mouthful. “To your friends. Or Hollie.”

“Okay,” I said, not wanting to commit myself to anything. What did honest mean? What would we tell them?

“But only if they ask.” She twirled her fork around, catching her spaghetti. “Hollie will be pissed whether or not I’ve been hiding it from her.”

“I like the idea of being honest,” I said and took a forkful of pasta. It didn’t sit well with me that Autumn was keeping things from a sister she was so close to. And that I was keeping something from Dexter that I knew he’d feel strongly about. But honesty was more than just responding to a question. It was offering up information if you knew someone would want to know. Wasn’t it?

“And if they ask, we say . . .?” I took a sip of champagne and waited for Autumn to reply. My feelings for Autumn had grown the more time I spent with her, but I understood that going forward wouldn’t be easy. She wasn’t

going to be Bethany's nanny beyond July, and she was planning out the rest of her life. I couldn't demand to be included.

Autumn was never shy, but the way she looked at me from under her eyelashes suggested she didn't want to be the first to offer an answer.

"I guess we say that we enjoy each other's company," I suggested.

She nodded as she chewed then swallowed. "Exactly. We like spending time together. And we're hanging out and having fun."

I chuckled. "I'm not sure Dexter will believe that. 'Fun' isn't the first thing my friends associate me with."

"Well Dexter hasn't slept with you, so he would have no idea how fun you can be." Her eyes widened and she grinned as if to say, *Yes, I really said that*. "What else would we say?" she asked, lowering her voice, almost like she didn't want to ask the question. But it was a question she was going to have to answer. I didn't want her to give anything up by being with me.

"I think your suggestion is good," I replied. "We're having fun."

"And we're using condoms and I'm still on the pill."

I tried not to choke. "Do we have to get into that much detail?"

"Hollie is terrified I'll get pregnant before I 'fulfil my potential.' I used to get lectures about it all the time back in Oregon. And to be fair it's not like she didn't have reason. There were so many girls back home who you'd think were going places before bam, they'd get knocked up by their boyfriends. Before you knew it, they'd be behind the registers at Trader Bob's, working night shifts so they could look after their eleven kids during the day."

"Wow. That's an image."

"Maybe not eleven, but you get the picture."

"I do," I replied. "But we're not in Oregon. And—" I stopped myself before I said I didn't want eleven kids. We couldn't have that conversation. Because that was about the future. And we didn't have one. We were having fun. We enjoyed each other's company.

"Okay, so we have birth control covered," I said.

"And I'll just tell her that Bethany doesn't know. We're not hurting anyone."

"Right," I replied.

She exhaled what seemed like a long-held breath. "Right," she said. "Ultimately, it's no one's business except ours."

"Except that Dexter is one of my oldest friends. And I like Hollie and would hate to upset her."

“I’ll handle her,” she said with a sigh.

“We’ll handle them both,” I said and took her hand. “And in the meantime, we’ll have fun. And enjoy each other’s company.”

She laughed. “Well that’s a guarantee coming from you, Gabriel Chase.”

I smiled despite the kernel of unease settling in my chest. I didn’t know what it was about Autumn, but despite me doing my best to stay in the here and now, when I was with her, my mind couldn’t help wandering to the future.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Autumn

We looked up at the ceiling of the huge ballroom and tried to count the number of lightbulbs in the ornate glass chandelier. It must have been at least three hundred. “Just the name *Dorchester* sounds fancy,” I said.

I’d never stepped inside a fancy hotel before I came to London, and not only had I stayed in one in Rome that was at least a thousand times bigger than the trailer I’d left behind in Oregon, I was now checking out all the best ones in London. Not to stay in, but for Hollie’s wedding venue.

“This is almost overwhelming,” Hollie said. “It’s just so big.” She sighed as if she was sizing up the prison cell she was going to call home for the next twenty-five to life, rather than her wedding venue.

“We’re just looking though, right? It’s not like anyone is going to force you to have a big wedding,” I said, trying to reassure her.

“Right. Can you do me a favor and take photographs?” she asked. “I’m bound to forget. I can barely think straight. And you have such a good eye for detail.”

“Sure,” I replied, pulling out my phone. I tipped my head back to see if I could get the entire chandelier in one shot. In the end, it took three.

The room was all huge mirrors and silk wallpaper and baby blue drapes that looked so full, they might be able to cover all of London if they were straightened out. The entire room was like being on the *Bridgerton* set. I took a handful of shots, trying to make sure I captured the scale of the room. “It’s beautiful,” I said, turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees to make sure I hadn’t missed anything.

“So it seats up to five hundred and ten people,” Beatrice, the woman from the hotel who had shown us in, said. She came up behind us out of nowhere, making me jump like I’d been caught stealing candy from Trader Bob’s.

“But the huge advantage is the private entrance from Park Lane.”

I recognized that name from the Monopoly board—it was smack next to Mayfair, the second-most expensive property on the board.

“You said you had smaller rooms as well,” Hollie said. “Can we see those?”

“Absolutely,” Beatrice replied. “If you follow me to the lifts, I can show you our penthouse, which can seat up to thirty-four guests.”

Hollie nodded. “Yes, that sounds like a more manageable number.” The green tinge to her face began to fade and she smiled.

“So where is Dexter?” I asked as we got into the elevator, which had walls covered in green silk. I wasn’t sure if fabric on the walls was a British thing or just a rich-person thing. But I took a picture just in case we needed to remember the elevators. “Shouldn’t he be here today rather than me?”

She sighed. “He had some crisis at the store in New York. A security incident, whatever that means. He said if I narrowed it down, we could come back together and look at the rooms I liked best. But we don’t even know how big to go. He knows far more people in London than I do. Although he’s said he’ll charter a plane to bring people over from Oregon.”

“A plane? But who would you invite from there?”

She shrugged. “Exactly. I just don’t know. Mom and Dad obviously. Anything else feels uncomfortable. Like I’m trying to show off or something.”

It was typical of my sister not to make a fuss, even when she was going to be a bride. “Well, like it or not, you’re going to be the center of attention on the big day.”

Beatrice guided us out of the elevator and through the door of what looked like a bedroom. Hollie froze as soon as she stepped into the room. “Oh wow. That view.”

I followed her eyeline and couldn’t repress a soft gasp. We were high enough up to see the London skyline stretched out in front of us, a jumble of buildings, big and small, with splashes of green breaking up the offices, palaces, shops, and homes. “You can see for miles. I completely love it.”

“If the weather’s nice, we could do pre-wedding breakfast drinks on the terrace,” Beatrice said. “Obviously, it’s difficult to imagine on a day like

today. We've even held some ceremonies out here, but it's a little stressful being so weather dependent."

"Yes, that would be worrying." Hollie stepped toward the windows, following the view, and I trailed after her, taking pictures of everything that caught my attention. "But inside you still get the view." She turned around to take it all in. "It's less intimidating than the ballroom but still beautiful."

"This room is so much fun," I said, lowering my phone. "The dramatic red drapes and the cherubs in the fountain—it's all very baroque," I said. "Like a glamorous fairytale."

My sister glanced at me. "Baroque?" she asked as if she couldn't believe that I would have even heard of the word.

"Yes," I said. "I've been to Rome now, didn't you know?"

Her face lit up with a smile as if moments like these were all she could have wanted for me. Me going to Rome with Gabriel and Bethany wasn't exactly how she thought I'd get to travel, but I knew she was pleased I was spreading my wings.

"I can show you the Orchid room next if you want to follow me?" Beatrice said. "It's very pretty for weddings."

"How's the view?" I asked. Beatrice winced slightly.

"Sorry, there isn't a view in that one."

"Then I don't think we need to see it," Hollie said. "I'm feeling a baroque vibe for this wedding."

I laughed and linked my arm through my sister's.

She shrugged. "London brought Dexter and me together. It only seems fitting that it should be a guest at our wedding."

Even though I'd only been in London a couple of months, I understood the pull the city had. The energy, the vibrancy. It was a hive of possibility, and it was where my sister's dreams had come true. This city would be the jumping-off point from where I was going to fulfil my ambitions. "I think that's a lovely idea."

We thanked Beatrice before clambering into a cab and heading to the next hotel.

"At least I know I want a room with a view—I think. Show me the pictures from the ballroom again," she said, peering over to my phone.

I opened my photos and began to scroll backward. "Those red drapes were amazing. And did you notice the windows on the side? You get one hundred and eighty degrees of London in that room."

“I want to see the ballroom again,” she said. “I don’t know if I’m being ridiculous writing it off so quickly.”

I kept swiping and eventually we came to the ballroom. “It’s really pretty,” I said. “The wallpaper is everything.”

Hollie nodded. “Do you have a wide shot?” She leaned over as if she were trying to swipe to the next photo herself.

“Let me see . . .” I kept swiping until I got to pictures of the chandelier that I’d taken first. “No, sorry, but I bet we can find something online or get Beatrice to send us something.”

“Keep going,” she said, pointing at my screen. “Maybe there was one before the chandelier.”

“There wasn’t,” I said, swiping again to reveal a picture of Gabriel and me in Rome. I quickly snapped the image back to the pictures of the ballroom, hoping she hadn’t noticed. “It’s a beautiful chandelier.” My heart clanked against my ribcage. She hadn’t seen that, had she? I’d only seen a flash of something before I’d changed tack. Hollie couldn’t possibly have made out what was on that last picture. It had been Gabriel and me on the balcony of the hotel. I’d been trying to get a selfie of the two of us with St. Peter’s in the background, but Gabriel was more focused on kissing me than posing for the camera.

“What was that?” she asked.

“That’s the last one,” I said, nodding at the image on my screen. “The chandelier was the first picture I took.”

“No, the one after that. It was a picture of you with a man.”

My heart plummeted to the ground like a skydiver without a parachute.

I started scrolling through to the pictures of the penthouse, pretending I hadn’t heard her and hoping to distract her with thoughts of her wedding. “I really prefer a room with a view,” I said, showing her the screen of my phone.

In a flash, she grabbed my phone out of my hand and tried to scroll through the pictures. “Hollie!” I said, trying to take the phone back, but she turned her back to me. I tried to climb on top of her, but she twisted out of the way. “Give it back.”

“Jiminy Cricket, it locked,” she said, as she turned back to face the front and pushed my phone into my hand.

“You’re insane. What are you doing, stealing my phone?”

“Tell me who that man was.”

“In. Sane,” I snapped, and I shoved my cell into my purse where Hollie couldn’t reach it. I folded my arms, fuming.

We sat in silence as the cab stopped and started along Piccadilly. She was going to have to apologize. How dare she just take my phone like I was a teenager she’d caught doing something wrong.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see her glancing over at me. I turned my head so I was focused on what was going on outside on the street.

More silence.

“I’m sorry,” she said, finally.

“How would you feel if I’d done that to you?” I snapped.

“I don’t have anything private on my phone,” Hollie replied.

She was so annoying. She knew that it was the principle that mattered. “Not the point. If you want to see something, ask me. I’m not a child.”

“I know,” she replied. “I’m losing my mind. Can I blame the wedding planning?”

I shrugged. I didn’t want to ruin her day, but she was way out of line. “Fine. Just don’t do it again.”

“I promise,” she said. I could hear the *but* before it was even out of her mouth. “But are you going to tell me who it was?”

I sighed. This was it. I was in store for a mammoth lecture. But I couldn’t lie. We didn’t do that to each other. I turned to face her. “I’ll tell you if you promise not to lose your goddamned mind any more than you already have.”

She slumped back on her seat, shaking her head. “It’s Gabriel.” She said it with certainty, as if I’d already confessed. “I knew it.”

“I don’t understand what your objection is. The guys I dated before were losers. I get why you didn’t like them. Gabriel isn’t anything like them.”

“No, he’s serious and a father and very settled. None of those things describe you or where you are in your life.”

“But it doesn’t mean I don’t like him or *can’t* like him. That we don’t or can’t like each other. I don’t get it.”

“You’re both at different stages of your life. You want to travel and see the world. He’s got different priorities.”

“Well, first off, let me remind you who’s responsible for me going to Rome. I got to go to a wonderful city and see amazing things that I could only ever dream about, all because of Gabriel. So don’t act like he’s stopping me from fulfilling my dreams. In fact, he’s actively supporting me in them.”

Hollie shifted around so she was facing me. “But that’s one trip. What

happens if you want to go to Bali for three months? He's hardly going to strap Bethany on his back and stay in some hostel with you and a bunch of other twentysomethings."

"You'll be happy to know I've realized that five-star hotels make a much nicer base than hostels when travelling." I laughed, hoping to lighten the atmosphere. "Also, I've never mentioned Bali. I'll start a job in September, which means I won't get a chance to spend three months anywhere but London."

"But you're in their *international* program. What happens if they assign you outside London?"

"You're thinking too far ahead, Hollie. It's not venues for *my* wedding we're looking at today." I didn't want to think too far in the future. Things would get complicated that way, and I liked how things were now. Easy. Simple. Right.

"So you're not serious about him?" she asked.

I didn't allow myself to think about the answer to that question. It kept popping up in my own head, but each time I simply dunked it under the surface like the boys used to do to each other in the pool.

"We're having fun," I replied, giving the pre-arranged answer Gabriel and I had agreed on.

"Gabriel doesn't do 'just fun.' He's a serious man with serious responsibilities."

"Trust me, he knows how to have fun, Hollie." I raised my eyebrows at her.

"Oh God, tell me you're using birth control."

"Yes. Condoms and I'm still on the pill."

"Well, that's one thing at least. But seriously, he's been hurt before. His wife leaving devastated him, from what Dexter has said. If you're just having fun and he's serious about you—"

"I didn't say that." The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Gabriel. I wasn't sure what had happened with his wife, but I couldn't imagine what would make a woman walk out on a man as truly good and kind and sexy-as-hell as Gabriel. Or a daughter as fun and vibrant and wonderful as Bethany.

"So, you're saying you're serious about him?"

Whatever I said, Hollie wouldn't be happy. If I was serious about Gabriel, I'd be compromising my future. If I wasn't serious about him, I'd be bound to hurt him. I was in a lose-lose situation.

“Look, if I’m being completely honest with you, I’ve never felt like this about anyone.” She looked like I’d just told her I wasn’t going to attend her wedding, but she needed to understand. “He’s kind and funny and caring. He loves his daughter. He’s thoughtful and a great listener. I enjoy being with him.”

“Oh, Autumn. But you’re so young and—”

“Just listen for a second. We know that whatever there is between us is . . . There are external factors that . . . You know, it’s difficult. So we’ve agreed not to look too far ahead and just enjoy each day.”

But in the moments after Bethany fell asleep and before Gabriel came home, I couldn’t help thinking about *what if*. I liked Gabriel. Really liked him. And I suspected I wouldn’t want to give him up when it came time for me to leave.

“I know you better than you know yourself,” Hollie started. Her voice was quiet and gentle—no trace of the Sensible Sister tone I’d expected. “And to most people you might come across as some kind of free spirit who’s drifted along, happy to be pushed in one direction or another by your sister. But we both know that’s not true. I didn’t *make* you work your ass off at school and college. You had your sights set on a better life just as much as I did. You’re focused and determined and you’ve always got one eye on the future. Those boys you dated back in Oregon were always going to get left behind by you. You’ve said it yourself. But what about Gabriel? Is he just another that you’ll leave in your rear-view mirror, or are you going to compromise what you want to stay by his side?”

“Maybe there’s a way for us to be together without making any compromises,” I said. I’d never run through options because there were too many moving parts, and I didn’t want to know it was hopeless. “I don’t think we need to play this out to the end and decide that it’s not going to work. If you did that, then on paper, most relationships would be doomed to fail.” I wasn’t sure which one of us I was trying to convince. “You and Dexter shouldn’t work, but you do.”

“But we’re not talking small issues. Are you saying you’re prepared to take on another woman’s child at twenty-three? You don’t think that’s a compromise too far?”

Hollie didn’t often shock me, but her question was like a punch to the gut. “Bethany’s not another woman’s child. She’s Gabriel’s daughter. Describing it as *taking her on* makes it sound like she’s a virus or something. She’s

sweet and loving and I adore her.”

“I’m sorry.” She had the decency to look embarrassed by what she’d said. I was grateful that Hollie was always there to fight in my corner, but she didn’t always know what was best for me. “Children are a big responsibility. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

“I know. And there’s a lot that would need to be worked out. I’m not saying we will work it out or that we’d even want to.” But the more time I spent with Gabriel, the more time I wanted to spend with him and the less I looked forward to leaving at the end of the summer. “I’m just saying that we don’t need to think about that now. And if in the future we do want to think about it, we can deal with it then.”

“I want you to be happy. But more than that, I want you to know what’s possible.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Tammy Greenfield’s the perfect example. She’s the happiest woman at the Sunshine Trailer Park, am I right?”

“Absolutely.” Tammy was a cheerleader in high school. She married the quarterback. They had three children. They both had jobs and their trailer was the nicest one on the street. “She’s got reasons to be happy.”

“She does,” Hollie agreed. “But you can bet she’s not going to feel the way you did when you went into the Pantheon or when you saw Big Ben. Tammy has made lemonade out of lemons, but I don’t want you to have lemons to begin with. I want you to know what’s out there and then choose what will make you happy. You’ve always been so good at making the best of what we had. You were always the one who could get me to look on the bright side. But I don’t want you to have to. I don’t want you to *make do* when it comes to your future.”

I could accuse Hollie of being an interfering, overprotective big sister, but when she said stuff like that, I couldn’t do anything but love her for all of it. “I’m so lucky to have you as a sister.”

“Not as lucky as me.”

“I don’t want you to think I don’t get it. I understand what you’re saying. But we’re not in Oregon anymore. You coming to London showed me that anything is possible. And we got out. Both of us. I’m not going to end up like Tammy Greenfield. It’s already way too late for that. I promise you.”

“Well, if you ever dare to dye your hair that circus red, I’m going to disown you.”

“If I make you a promise that my hair is never going to be anything like Tammy’s, can you try to be just a little supportive of me sleeping with my married, single father, much-older-than-me boss?” I started to chuckle as my description of Gabriel laid bare so many of the obstacles to us having a future together.

“Oh my God, Autumn. Nothing’s ever straightforward, is it?”

“That’s the way life is. And look how it turned out for you,” I said, peering out the window as we pulled up in front of the Savoy.

“I could never have even dared dream that someone like Dexter would love me, or that I would love anyone as much as I love him. I want that for you too, Autumn.”

“Same, sis.” I didn’t dare let myself think about loving Gabriel. For now, I was happy to be happy. Happy to be with him. Happy to feel as good as I did when we were together. Before today, I’d only had a trickle of thoughts about my feelings for Gabriel and what the future might hold. Talking about it with Hollie had made it clear that deep down, in the bottom of my heart, I was holding back a tidal wave.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gabriel

I padded downstairs to the smell of Autumn's cooking, having just put Bethany to bed. Weekends, when I got to see my daughter from the moment she woke up to the moment she went to bed, were what I lived for.

"I poured you a glass of wine," Autumn said as I entered the kitchen.

"That rounds off a great day. Thanks." I took the glass from the counter beside the hob and took a sip. "Bethany passed out before I finished *Zog and the Flying Doctors*."

"Best book ever," Autumn said with a wide grin. "Chicken pasanda tonight, if that's okay."

"More than okay. Can I help?"

She shrugged. "Nothing to do for dinner, but you could look at those résumés I left out for you. I've arranged interviews for all four this week because there's only a month before I leave. They look amazing."

I groaned. I didn't want to think about another nanny because that meant Autumn was leaving, which didn't bear thinking about. There wasn't going to be anyone like Autumn. Apart from the fact that I was sleeping with her, she was wonderful with Bethany and I trusted her completely. Anyone else was going to be a step down.

"Look at that top one." She nodded to the stack of papers on the island. "She's a Norland nanny like the royal family always have, and she's got years of experience. Plus she has a lifeguard qualification."

Just like Autumn to think of everything. "She's not you," I huffed.

"We'll find someone better than me. Your mail is in that pile of papers as

well. It's building up."

I pulled the stack of envelopes from underneath the CVs and started to flick through them to see if there was anything other than water bills and bank statements. "There's one for you here." I pulled out an envelope and handed it to Autumn.

She set down her wine and grabbed it from the side and set about opening it. "I never get mail."

After looking at them, I set the envelopes down. There was nothing in my post that I wanted to open. I'd rather chat and pretend to help with cooking dinner.

I glanced up to find Autumn's face frozen in a grin that even I could tell was forced. "You okay?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, resolutely. "Absolutely fine."

She didn't look fine.

I glanced down at the letter. "Does it say anything interesting?"

She folded the letter and stuffed it back in the envelope, tossing it onto the counter before heading back to the hob and stirring the chicken vigorously. "They're cancelling my trainee-executive position. Fifty percent of our year has been cut. I'm out."

"They did what?" I asked, wondering why she was so calm when the role she'd moved across an ocean for had just gone up in smoke.

"It's fine. Better this way probably. I wouldn't have had enough money to see much of Europe in August anyway. I can get a bar job or even stay on with you and Bethany if you like." She picked up her wine and took a gulp. I slid my arm around her waist, and she froze. "I'm fine. It's better this way. And it's not like I really want to be in an international program anyway. I want a job in London because this is where Hollie is. This is for the best."

I turned off the hob and took the wooden spoon from her hand. "It's awful news, Autumn. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," she said through gritted teeth. "Like I said, it's fine. If you don't want me to stay on, that's fine too I can find something else. I can—" She pulled in a breath. "I can even go back to Oregon for a while. I'll get to spend some time with my mom and dad."

How was she just shrugging this off? I knew the last thing she wanted to do was go back to Oregon.

"You're right. I don't want you staying on as Bethany's nanny," I said, holding her by the shoulders. "I want you to be doing what you've had your

heart set on for months.”

“Well, that option is no longer on the table. You have to deal with what you’ve got, not what you’d like. Let’s look on the bright side—”

“No, Autumn. Let’s not look at the bright side. Let’s get drunk and send those arseholes who just fired you a letter telling them you’re going to sue them. They can’t just string people along like that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, picking up the wooden spoon and stirring the cooling curry. “That’s not going to help. I just need a few days to make a plan. Things will work out for the best. They always do.”

“Autumn!” I snapped. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

She turned, shock flashing behind her eyes. “What?”

“You’re being ridiculous. You can’t tell me you’re not upset about this.”

She shrugged. “There’s no point in putting my energy into being upset.” She stopped and winced. “Don’t say anything to Dexter. He’ll tell Hollie and she’ll start freaking out and it will be a mess.”

“Freaking out would be the right response,” I said. She was behaving like a robot. I loved the fact that she was sunny and positive all the time, but she was taking it to an extreme. “You don’t need to look on the bright side tonight. Maybe not ever. Maybe this is just a shit thing that’s going to happen and you can be pissed off and angry and sad and—”

She shoved the wooden spoon into the curry and pushed past me. “Worse things have happened to me, Gabriel,” she said, her voice lifting slightly as if she were on the verge of actually expressing how she felt. “I can’t break down when I have a setback. If I did, I’d never pull myself together. And I’d certainly never be able to help Hollie if I was constantly getting angry and pissed off about how life was unfair. These things happen.”

“Just because worse things have happened—just because bad things happen—doesn’t mean you can’t feel things. It doesn’t mean you have to put on a smile and pretend everything’s okay. You can shout and cry and stamp your feet.”

“That’s not what I do,” she said, her eyes beginning to water. “If I give in to it and collapse, I don’t know if I can get back up.”

My heart squeezed. Here she was, trying to keep her chin up, when anyone else would have given in to devastation.

“Of course, you will. You’re strong and capable and independent. But you don’t have to be all those things *all the time*. And I’m here to give you a hand up, if you need it.” I pulled her into my arms, and she sank into me,

boneless.

“I don’t know how to give in to it. I just . . . want to be happy.”

I wanted that for her too. “Even the sun brings shadows,” I said. “Nothing is all good, all the time. It’s in the shades of grey that we learn who we are.”

“I’ve always been the happy one. The one who pulls Hollie and me up and makes us believe we can get through.”

I’d always loved how sunny and positive Autumn was. How she always saw the silver lining in every cloud. I hadn’t realized until tonight that she’d cultivated that disposition because she’d faced so many impossible situations. It was a coping mechanism as much as it was a personality trait.

“Not all the time,” I said. “You can take turns.”

Her sobs were almost unnoticeable, but I held her tightly as she let out everything she’d been holding on to. I wanted to make it better for her—perhaps that was the example she set me—but there was nothing that could make it better. Not tonight. This evening was just going to be terrible. All I could do was hold her.

“I need wine,” she said eventually.

“That I can do,” I said, not letting her go as I shuffled us both toward her glass.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, her voice wobbling. “Hollie is going to be so disappointed in me.”

“No,” I said, pulling her tighter. “She’s going to be disappointed *for* you. Not *in* you. You don’t need to concern yourself about that.”

“She’s going to worry.”

“She knows you better than that. There’s no need to worry.”

“There are always a thousand reasons to worry, Gabriel. And I don’t need to be one more.”

Thoughts started to slot into my brain and make sense, like the final pieces of a jigsaw. She was always so happy and upbeat because she didn’t want to be a burden. She didn’t want to be another item on anyone’s list of worries, especially not Hollie’s.

“Your sister loves you. She’s bound to worry sometimes. That’s natural and it’s okay. But that doesn’t mean you’re a burden.”

“She was the reason I had food in my belly and a roof over my head growing up.”

“But not anymore. You got your executive training position yourself. You’ll get another. And you know what? You are a capable, independent,

creative woman. I would bet money that you took a chunk of the burden growing up. I've seen the way you organize this house. And Bethany—you saved her life, for goodness' sake. And you even organize me." I nodded to the candidates for the new nanny she'd shortlisted. "I can't imagine you ever being a burden. You might have been younger, and you might have supported each other in different ways, but you were both in a very difficult situation. You both fought hard to survive.

"It's okay for things not to be okay sometimes," I said. "It's okay to need help and it's okay for people to give you help." I kissed the top of her head. "I'm here to help where I can. Even if it's to pour your wine. You will figure this out. I have no doubt."

Her bottom lip wobbled, and she rested her head on my chest. "How do you know exactly the right thing to say?"

"Believe me, I learned what it is to need help and what it is to get it from five of the best friends a man can have."

"Even Tristan?" she asked.

"Even him. There's nothing he wouldn't do for any one of us. And vice versa. You have that with Hollie. It's a two-way street."

"Thank you," she said as she looked up at me. "I'm so disappointed. I thought I was about to make this final move away from my past. And without that job . . . I just don't know where to go from here."

I nodded. "I understand. But you don't need to know where to go right away. You have time to figure it out."

As I held her, I realized that the more I knew about Autumn, the more I liked her. Yes, I loved that she was sunny and positive and always looked for the silver lining. But I liked her even more as I understood why she was built like that. Most of all, I felt honored to be the man who got to pour her wine and hold her when the sky clouded over, not a sliver of sunshine in sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gabriel

I squeezed Autumn's hand as she sat beside me in the cab on the way to the restaurant, trying to give her some wordless reassurance about tonight. So far, nothing I said had stopped her chewing her lip and digging her nails into my hand.

I hadn't seen Dexter since Autumn told her sister about our relationship, and Autumn hadn't seen Hollie since she'd told her about losing her job just over a week ago.

"I'm not sure I'm cut out for these fancy London restaurants, even though it's my birthday," she said. "I'm happy with meatloaf and a bottle of wine."

"We don't have to go if you don't want to." It would be much easier for me to stay at home with Autumn. Dexter was going to be pissed. His anger wouldn't change anything—I wasn't going to give up Autumn.

"Of course I have to go, are you kidding? Hollie has been planning this for weeks. And it will be nice," she said as if she was convincing herself. "It's good to get out and do things, and Hollie said the restaurant was amazing. Have you been before?"

"Maybe," I replied. The name sounded familiar, but a restaurant was a restaurant as far as I was concerned.

"Apparently the bathrooms are eggs that open up or something."

"Eggs?" Jesus, couldn't London restaurants just have good food and good wine and leave the rest up to the people who were dining?

"Sounds weird. Anyway, it will give everyone something to talk about so hopefully they won't focus on gossip." Autumn wasn't in her normally sunny

mood tonight.

“These are very old friends, Autumn. They won’t be gossiping. Well, not about me or you, anyway. Dexter messaged me and said he wanted a word and so no doubt, we’ll have to speak but everything’s going to be fine.”

“It’s usually me telling you things will work out.”

“Right? What happened?”

“I just don’t want Dexter giving you a hard time. You and me . . . I’m a consenting adult.”

“You’re also Hollie’s sister. He’s got a right to be protective. If I had a little more self-control around you then it would have been easier.”

“Easier? It would be easier not to be with me?” Autumn’s clouds were out in force tonight, but I took it as a compliment that she was showing me what was going on inside her. I wasn’t sure there was anyone else in the world who got to see that.

“That’s not what I said.” She thought I had regrets, but I didn’t. Not one. “But I breached Dexter’s trust. And he deserves an apology and some reassurance from me.”

“Reassurance?”

“You know, that I’m not going to dick you around.”

“Have you ever dicked anyone around your whole life?” she asked.

“No one’s perfect.”

“If you say so.” She leaned against my shoulder and I pressed a kiss on the top of her head, thanking her for the compliment, despite it being far from true.

We lived together. She knew my flaws. She understood how demanding my job was and how most of the time, I liked to escape into my workshop rather than talk about what was going on. I was closed off and wary of letting anyone in. But here I was, holding this woman’s hand. This person who was almost all sunshine but was finally letting me see her clouds.

We pulled up in front of the restaurant and climbed the steps, where Dexter and Hollie stood waiting for us.

“It’s the birthday girl,” Dexter said as he greeted Autumn with a kiss. “And my one-time best friend.”

I sighed. “Are we going to have to duel?” I asked, shaking his hand.

He cocked his head, indicating a bar across the hall. He turned to Hollie. “Order us something and we’ll be there in a minute, will you?”

I pulled off my coat and unwrapped the scarf from my neck, and Dexter

leaned against the bar.

“Don’t fuck her around,” Dexter said.

I nodded. “I won’t.”

“And she’s young, Gabriel. I don’t want either of you to get hurt because you’re not heading in the same direction.” He paused. “But relationships are messy and if you end up with your heart splattered on the wall, I’m here for you, mate.”

“I appreciate it. We’re not fast-forwarding anything. Just enjoying the moment.”

He patted me on the shoulder. “Good. Shall we join the others?”

“Is that it?”

He shrugged. “What do you want me to say? I’m fucking happy you have someone. Autumn’s a great girl. You’ve said you won’t fuck her around and I believe you. What did I miss?”

I was lucky to have a friend like Dexter. And the rest of them. Dexter knew my heart and trusted me. There really wasn’t anything more to say. “You’re a good man, Dexter Daniels.”

“You too, Gabriel. I’m happy if you’re happy.”

We headed back out to the lobby and got directed into the restaurant, where I could see Autumn and Hollie at the bar. She was laughing at something and then her hands were in the air and she was scrunching up her face.

“What are you two laughing about?” Dexter said.

“Autumn was just telling me about her bad mood today and I told her that it never lasts long.”

“Right,” I said. “Ten minutes tops before she’s found a positive angle on the worst situation.”

Someone called Autumn’s name and when we turned, Tristan and Joshua were heading toward us.

“You look stunning,” Tristan said to Autumn, kissing her on the cheek. “So do you, Hollie. Great necklace.”

“The beautiful birthday girl,” Joshua said, pulling her into a hug.

I wanted my friends to like Autumn. I just didn’t want them to like her too much.

“Right.” I had something to say. There was no point in hiding it from my friends any longer. “Joshua, and maybe you need to hear this too, Tristan. You should both know that Autumn and I are together. You can flirt all you

like with her, but at the end of the night, she's coming home with me."

Tristan's eyebrows looked like they were going to disappear over the top of his head. "Fucking hell, I knew that face of yours would come in handy one day."

"What has my face got to do with it?" I asked, completely confused.

"Don't pretend you don't know you're a handsome devil," he replied and nudged me.

I shook my head. "I have no response to that."

"Can we eat now?" Autumn asked, sliding her hand into mine. It was the first time we'd held hands in public. Even in Rome, we'd had Bethany with us and hadn't crossed that line. "I'm *famished*, as the Brits would say, and I need a drink so I can see these eggs everyone keeps talking about."

"Follow me," said Dexter, leading us all over to the hostess. "Andrew, Beck, and Stella will have to catch up with us."

"Speak of the devil," Joshua said. "The three most beautiful women in London and none of them on my arm. I need to figure out my priorities in life."

"You said it," I said, slapping Joshua on the back as we made our way to the table. "I keep telling you, you work too hard."

"Right," he said, offering me a half smile. "Maybe that's it."

I made a mental note to take him to lunch in the next couple of weeks. Something was up but now wasn't the time to get into it. I wanted tonight to be all about Autumn.

Dinner was more enjoyable for me than for Autumn. These had been my friends for as long as I cared to remember, but I could tell Autumn wasn't entirely herself. Like she said, she'd have been just as happy at home with meatloaf.

I cleared my throat to get the table's attention. "Can I suggest we finish up here? I've organized a little afterparty."

I could see Autumn looking at me out of the corner of my eyes, her eyebrows pinched together.

"Afterparty?" Stella asked. "That sounds exciting."

I smiled. I was about to announce a trip to my own personal hell. But it would be worth it, because Autumn would have the time of her life. I hoped.

"What do you have planned?" Dexter asked.

I pulled out my phone. "I've hired this place out for our group." I showed them a picture of the Theatre Café, which I'd found out was a little café on

St. Martins Lane in the West End that was dedicated to musicals and regularly had cast members from current musicals in to perform. “I’ve invited some of the cast of *Mamma Mia* and *Wicked* along to sing some songs, and we all get to join in.”

“Really?” Autumn asked me, clearly thinking I was joking. “Honestly?”

“Wow,” Hollie said from across the table.

“Unfortunately, Idina Menzel wasn’t available, but the stars from the current productions are coming,” I said. “I thought you’d like it.”

Autumn shook her head, a grin spreading across her face like butter. “But you hate my singing.”

“That’s true,” I replied. “But I want you to have a fantastic birthday more than I value my eardrums.”

Autumn laughed. “You are the best of men, Gabriel Chase. I can’t imagine a better birthday gift.”

Seeing Autumn happy would be worth enduring whatever was to come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Autumn

I wasn't sure I'd ever been attracted to a man more than I was to Gabriel when he told Joshua and Tristan they could flirt all they liked, but I was going home with him. It encapsulated one of the things I liked best about him—he didn't say much, but when he did, every word counted. He was all strong, brooding confidence that didn't need to shout. Some guys were possessive or territorial, but it was all about their ego. When Gabriel said what he did, it was a statement of fact to stop his friends wasting their energy.

And then he told us about the Theatre Café, and I didn't know if I should kiss him into next week or faint from all the swooning.

It was just past one in the morning when we got home, which meant we had six hours until Bethany got up.

We could get a lot done in six hours.

Gabriel put his key in the door, and I placed my hand on his, making him stop and turn to me.

“You okay?”

I nodded. “You need to get rid of the sitter as soon as possible,” I said, and reached around to the crotch of his pants. I let out a small moan as I found him hard as rock in my hand. “I have plans for this.”

“Believe me, I have plans too,” he said and opened the door, gesturing for me to go in first.

The sitter was gone in less than sixty seconds. As Gabriel shut the door, I slid my hands around his waist.

“Did you have a good time tonight?”

“Of course,” I replied. “I was with all my favorite people. *And* I got to sing. Anyway, the night’s not over yet.”

He tilted his head to one side, and I don’t know if it was the way his eyes seemed to narrow ever so slightly, or the way he seemed to tower even taller over me than he did normally, but I felt like he was getting ready to devour me. And I was looking forward to being his prey. The starting pistol had been fired on my heartbeat, which set off at a sprint. “I think you’ve been a little wound up for me all night.”

He slid his hands over my ass and yanked the bottom of my dress up. Jesus, how could this man be so polite in public? So taciturn and suave when he was in company? Then a switch flipped as soon as we were alone, and he turned dirty and provocative and knee-weakening sexy.

His hands slid into my panties, his fingers into my folds, and I sighed with relief that finally, I was right where I wanted to be.

“Shit,” he spat and spun me around so I was pressed up against the door. “Have you been this wet for me all night?”

I nodded as he lifted my leg over his hip and slid his fingers inside me.

“You’re soaked,” he said, pushing his fingers inside, his thumb finding my clit. “I’m surprised you lasted this long without an orgasm.” He coaxed my g-spot awake with his fingers and I couldn’t stop myself from twisting my hips to get more. I needed relief from this built-up need I had for him. “I’m shocked you weren’t begging for me in the cab. If you’d have said, I would have been more than happy to have reached up your skirt into your hot, tight pussy and made you come.”

I tried to keep control over my breath as he spoke, but it was no easy feat. He was right. I’d been so wound up all evening. So desperate for him. Now that he was touching me, I was already so close to the orgasm I’d been imagining getting all evening.

In a flash he let go of me, took his hand away, and stepped back, shoving his hands in his pockets. I stayed pinned against the door, unable to function. My disappointment at his lost touch felt like a chasm opening in my chest.

He pulled out a foil square and in record time, had his pants open, the condom on, and my leg around his waist. “This what you need?” he asked as he thrust into me.

It was exactly what I needed, and I exhaled with relief at having him inside me finally. “Yes,” I choked out. “It’s all I need.” I held onto him, clinging to his thick, muscular arms as he pounded into me, just as I’d hoped

he would.

He fucked me with hard, deliberate, achingly deep movements, and I could do nothing but let him. Nothing but give myself up to him. I'd spent the evening wondering how I was going to seduce him, but I should have known that seduction wasn't necessary when it came to Gabriel. He knew what he wanted and he took it, and I was happy to let him.

"I've been thinking about this all night. I've been imagining all the ways I'm going to fuck you," he said between heavy breaths. "First it's going to be like this up against the door. Then I'm going to go down on you and make you scream. Then I'm going to fuck your mouth. And you're going to come and come and come."

It was too much. His words. The friction. The feeling of being impaled on him, my back against the hard wood of the door. "Gabriel," I cried out.

"That's right," he said, his voice softening, his pace slowing but not stopping as I shuddered against him.

He lifted me up as I floated down from my climax, and I pulled him closer. I wanted to stay like this for as long as possible—him and me, joined. Connected. Together. In every way.

"You okay?" he asked as he sat me on the kitchen table and began to undress me and then himself. His cock stood thick and upright against his belly, and my eyes trailed up to its crown, to his flat stomach, his hard chest, his wide shoulders, and that oh-so-beautiful face.

I nodded.

"You seem . . . a little sad."

I shook my head. "I'm not sad at all." I paused. My instinct was to hold back. To keep things sunny and light. But the fact was, he seemed to like to hear everything about me. The good *and* the bad. And I wanted him to know how I felt about him. I wanted to be real with him. "I *really* like you, Gabriel," I said. It was important he knew that. Important that he understood this wasn't just about the sexual chemistry. It wasn't just about the way he was wise and caring. It wasn't any one thing. It was everything.

He paused and looked at me as I sat naked on the table in front of him and cupped my face. "I *really* like you too." He stroked his thumb over my cheekbone. "More and more."

I tilted my head into his hand, and he bent to press his lips against mine. If whatever we had was growing stronger as time went on, then how was I going to feel when August arrived, fresh with its invitation to travel? Would

my wanderlust fade, burrow itself beneath my feelings for Gabriel? We had just over a month before I'd be gone. And then what?

Before I could drown in what-ifs, Gabriel's insistent tongue and urgent lips worked their way down my neck, between my breasts and over my belly. Roughly, he pulled my legs apart and kneeled before he buried his head between my thighs. He was impatient and greedy, and he made me feel as if I were the most valuable prize he could ever wish for.

His tongue soothed me at first, long, languid, slow strokes that calmed my pulsing clitoris and gave me a chance to revel in his desire for me. I sighed and his tongue grew firmer and more insistent, ratcheting up my yearning for more of him. He knew, and began to circle and flick his tongue in a circuitous release of pleasure that climbed up my body.

My body had surrendered and my orgasm galloped toward me, unrelenting and urgent. Just as I began to fall, he took away his tongue and his fingers and stood.

My eyes widened as I waited for him to explain himself. But he said nothing and simply lay me down on the table as if I were the main course at his one-man banquet. He stood at one end of the table and I shifted, understanding Gabriel was a man who always kept his word.

He was going to fuck my mouth.

He guided my head off the end of the table and tilted it back. "I'm going to get so deep—right at the back of your throat."

I groaned and opened my legs so he could see what his words did to me. What his tongue and his cock had already done to me. I was red and swollen and so, so wet.

He slid against my tongue with a groan and swept his hands through my hair, holding my head as he pulled back and rammed his cock into my throat.

Any other man and I would have said no, but I wanted this just as much as he did. I wanted him to fuck me exactly how he wanted to fuck me. I wanted him to take everything I had to give. I wanted everything with him.

He slid his hands over my breasts, twisting my nipples, causing me to moan at the sparks of pleasure it set up as he kept fucking me where I lay.

"Autumn, you're so gorgeous," he growled. He dipped his hand between my legs. "And so fucking wet."

I came as soon as he touched me. Shuddering as he withdrew from my mouth. "Oh baby. You're still so wound up."

Two orgasms and I still wanted more.

“I should have cut this evening short. Made some sort of excuse and come home to fill you up.”

He walked around the table and scooped me up, this time placing me at the edge of the oak. “I think you just need a good, hard fuck again, don’t you?”

He grabbed a condom from where he’d left the packet from the first time, but I didn’t want him to use it.

“I’m taking contraceptives,” I said. “And I was tested before I left the U.S.”

He stalked back from where he’d left me with my legs open, waiting for him. “You want me inside you, skin to skin,” he said as a flat statement. “I was tested after my ex-wife left and there’s been no one since.”

“Yes, Gabriel,” I said, clawing at his chest.

He stood between my legs and positioned himself at my entrance. “You want it?”

I nodded.

He pushed in so slowly, our eyes locked on each other as if we were stepping over some kind of line in the sand.

“It’s so good, Gabriel.” He felt so perfect. As if my body had been waiting for him my entire life.

“Because you’re amazing.”

“With you,” I replied. I was amazing with him. There were no reservations about the strength of my feelings, about what kind of man he was or how he cared for me. And he cared for the whole me, not just the piece of me that I chose to show the world. He liked my shade as well as my light. I didn’t think that was possible. The only obstacles between us were external, and the longer I knew him, and the deeper my feelings grew, the more the issues that once looked unsurmountable seemed to diminish in size and importance.

Was that what love was? Something that could conquer all?

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Gabriel

I loved fucking Autumn. So much so that I wondered if I'd ever be able to exist without having her naked beneath me. I certainly didn't want to find out. But more than fucking her, I loved being with her afterward and before and all the times in between. It felt so natural and right. And she was so funny and interesting—I was becoming completely captivated by her.

"It's late," she said as she took her legs from where they laid over my lap as we recovered on the sofa. I'd managed to pull on some boxers and trousers. Autumn was wearing my shirt, which made her almost unbearably tempting, and we'd just been sitting together, chatting about nothing and everything. "You have to be up early for work."

She was right. It would be dawn soon, but I wasn't ready for her to go to bed alone. I wanted more time with her before I had to give her up. "I haven't given you your birthday gift yet."

"I think you gave me your gift already," she said. "Four times, if I'm counting correctly."

I grinned as I stood and held out my hand. "Well, I know nothing can top *that*, but I do have an actual gift for you."

"Honestly, Gabriel, I've had a more than enjoyable evening. Eaten out at a fancy restaurant. Been eaten out by a fancy guy. And of course, there was the singing. What more can I ask for?"

I chuckled and led her to my workshop. "It's only a small gift, so don't get your hopes up." Since Autumn and I had started sleeping together, I'd spent less and less time in my sanctuary. But when I had been in here, I'd

been working on Autumn's gift. I flicked on the light and looked over at the bench where I'd wrapped what I'd made with a red velvet bow.

"My hopes are always high," she said. It was true—despite her clouds, she was relentlessly optimistic about everything.

"Here," I said, indicating the box on the bench. "Usually I refinish, restore, and bring something back to life. This is the first thing I've made from scratch."

Her wide, innocent eyes peered at the box. "Gabriel," she said softly. I wasn't sure I'd heard the catch in her voice before. I could tell she was surprised, but was she trying to save her feelings by masking her disappointment? "This is beautiful." No, Autumn's truth always shone through. She stroked her hand across the waxed walnut lid of the square jewelry box.

"I could have bought you something but—"

"This is the best present you could have ever given me. I can't believe you made this for me." With one hand still on the box, she slid the other up my chest. I grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles.

"It's a jewelry box. I know Hollie gives you her designs and I know how important your sister is to you . . ."

Her eyes went glassy and she looked away, dipping to examine the box in more detail.

"It opens," I said, chuckling at her awe and pulling at the bow.

She glanced at me with a smile and then lifted the lid.

"American walnut outside. And English sycamore inside." I hadn't realized it until now, but it was like the box represented us. American and English, bound together as one.

"It's amazing. I've never owned anything so beautiful. You made this for me?"

"Yes, of course for you. I wasn't sure how it was going to work out because, like I said, I don't normally make things from scratch. But it didn't turn out too badly." It had taken a while to make but I'd gotten up early for the last month or so and stolen a few hours here and there when Autumn had gone to bed.

She ran her fingers around the internal squares that would separate each piece of jewelry. "It's just so pretty."

"There's two layers there. The top is a tray that lifts out." I showed her, pulling out the tray and replacing it once she'd peered into the space

underneath.

She put her arms around my waist and just seemed to stare at it.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a gift that I love more than this.” She looked up at me. “‘Thank you’ doesn’t seem to be enough.”

I wanted to tell her that it was me who should thank her. Thank her for coming into my world and sprinkling her sunshine onto my dark soul. Thank her for warming me with her light. Thank her for being just what I needed. “You don’t even need to say thank you. I wanted to do it.”

I wanted to give her something of me. I wanted her to have something special. She deserved it all.

“How am I ever going to let you go if you keep doing stuff like this for me?”

What she said was like a knife piercing my armor. I realized I didn’t want her to picture a future without me. “Maybe it’s all part of my plan to keep you,” I said, trying to use the same breezy intonation she had but meaning every word. Maybe that was why I’d given up sleep to make this box. Subconsciously, perhaps it was my invitation to her to stay in my life. To stay in Bethany’s life. Neither of us wanted to lose her.

She looked at me with forlorn eyes, her smile having faded, and wrapped her arms around my waist. “I’m serious,” she said. “I really like you and when I move out—”

“I’m serious too,” I interrupted, not wanting her to finish her thought.

“Can we figure something out?” she asked. “I know I like to see the bright side of things, but I’m not sure there’s an upside to not being with you.”

I exhaled, grateful that she’d verbalized what I’d been feeling. Of course it would be Autumn, the bravest woman I knew. “I’m sure we can figure something out.” I wasn’t sure. I knew I wouldn’t hold her back if what she wanted to do was travel the world or move back to America. I knew she was young enough that a lot could change in a few months. But I had started to wonder whether or not Autumn was someone I could accept a promise from.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gabriel

Mike's very grey office suited him. I just didn't know why I was sitting here first thing this morning. We'd gone over a few strategy points on the Rome deal, but nothing that couldn't have been discussed over the phone.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing." *Other than the fact that you called me across town for no reason.* "Why do you ask?"

"You don't normally look so happy."

I chuckled. "Sorry to disappoint you, Mike. I'm going to leave you to it. I've got a busy day." I stood and headed out, still laughing to myself. Mike wasn't the first person to mention my mood today. This morning my secretary had said I sounded like I'd caught up on my sleep. Little did she know that I'd had little more than an hour on Saturday night.

But I'd choose a naked Autumn over sleep any day of the week.

And apparently naked time with Autumn had created my good mood. Perhaps it would be a permanent shift over time.

As I got out into the street, my phone buzzed in my hand. It was my solicitor—perfect, she was due to call when the divorce papers finalized. At this rate my positivity would at least last the day.

"Gillian," I said as I answered the phone. "I'm actually not too far from your offices. You want me to call in and sign the papers?"

"Actually no." She cleared her throat. "I've not had the papers yet, but her solicitor has called this morning with a request from her."

The blood in my veins stilled and I stopped in my tracks. All I could see

was Bethany. Happy, laughing, mine.

I put my finger in my free ear because I didn't want to mishear anything. "What does she want?" It could only be Bethany. What else?

"A meeting."

There was no way that woman was going anywhere near my child. She'd proven just how unreliable and untrustworthy she was by walking out. She didn't have Bethany's best interests at heart at all and I didn't want anyone near my daughter who was focused on anything other than what was best for Bethany.

"I'll see her but I'm not taking Bethany. She's not going to lay eyes on my child." A whoosh of noise from the street filled my ears as if I'd been brought back to life. I'd crawl from the grave to protect my daughter.

"If it makes you feel any better, there was no mention of Bethany. She wants a one-on-one conversation with you."

I took a couple of deep breaths and tried to think. What was she up to? After all these years she suddenly wanted a meeting? It didn't make sense.

Unless it was about money. Her family had money but perhaps they'd cut her off? Maybe she just thought she was owed. Whatever the reason, my ex had changed her mind and had decided she wanted some of my fortune after all.

"I don't want to see her. Can't you just get a number? Find out how much she wants."

"I've tried that," Gillian said. "She's assured me she doesn't want money."

Irritation prickled at the back of my neck. She might be saying that. But she'd also said *'til death do us part*. And that she loved Bethany. And me. I'd never believe another word that came out of her mouth.

"Right. And *I* don't want to see *her*. I'm not interested."

"Gabriel, I understand how you feel but we need to find out what she wants. We're in touching distance of getting this divorce, and if that's something you want to pursue, you should probably just agree to a meeting."

I wondered if this was how my clients felt when I advised them to do something they didn't want to do. The difference was this was personal. Not business. I didn't want to sit in the same room as the woman who'd left our baby. Who'd left me. Who'd broken every promise she'd ever made.

"A meeting about what?"

"Maybe she wants to explain. She did leave in rather a rush."

I wasn't sure it had been a rush. She'd taken every single item of clothing she owned. And over the months after she'd left, when I'd come out of the initial fog of grief at losing my wife, I'd realized there was nothing in our home that had been hers before we'd married. Her graduation photos. The pictures of her and her sister. Even the chair that had been her grandmother's had mysteriously disappeared. She hadn't just taken off on impulse. She'd planned it. Every time I thought about it, it was like her leaving for the first time, and a fresh wave of anger engulfed me. She hadn't wanted to talk then. She hadn't wanted to discuss anything as she was removing every trace of her life from our house. She'd done that in complete secret.

"Maybe you'll find out why she left," Gillian said.

"I don't care why she left." Of course, I'd tortured myself in the aftermath. How had I driven away my daughter's mother? Why hadn't she come to me? What had I missed? And then answers started to drip through. Alternatives that came to me in the middle of the night.

She'd met someone else.

She'd been having an affair all along.

She'd only been after my money.

She didn't like being a mother.

But none of the answers mattered because there was one thing I knew for certain—she'd lied to me. She'd lied when she'd said she loved me. She'd lied when she'd said she loved my daughter.

"If you don't want answers, then think practically," Gillian said. "What we want to avoid is her turning up on your doorstep out of the blue."

The thought crawled over my skin like a cockroach.

"This way you get to control the situation. You'll know exactly where you're going to see her, when, and for how long."

She had a point. If she was determined to speak to me, she'd find a way. She knew where I worked. Where I lived. And if she came to the house and Bethany was there, with Autumn . . .

"Okay, I'll meet her. But I want it to happen soon. Your offices."

"Her solicitor suggested the two of you could have lunch."

Her solicitor could fuck right off. Lunch was never going to happen. "If she wants a meeting, tell her it will be at your offices Monday at four. I'm not negotiating on this."

"Very well. I'll go back and see what they say."

"Tell them it's a binary choice. Meeting at your offices or no meeting."

I shut off the call and headed back to the office. I had a job to do. A daughter to provide for. I wasn't going to waste time thinking about my past. I was going to focus on my future.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Autumn

Hollie and I sat at a table that looked like something out of a magazine—glinting flatware, cream orchid head in a tiny vase, and a crisp white linen tablecloth. I bet burgers weren't on the menu here. We were by the window and could see the Thames peeking through the bright green leaves of the trees. Even now I was constantly surprised at the amount of green in London—far more than I'd been expecting. I was forever stumbling on a square or a park I'd never heard of and no one had ever mentioned, and I loved to explore.

“How did you talk Dexter into bringing me here today? Doesn't he want to taste all the food for the wedding?” I asked as I glanced around, trying to take everything in from the deep pile carpets to the ornate gold and frosted glass light fixtures over the bar.

“I guess he's used to this kind of thing. Going to lunch at the Savoy is no big deal to him.”

I could have lunch at the Savoy every day for the rest of my life and I still wouldn't get used to it. “But it's his wedding.”

I was pretty sure I'd be able to be a wedding organizer by the time Hollie and Dexter were married. I'd been happy to discuss every detail with Hollie and support her in her choices so she didn't feel guilty or awkward. The money, the glamour, and the people she now mixed with changed the rules for her, and I knew it still made her a little uncomfortable. Even I found it intimidating at times and I wasn't living with it every day. But, as always, if we did things together, nothing was unsurmountable.

The waitress poured two glasses of champagne and Hollie and I clinked as if champagne at lunchtime was just one of those things that the Lumen sisters did.

“He saw the menu and said he liked the sound of everything. And he’s not coming back from Dubai until this afternoon.”

I took the cream card from the center of the table and scanned down the list of food. The bits I recognized sounded amazing. The more I ate at these kinds of restaurants, the more I realized that I liked most things. “I’m happy to be his stand-in. I feel like I’m enjoying Dexter’s lifestyle on his behalf, which is fine by me. Do you feel like you’re missing out doing this stuff with him?”

“Not really. He’s busy. I’m busy. The wedding is no big deal, or so I keep telling myself. If it makes you feel better, he’s figuring out the wine by himself and he came to a dress fitting last week.”

“He saw your dress?” I asked.

“He has a great eye for design, and I want him to like whatever I wear.” She shrugged. “You think that’s a problem? It’s only a small wedding. It’s not like we’re following all the traditions.”

“I think you should make your own traditions and it’s true, he has a great eye.”

“Also, he’s going to make some jewelry for me. He needed pictures so Primrose can design something.”

I laughed. “Wow. Bespoke jewelry. It might be a small wedding but it won’t be cheap.”

A waitress interrupted to put something involving shrimp in front of us. “This is the first of the three starters.”

“We’re eating every option?” I asked, wondering if I should have dug out something to wear that had an elasticized waist. I’m sure I’d like the food, but I didn’t need three of everything.

“*Tasting it.* You don’t have to finish every plate but we have to know what it’s like. How else would we choose?”

“If you say so.” I wasn’t sure I’d be able to resist finishing every plate.

“So, how goes the job hunt?” Hollie asked. “Anything I can do?”

I shook my head as I tried to ignore the swirl of dread in my gut. “I’ve applied for lots of different things. There aren’t many management training programs starting in September that still have vacancies, but there are a few. And then I’ve applied for some entry-level positions at banks and insurers. I

have a couple of interviews next week.” I’d rather focus on the food than have the inevitable conversation hurtling toward me. I didn’t want to think about the future, all the *buts* and *what-ifs*. I took a forkful of the shrimp and as I suspected, it tasted heavenly.

“So, you’re definitely going to stay in London?” she asked, bringing me back down to reality.

I wanted to be here with Hollie but realistically, I wasn’t sure that was possible. I was going to try. For now I didn’t need to mention the jobs I’d applied for in Portland, New York, and Tampa. Hopefully, I’d find something here. “I’m not sure. If I don’t get something by the beginning of August, then nothing will happen until September. The new nanny starts in a month and —”

“So, you come to live with me and Dexter. I told you that I can use you as an assistant.”

I was grateful to Hollie but I didn’t want to be her assistant. I wanted my own thing. I wanted to be independent and not have my big sister look after me for the rest of my life. “I know but—”

“And when I say assistant, I mean business partner really. You could really help on the marketing side—you’re creative and clever and organized. I’d be lucky to have you.”

“I agree, you would be lucky,” I said, grinning at her. “But I’m way too expensive for you. And seriously, Hollie, I appreciate the offer, but I need to figure this out and get something on my own.”

She didn’t say it, but the question hung in the air like expensive perfume: *What if you don’t find another job?*

“But you’ll come live with us when the new nanny arrives? Just until you work it out?”

I nodded. It was that or go back to Oregon. “I’m travelling in August. I thought about cancelling my trip, but nobody is holding interviews in August. It’s now or September. And I have the money saved up . . . I won’t spend all of it.” Six months of being paid as a London nanny with no living expenses had been good for my savings, but the idea of spending so much when I didn’t have a job to come back to pinched at me. There was a part of me that wondered if I should just get another nanny job. Just until I found something more permanent. I really didn’t want to go back to Oregon. I didn’t want to leave Hollie. And Gabriel. And Bethany.

Gabriel and I hadn’t talked about what happened next. And although I

knew the things he whispered into my ear when we lay naked, breathless with our limbs tangled together—knew the way he looked at me when we played Monopoly or cooked or I made him watch musicals—I just didn't know how things would work when the new nanny arrived. When I moved out, I should ask him. But it seemed pointless until I knew something more about my future—at the very least, what continent I'd be living on.

“You've wanted to go for so long, Autumn. You should definitely still go and see the rest of Europe.”

“You never know, I might get one of the jobs I'm interviewing for next week.”

Hollie nodded enthusiastically. “You're sure to. You went to a great college and I bet you give a great interview.”

“Anyway,” I said, wanting to change topic. “You think Mom and Dad will cope with all this?” I said, scanning the well-heeled diners and ever-attentive wait staff.

“They'll figure it out. They don't pay rent since Dexter bought the trailer park, so they're used to having a bit more cash and . . . I've had Mom send me their measurements. They've picked out outfits online that I'm having made for them.”

I laughed out of shock. “They're going to have bespoke clothes?”

“Honestly, it's a bit of an excuse. If I organize their outfits, I know they'll actually have something to wear and not turn around the night before and realize they need to go shopping.”

“You've thought of everything.”

“Apart from you. What are you wearing?”

I rolled my eyes. “You're not buying me something.”

She winced, wrinkling up her nose. “I know you're going to think I'm controlling and that's true. But I saw this, and I just loved it and so I went ahead and bought it.” She pulled out one of those fancy cardboard bags with *Alexander McQueen* emblazoned across the front in a font that just screamed expensive.

“Are you serious?” I asked, half mad at her and half super-excited to see what was inside.

“Wait until you see it. It's so good.” She swiped on her phone. “I took a screenshot from the website. Look, see.”

I took in the picture of a white, ruched bustier with black pants. She knew me too well. It was far too amazing to say no to. It was the kind of elegantly

chic thing I'd see in magazines and wonder what kind of woman I'd feel like if I wore an outfit like that.

"It's a jumpsuit even though it looks like a top, and that sweetheart neckline is going to look amazing on you."

"It's gorgeous," I agreed, feeling a little conflicted. "But I've come to London to be independent. I don't need you to buy me—" The fact was I was in a very different position now than when I'd landed here. I no longer had a job to look forward to.

"I know you can stand on your own two feet now, but I'm still your sister. And since I'm not having bridesmaids, I think it's only fair that you let me buy your outfit. If you don't like this one, then something else, your choice."

"You're insane," I said, holding the bag to my chest as if she was going to grab it from me. "As if I'd let you take this back now. It's mine."

She grinned, happy for me and happy she'd gotten her way. "It should fit. Let me know if it doesn't."

The waitress came and delivered the next starter, which seemed to be the vegetarian option. It tasted divine whether it was cabbage or cardboard.

"You're too good to me," I said. "But that's been true forever."

"You're just as good back to me. It's so amazing to have you in London. I still can't believe we're both here."

"I can't believe how much I like it here. Oregon is familiar but it doesn't feel like home anymore." I wasn't sure that London felt like home either, but it was getting that way. Having Hollie here helped. And Gabriel.

She nodded her head as if she knew exactly what I was saying. "How is Gabriel doing?"

"He's good. Busy at work but no change there. The guy is a workaholic. But he's so kind and easy to talk to and you've seen him with Bethany. He's taking her to paint pottery today; can you believe it? He's such a good dad."

"Not to mention hot. How's he coping with the divorce and everything? I can't believe that wife of his wants to talk to him after all these years."

I paused, a forkful of who-knows-what suspended mid-air while I repeated what she'd said in my head to make sure I hadn't heard her wrong. "His wife what?" I asked, just to be sure.

Hollie's eyes widened as she realized I didn't know what she was talking about. I tried to keep my breathing steady despite my tightening jaw and the uptick in my pulse. "I thought he would have told you."

That makes two of us. "What's going on, Hollie?" There was no way she

was going to clam up now.

“Maybe I have it wrong, but I think Gabriel told Dexter that his ex-wife wanted a meeting before she agreed to a divorce.”

My stomach roiled. I put down my fork and leaned back as if to get as far away from what she was saying as possible. “He hasn’t told me that.” I tried to file through the reasons why he wouldn’t have said anything to me.

It was no big deal and he’d forgotten.

He’d told her he wouldn’t meet her.

He didn’t want me to know. He didn’t want me to know. He didn’t want me to know.

“I’m sure he’ll tell you. He’s probably just trying to process it.”

I nodded, trying to swallow down the sharp pangs of insecurity that stuck in my throat. This couldn’t be as bad as it seemed. I just wouldn’t allow it to be. “It’s probably because it’s no big deal. Or he’s said he won’t meet her.”

She sighed. “I think he’s agreed to meet her. I’m sorry. I’m sure it’s just to sign the papers. Or maybe she wants to explain herself or something.”

I focused on keeping my breath steady. This was a private thing between Gabriel and his wife. It was okay that he’d not told me he was meeting her. “It’s very personal,” I said, trying to convince myself this was fine—I was fine. “And nothing to do with me if you think about it.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Hollie said. “I mean, you’re a couple now, aren’t you?”

It felt like we were a couple, but no words had been exchanged. I knew he wasn’t sleeping with anyone else. Not only because we shared the same home but because of the way he touched me, the way he looked at me. But we didn’t wake up in the same bed. We weren’t together in front of Bethany. Perhaps he wasn’t part of a couple in his mind.

“He certainly cares about you,” Hollie said, trying to be reassuring. “There’s no way he would have risked upsetting Dexter if he didn’t.”

That was true. I knew how much Gabriel cared about his friends. And I was certain he cared about me. I knew he did. I just didn’t know what that meant. The strength of our bond hadn’t been tested and I had no idea whether it would last an argument about pineapple on pizza, let alone the stress of a divorce or a wife who might want him back. I knew what I felt for him was nothing I’d felt for anyone. But even I didn’t know what that meant for Gabriel or for our future as a couple.

“I think he just wants to get it over with,” Hollie said. “The meeting, that

is.”

“He hasn’t seen her since she left.” Perhaps when they met, she’d realize she was still madly in love with him and want him back. I swallowed, trying to keep my breathing steady. “What if she wants him back?”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that,” Hollie said. “She caused way too much damage.”

Was it damage that could be repaired? They were still married after all. She’d been Gabriel’s family not so long ago and she was still Bethany’s mother. It would be naïve to think that wasn’t a strong bond. Perhaps it was a bond that was bent but not broken.

“I guess this is good in a way,” I said, pulling back my shoulders. “He’ll get the closure he needs or—” I didn’t want to think about the alternative.

I wasn’t ready to give him up. I’d never be ready to give him up. Gabriel was the best man I’d ever known. But if I understood that, then maybe his wife had come to her senses and realized that too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Gabriel

This meeting would be utterly pointless. When I'd pressed my lawyer for more detail on what my ex-wife wanted to discuss, I'd simply been told that she wanted to talk about what happened. Well, I wasn't interested. But I'd treat this like our monthly partners meeting: I wasn't interested in most of those but I sat through them anyway. Usually, I spent the time figuring out the answer to some complex tax issue that was stalling my current acquisition, or a real estate problem that had affected price on my latest disposal. This would be no different. I would sit there, but I wouldn't engage.

I'd insisted the meeting would be at my lawyers' offices and in front of our respective representation. I didn't want her to think this meeting was personal.

It was business, nothing more.

I caught the lift before the doors closed and went to press the button to the eighth floor, but it was already illuminated. I straightened and faced the doors, wondering whether a preemptive bid on the tech deal I was working on was the way to go.

The lift stopped at every floor and I stepped aside, letting people from behind me exit. On the third floor, I looked up as the doors closed and there she was.

The woman I'd stood at the altar with and vowed to love the rest of my life.

The woman I'd brought a child into the world with.

The woman who'd walked out on our family with no explanation.

“Gabriel,” she said in a whisper.

I turned back to face the doors and she stepped closer.

“You look good, Gabe.”

No one called me Gabe except her.

I hated it. When we were married, I’d thought it was intimate. Special. But all of it had just been fake. All the times she’d said she loved me. All the plans we’d made for the future. Nothing about her had been real.

“How’s Bethany?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure I could endure this meeting without burning the place to the ground. How dare she ask about *my* daughter? I ignored her and focused on the numbers above the doors as they flashed four, five, six, seven—the doors opened, and I waited for her to step out. When she didn’t, I went first and headed straight to the reception desk without looking back. The receptionist showed me to the meeting room and my lawyer met me at the door.

We sat and waited. Gillian knew me better than to try to make small talk.

Someone knocked on the door and I stood, my eyes fixed on the blank wall in front of me as my ex and her lawyer were shown into the meeting room. I sat, not wanting to greet either of them.

“Thank you for coming, Gabriel,” Penelope said. I’d forgotten the timbre of her voice and how sweet she sounded. It was one of the first things that had attracted me to her. But she was anything but sweet.

I looked her right in the eye. “I have twenty minutes and then I have to get to another meeting.”

“Always so busy,” she said with a smile.

I didn’t reply. This wasn’t a conversation as far as I was concerned. It was a means to an end. If I sat here for twenty minutes, I’d get the divorce papers signed. It was as simple as that.

“Well, I appreciate you making time in your day for me,” she said when she realized I wasn’t going to respond.

Without warning, she stood and moved her chair around the table so we weren’t across from each other but kitty corner. What was she doing?

“I want to say I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry for not talking to you. I’m sorry for leaving and I’m sorry for not being in contact since. I know it must be impossible to forgive me, but I wanted you to understand that I know I was wrong, and I take full responsibility.” She took a deep breath when she finished, seeming relieved to have it all out.

It took all my strength not to laugh. She said it as if she was expecting me

to be grateful. That I would tell her that as long as she knew it was wrong, it was fine—she could do anything she liked if only she accepted responsibility. But I didn't laugh. I didn't say or do anything. I just focused on the clock overhead and how I only had eighteen more minutes of this to endure.

"I don't want you to think I didn't love you," she continued. As if I cared. "I did. And . . . still do."

This time I couldn't hold back my laugh. What she was saying was so ludicrous. So utterly ridiculous.

"It's true, Gabe. I never stopped loving you. I was just scared that my life was all planned out. I was young. And bored. And tired. And I wanted to explore what else life had to offer."

I glanced at my solicitor, wondering if we could wrap this up early. I didn't need Penelope's explanations. What was done was done. It didn't matter how we had gotten to this place—we were here.

"I left because I would have turned into someone else if I'd stayed."

I didn't respond. But part of me wanted to. The lawyer in me wanted to rebut her arguments. We all change and grow as the years go by. I'd thought we were going to do that together. As a couple—as a family.

I glanced at the clock again. There was too much time left.

"I made a lot of mistakes," she continued. "And I understand I hurt you. And I hurt our daughter."

She hadn't hurt Bethany. When Penelope left, Bethany had been too young to remember having a mother. She and I had been fine, and were still. We were a team.

"But everyone deserves a second chance. And I'm asking you to give me mine."

My gut twisted like it was an old towel being wrung out by a heavyweight boxer. She couldn't be serious. "You're asking me what?" I said, almost hissing the words.

"I want my family back." Her voice hitched at the end of the sentence. A ghost of a memory made me flinch.

I'd heard apologies like these a long time ago. Over and over, I'd heard my father ask for one more chance. And another one. And another one. Infinite fresh starts hadn't been enough for him.

"Your family doesn't exist," I said simply. What did she think? That she was going to meet me after three years and I was going to be so grateful that she'd come back, I'd welcome her with open arms? Did she really think I was

that desperate? What could she possibly think she had to offer Bethany or me? Nothing except disorder and broken promises. Nothing except a cloud of expectation that it would happen again. I didn't want to exist in a world where every day I remembered that Bethany and I weren't enough to make Penelope stay the first time, and that we probably wouldn't be able to keep her from leaving again.

I wouldn't put up with that for me, and certainly not for Bethany. My daughter deserved better. She deserved to be brought up by a parent who kept their promises and loved her enough to stay even when life got difficult.

"I know you're a good man, Gabe. I knew Bethany was safe in your hands."

I tried not to roll my eyes as she spoke.

"I needed to leave," she continued. "I needed to go to understand how much I had at home."

She had no home with me or Bethany.

"And now, I'm back and I want to be part of your lives."

The buzzer went off on my phone and I stood. "Twenty minutes is up. I have a meeting."

I swept out of the office, knowing that by the time I reached the lobby, Gillian would be calling.

She rang before the lift doors opened.

"She wants to see Bethany," she said before I had a chance to say anything. "She said that if you won't take her back, then she wants a custody arrangement."

My lungs filled with concrete and I sucked in a breath, trying to find air. Custody? "She's a stranger to my daughter," I choked out. "She can't do that, can she?"

I staggered to the door, desperate to steady my breath.

"She's the biological mother. Of course she won't get fifty-fifty custody at this point, but the court will allow visitation."

After all this time, she could just waltz back into our lives and try to pick up where she left off? And just expect that we could all go back to how it was before?

"No," I said.

"We can fight," she replied. "But given her position, we might be better off trying to come to an agreement. You might end up with more that way, Gabriel."

“No,” I repeated. There was no way I was letting her anywhere near Bethany.

“Think about it. We want to avoid a court battle. It’s expensive and will take you away from your daughter. In the end, you’ll have to give her something.”

I hung up. I couldn’t listen to it any longer. I needed to get home. I had to protect what was mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Autumn

I put on Bethany's nightlight and folded back her bed covers. She hopped in without me having to ask twice.

"Sleep tight," I said, smoothing back her hair. "Don't let the bed bugs bite." I kissed her on the forehead and headed out, leaving her alone with her dad. I watched from the doorway as Gabriel bent and told his daughter he loved her.

"Can you stay home tomorrow, Daddy?"

"I don't know, darling. But I'll try to come home early more."

"Margaret likes to have dinner with you," she said, referring to her dolly. "And Bear Bear."

"I like having dinner with them as well."

Something bad had happened. He never came home from work early but this afternoon, he'd returned, changed, and spent the rest of the afternoon with us. Baking animal cookies and decorating them before having a doll's carpet picnic, during which Bethany licked the icing off at least three quarters of everyone else's cookies.

I didn't question him being home. I asked him if he wanted me to leave him and Bethany together and he'd answered with a squeeze of my hand.

It was nice having him spend the afternoon with us unexpectedly, but I couldn't shake the feeling that tonight, once Bethany was in bed, he was going to tell me about his wife wanting to see him.

I padded downstairs and fixed myself a soda. "You want anything?" I asked as he arrived in the kitchen. "Seems like maybe you need a beer to take

the edge off.”

“Yeah. I’ll get a beer. You want one?”

I shook my head, raising the can of soda in my hand. No, I wanted to keep a clear head. I needed to be calm and rational without alcohol putting its two cents into the mix.

“Bad day?” I asked as we headed into the TV room.

“Yeah,” he replied. The dark circles under his eyes made him look older than he was. I was sure he hadn’t had those when he left this morning. When we sat, he shifted me closer to him and put my legs over his.

“Wanna talk about it?” I asked.

“Not really,” he said with a sigh. “But I need to.”

“Whatever it is, there’s always a silver lining,” I said. I believed it was true. Whatever life brought, there were always lessons to be learned, maybe even laughter to be had along the way.

“I wish that were true.”

I slipped my hand into his, wanting to reassure him that everything would work out.

“I saw Penelope today.”

Even though I knew she’d wanted to see him—had known for days that it was a possibility—it was still a shock to hear him say her name and to know that they’d been together today.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I should have told you that it was going to happen, but I thought it would just be a formality. I assumed she just wanted closure and then she’d disappear again, like she did before.”

So she wasn’t going to disappear. She was back. It had always been a possibility; I just thought I could wish it away.

“But it’s not a formality?” What was he trying to say? Were they getting back together?

“You don’t seem shocked,” he said. “I thought you might be upset with me because I’d not told you.”

I wasn’t going to lie to him. “Actually, Hollie told me by accident when I met her for lunch. She assumed I’d know.”

He closed his eyes as if disappointed. “I’m sorry. I should have told you. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I figured you’d tell me if you thought it would affect . . .” I wanted to say *us*, but I wasn’t sure what *us* meant. “If you thought I needed to know.”

“I wanted to but . . .” We were both holding back. We were both not

saying things and I wasn't sure if that was because Gabriel was unsure of what to say or because he thought I wouldn't want to hear it. "Anyway, for whatever reason, I thought I'd handle it and she'd sign the papers and that would be it."

"But instead?"

He groaned and tipped his head back to rest on the couch. "Instead, she wants my forgiveness and she wants to see Bethany. She's threatening a custody battle."

A shiver of shock rushed up my body. I pulled my legs from his and sat up. "She can't do that, can she?"

"Apparently she can."

"But she left. And Bethany wouldn't know her if she met her."

"I know," he said. "I said all this to my solicitor, but it doesn't matter apparently."

"You're a great lawyer. You'll fight it."

He paused, a look of concentration on his face. Running through the options, I guessed.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. Maybe I'll let her see Bethany, she'll get spooked again, and will disappear for another three years."

"Spooked?" I asked. We'd never discussed why his wife left and Hollie said no one knew. Not even Gabriel. "Is that why she left before?"

He pushed a hand through his hair. "She'd never offered an explanation until today. She said something about how she was young and bored and wanted to see what life had to offer."

"And now what?" I asked. "Now she's decided the grass isn't greener after all?" I was angry for Gabriel. Angry for Bethany. Angry that someone could be that selfish. "Maybe she should have thought about that before getting married and having a child." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. She was Bethany's mother. Gabriel's wife. He'd loved her once.

Gabriel took a swig of his beer. "Right." He sighed and shook his head as if everything was hopeless. "I don't want to spend more time away from my daughter because I'm fighting a custody case that I'm going to end up losing."

"Why would you lose?" That didn't make any sense to me. Sometimes it felt like the three of us were in our own bubble of happiness. I didn't want it to burst.

“Gillian says without some concrete reason like abuse or addiction, the court will award her something. I suppose the courts believe in redemption.”

I let his words sink in. The courts believed in giving second chances. And really . . . wasn't that the right thing to do? Weren't people allowed to make mistakes? God knows, everyone made them. If Hollie hadn't given my parents a thousand chances, they would probably be homeless by now. If she hadn't put up with me being an asshole at times, I would have never been able to finish college. Families gave each other second chances—and third and fourth and infinity chances, didn't they? But walking out on your infant daughter and husband for three years was more than a mistake. Maybe there was no way of righting that kind of wrong.

I stayed silent, aware that whatever I said might not be helpful. I liked to look at the bright side, but Gabriel had taught me that sometimes it was important to sit under the cloud for a while. And he likely wasn't ready to hear how it might be better for Bethany to have her mother in her life.

“So what's next?” I asked, trying to stay neutral.

“Gillian is trying to find out what Penelope's endgame is. God forbid she wants full custody.”

“She didn't say at the meeting?”

“No, she was too busy trying to convince me we were a family and that she wanted to try again.”

My heart burned in my chest. Penelope didn't *just* want to be back in Bethany's life. She wanted Gabriel back, too.

I placed my hand on his stomach. I needed to feel him. I wasn't sure if I was looking for him to reassure me, but he just stayed silent and placed his hand over mine.

Right in that moment, I wanted to tell him that I'd never felt for anyone what I felt for him. I wanted to say that I couldn't be excited about travelling or the future in general because thoughts of tomorrow meant that whatever we had today would shift, and I'd never been so happy. I wanted him to turn to me, clasp my face in his hands, and say he felt exactly the same. I wanted him to reassure me that he didn't want his wife back. That he wanted me—only me. That he saw Bethany, me, and him existing in this bubble forever.

But silence stretched between us and I couldn't help thinking that this was the beginning of the end. We were about to be over before we had even begun.

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

Autumn

Today was about Bethany. I was just her nanny. Her caregiver. Her protector. I should remain professional and bury the nerves swirling about in my stomach.

The doorbell rang and I wanted to throw up.

“Postman?” Bethany asked as I stood from where we were bandaging up Bear Bear’s arm.

I didn’t want to lie to her, but I didn’t know how to explain who was at the door. Gabriel was at work—everyone agreed that it would be better if he wasn’t here when Penelope came around. There had been lots of rules put in place before Gabriel had agreed to today. The first meeting between Penelope and Bethany would be an hour long. It would take place in this house. Penelope wouldn’t bring gifts. Penelope had to be accompanied by an independent psychologist. There were other things Gabriel had told me about, but they had gelled into a hard ball in my gut. I just knew I wasn’t going to leave the room. Not for a second. Gabriel had hired a security guard who would be stationed outside the house all morning. It was clear he didn’t trust Penelope with his daughter. And who knew what her game plan was? The more I thought about it, the less I understood her explanation for leaving. Even if she’d felt trapped and bored—why be gone for so long? Why come back now? Why hadn’t she stayed in touch? Sent Christmas presents? Something.

I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Hello,” a very glamorous, blonde woman said. “You must be the

nanny.”

Irritation crawled up my skin. *Yes, I'm the woman who spends all day with your daughter. I'm the one she kisses goodnight and hugs when she's fallen over. I'm the one who's here every day. Who the hell are you?* But I didn't say any of that. I just smiled and gestured that she and the woman behind her should come in.

“Who's the guy outside?” she asked me, nodding toward the security guard on the door.

I just shrugged. I wasn't about to get dragged into anything. “Bethany, this is Penelope,” I said pointing at her mother. “And this lady is . . .”

“Jade,” the psychologist said.

Bethany waved and said hi without even looking up. Penelope tried to catch her eye but Bethany was too caught up in Bear Bear's injuries.

“They've come to visit,” I explained. Gabriel had been clear that no one was to refer to Penelope as Bethany's mother. He thought it would be far too confusing for Bethany.

“Please have a seat,” I said. This might not be my house to invite people to sit down in, but it sure as hell wasn't Penelope's either. “Can I get either of you something to drink?”

Penelope shook her head, her eyes fixed on Bethany. It struck me like a blow to the head: Penelope was Bethany's doppelganger. They looked exactly alike. The long blonde hair. The bright blue eyes.

They were both beautiful.

Penelope sat on the floor next to Bear Bear and tapped his nose. “Hi, Bear Bear.”

She knew him. Of course she did. There was history here that couldn't be erased.

“He's hurt his leg,” Bethany explained. “I'm making him better with bandages.”

“That's kind,” Penelope said carefully. “How did he hurt it?”

“He fell,” Bethany said.

I sat the other side of Bethany, making sure I was in touching distance.

“Autumn,” Bethany said, tugging at the elastic fastener that fixed the end of the bandage. “Please, may you help?”

“I can help you,” Penelope said with a glance to me, checking it was okay.

It was no big deal, right? She was just helping Bethany fix a bandage on

her bear. Something I would have done if she hadn't been here.

Penelope took the small section of elastic with the metal ends and placed it on Bear Bear's leg, holding the bandage in place.

"Thank you," Bethany said and looked up at Penelope. "Are you Autumn's friend?"

Penelope glanced at me again as if I had the answer to that question. "I'd like to be your friend," she said.

I had to give it to her, it was the perfect answer. For now. First, she wanted to be Bethany's friend and then she'd want to be her mother. I wanted to ask her questions. Did she regret leaving? Did she know how much she'd missed? Even in the short time I'd been Bethany's nanny, there'd been so many changes. The questions she asked, the different toys she played with, her bravery on the monkey bars at the park. Everything was different. But Penelope left Bethany before she could walk. Before she could talk or blow a kiss. She'd never get any of that back.

It wasn't anger for Bethany that I felt. She had a father who loved her, and Gabriel's inner circle had adored Bethany since the day she was born. Instead, pure sadness rushed through my heart like a swollen river after rainfall. I was sad Penelope had missed so much of Bethany's life. She had to live with that decision forever—had to come to terms with the fact that she'd never know her daughter in the way a parent should.

"He's going to sleep now. That way he'll get better," Bethany announced as she stood and pulled a cushion from the couch. "Please get a blanket from over there," she asked Penelope. Bethany wasn't a shy child, but she was very accepting of Penelope and I wondered if there was a bond between them from before. Maybe Bethany saw herself when she looked at Penelope. Maybe it was a pheromone Penelope gave off, or just something Bethany found familiar about her. Whatever it was, Bethany was comfortable with Penelope.

And that was good, wasn't it?

I wasn't sure Gabriel would think so.

Penelope and Bethany played for the rest of the hour as if they were old friends. I didn't interfere. Jade didn't say anything, other than to ask me a couple of questions about how long I'd worked for Gabriel.

"I think our time is up," Jade said as she stood.

A sheet of disappointment crossed Penelope's face, but she kissed Bear Bear on his hurt leg and stood. "Get better, Bear Bear."

“He’ll be okay,” Bethany said, reassuring Penelope. God, that kid made my heart melt.

“Thank you for playing with me, Bethany,” Penelope said.

“We’ve got lunch to make,” I said, hoping Bethany wouldn’t think it was weird that these two women had turned up, played with her, and then left.

“Can I have happy cow cheese?” she asked, referring to her favorite snack and completely unfazed by the two women leaving. She was oblivious to the tears I could see Penelope holding back.

“We can make that happen,” I said. “Let’s say goodbye to Penelope and Jade.”

We moved out into the hallway and opened the door, Bethany clutching a bandaged Bear Bear. “Bye-bye,” Bethany said, moving her bear’s arm so he was waving.

“Bye-bye, Bear Bear. Bye-bye, Bethany,” Jade said.

“Bye-bye—” Penelope’s voice cracked, and she covered her mouth with her hand. Jade guided her out and I shut the door.

“Cheese, please, Louise,” Bethany sang.

I smiled as she slipped her hand into mine and half skipped, half hopped as we headed to the kitchen. “What about an omelet with a triangle of happy cow on the side?”

“Yum,” she said.

The most important thing in all of this was that Bethany was happy. Despite my concerns, seeing Penelope hadn’t upset her. Penelope hadn’t pushed too hard, hadn’t broken any of the agreed-upon rules. It had been a good reintroduction for both of them. It would be the start of a road back to a relationship. When Bethany was older, she’d barely remember her mother ever not being in her life. Gabriel might not want to admit it to himself, but Penelope being back was almost certainly what was best for Bethany. I just couldn’t figure out where that left me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Gabriel

After the rough morning, I'd needed the afternoon with my daughter. And the night with Autumn. I slid my arms around her waist as she stood at the kitchen island.

There had been no point being at work. I'd done nothing productive in the office. I'd just watched the clock until it hit midday. After I texted Autumn to make sure Penelope had left on time, I'd raced back home.

The three of us played tea party, painted pictures of rainbows, and plaited Autumn's hair. And I'd done my best not to think about how Penelope had been in the house just hours before.

"She's zonked," I said, and kissed Autumn's neck.

"It's been a big day," Autumn replied.

I knew I should ask how it went but I wanted to forget about it. To pretend it hadn't happened.

"I think it went well," Autumn said as she turned in my arms. "Penelope was very respectful. And Bethany didn't question anything. Just one time she asked Penelope if she was my friend, and Penelope just said she'd like to be Bethany's friend."

I wasn't sure if Autumn was telling me this because she thought I'd want to know or if she thought she should. But I didn't want to hear it.

"Bethany's fine. That's all I need to know," I said as I bent to place a kiss on her neck. She smelled like almonds and rainfall and I wanted to dive into her scent and lie in it for a while.

"Yes, I think it was good. When's the next visit?" she asked.

I groaned. “I don’t know. Do we have to talk about this?”

“But you must be pleased it went well?” she asked, and I stepped back, dropping my arms to my sides and heading to the fridge to get a beer.

“Like I said, as long as Bethany’s okay. I wish it didn’t have to happen at all.” I twisted the lid off my beer and took a swig.

“But she’s her mother. And in a few years, Bethany won’t even remember that she left.”

She was so naïve. “In a few years, Penelope will be long gone. Believe me, Autumn.”

I glanced at Autumn, who was frowning at me, confused. “You think she’ll leave again? What makes you say that?”

“She did it once. It’s bound to happen again.” I’d seen it a thousand times with my father. If they left once, they’d keep on leaving. It was how people were made. I’d been broken when she left. Devastated for me and for Bethany. But I’d built myself back, piece by piece. I was happy now. Why couldn’t she have just stayed away? Bethany didn’t need her. I certainly didn’t. Our meeting that Penelope had insisted on had been ludicrous. Why would she think I would be prepared to take her back? After all these years, she really thought I was the desperate fool who would just fall to my knees in relief and beg her to come back into our lives.

She was delusional. I wanted nothing to do with her and I never would. If I didn’t think it would hurt Bethany, I would have fought her every step on custody. I’d prefer her to slink off back to wherever she’d gone and never come back.

“But she’s older now,” Autumn said. “She said she felt too young.” Autumn followed me over to the sofa. “Presumably if she’s back, she’s over that now.”

I wanted to get naked. Have incredible sex. Sleep. In that order, preferably. But Autumn was like a dog with a bone. “Don’t be naïve. She’ll be off again next time she’s bored and if she’s bonded with Bethany, I’ll be left to pick up the pieces. Again.” Bethany hadn’t noticed when her mother left the first time. She’d been too young but this time she could cause real damage. “She should understand the potential to cause harm at this age. She’s just being selfish.” I’d have to limit the amount of time Bethany saw Penelope over the next few months, until she left again. That way I could minimize the damage.

“You don’t think she’ll stick around? Maybe she’s changed.”

I rolled my eyes. “People don’t change. I’m just entering some kind of cycle where I have to protect Bethany as best as I can and prepare her for when Penelope takes off again.”

Autumn tucked her knees under her chin as we sat together in silence. “How can you be so certain? I know she left before, but people make mistakes.”

“And are destined to repeat them,” I replied. It was nice that Autumn saw the best in people, but she was being ridiculously naïve. She’d not experienced the reality of the world which presented the evidence very clearly: people didn’t change and second chances were always wasted. “I’ve seen it all before.” I tipped my head back on the sofa. I’d lived this cycle once already.

“I thought she just left once? Did she walk out before?”

“Not her,” I said, remembering the arguments. The flowers. The door banging. The late-night pounding on the doors.

Autumn slid her hand into mine and squeezed. I was taking my bad mood out on her. It wasn’t her fault. She didn’t know people like I did.

“My father cheated on my mother. A lot. She’d make him leave and then he’d come back. Say he’d ended it. Apologize. Assure her that it would never happen again. She’d take him back. Then a few months later the cycle would start all over again. Each time he convinced her that he’d changed, that he deserved a second chance. But he was always the same weak, pathetic liar. And she always fell for it.”

I wouldn’t make the same mistake. My mother had been frightened to divorce my father. She hadn’t wanted the social stigma, the money worries, the loneliness. But she’d paid a very high price for staying married. And as her son, so had I.

I wouldn’t put Bethany through that. I wouldn’t put myself through that. Not again.

“Did Penelope leave for someone else?” Autumn asked. “Was she cheating?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.” It didn’t matter why she’d left. I’d heard every excuse under the sun for letting your family down. Not a one of them was excuse enough.

“But if the problem wasn’t cheating, then maybe she just had a hump to get over and now she’s over it and ready to be a mother and a wife?”

It sounded like Autumn wanted me to take Penelope back, wanted me to

give her a second chance. It was the last thing I wanted to hear. Especially from Autumn, who I cared deeply about, who I raced home from work to see, who I'd just begun to see a future with.

"I should go into the workshop," I said, standing. I needed some space and I wanted to get away from this conversation. I'd said all I had to say about Penelope. There was no need to rehash it. "I've bought an old desk that I'm going to polish up and put in the bedroom next to yours. I'm going to work from home more. That way I can be home for bedtime more often."

Autumn stood and smoothed her hand over my cheek. "You're a great father. A good man." And she shrugged. "And hot as hell. You need an apprentice to help buff your wood?"

I chuckled at her ridiculousness. I wanted to be angry and sullen about my situation, but Autumn made it impossible. But she couldn't shine her light and make *everything* perfect. She needed to see there was no future where Penelope was part of my life. I'd gotten over her leaving and I wasn't going to step back onto that roller coaster again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Autumn

I was officially pissed off on my sister's behalf.

"Are you mad at him?" I asked her as we stood in front of the store that had fresh pink and blue flowers draped around the storefront like some kind of magical fairyland. Hollie had called me this morning and begged me to come to the florist with her. Dexter had had some kind of issue with a client not being happy with her ginormous diamond and had to go sort it out, and Hollie didn't want to choose their wedding flowers by herself.

"He was really upset that he couldn't be here. We tried to rearrange but this woman is booked up for like, five years and a day. I'm sorry I had to drag you here."

"It's fine," I said.

"I thought you might be busy with Gabriel," she said, stepping forward to smell one of the hanging lilacs that drooped over the door.

"We didn't have particular plans. And I always like hanging out with you. I'm just a little concerned with Dexter's lack of participation in your wedding. I mean, I know he offered to take your name and everything, but it feels a little sexist."

"It looks that way. But there's so much to do and I think he's actually done more than me. The guest list, the invitations, the seating plan. All Dex. He's not intentionally missing meetings."

I supposed I didn't know what went into planning a wedding, but if Hollie thought it was okay then I supposed it was. She was usually right.

She peered into the window and rang the pink old-fashioned bell that sat

on the pink doorframe.

“Who has a doorbell on a store? Aren’t they supposed to be encouraging people to go inside?”

“People don’t need encouragement. This flower store is so sought after it’s like an urban myth. Dexter had to get one of his clients to pull in a favor to get us an appointment here.”

Rich people were crazy. Roses were roses. What could be so special about the ones here?

A small lady with a short blonde bob appeared at the door, peering over her old-fashioned semi-circle glasses perched on the end of her nose like I’d only ever seen in the books I read to Bethany.

“Welcome to our world,” she said in a hushed voice. “Come through.”

Inside was like a fairytale come to life. I wished Bethany was here. She would have loved it. There were different types of flowers everywhere I looked. Some falling from the ceiling, some hanging from the walls, covering tables and desks. I could see nothing but petals and color wherever I looked. Even the floor was completely covered, other than a path that wound around to a door leading to a room in the back. It was like some kind of Disney experience, only better because the scent of every flower in the world surrounded us.

“This is amazing,” Hollie said.

“A floral experience,” the lady said. “That’s what we aim to create.”

Could I move in? “It’s beautiful,” I said, turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees to make sure I hadn’t missed anything. I pulled out my phone so I could grab a picture.

“Sorry, no photographs please.” She gave no explanations and I put my phone back in my bag. “Come through and we can discuss the experience we will create for you.”

The next hour was surreal. I saw examples of every type of flower I’d ever imagined. I could tell Hollie was getting overwhelmed because she clearly loved it, but she was also trying to keep the wedding simple.

“Why don’t you focus on the tables and go from there,” I suggested. “I like these, where the flowers are high and trickle down to the tabletop.” I pointed to one of the table displays in front of us.

Hollie nodded. “I do like the orchid combined with the lily of the valley. But then I really like the roses and the wisteria as well. What do you think?” she asked the self-styled *floral designer*.

“I think,” she replied in hushed tones, “that you need to just *be* in the flowers. And the decision will come to you. I will leave you and return and you will have the answer.”

“Did we just land in California?” I whispered once the woman had left.

“I just have to *be* in the flowers. So . . . let’s sit.” We took a seat on the tiny silk sofa, the only surface not covered in flowers.

“You think we should close our eyes?” I asked.

“No, I think you should tell me how the visit with Penelope went.”

I groaned but gave her the highlights. “I’ve never seen Gabriel like this. He’s adamant that she’s going to leave again and furious that this time, Bethany will know more and be disappointed.”

“That’s an understandable concern though, isn’t it?”

“It is, but he’s so adamant that it’s going to happen. It might not. This could be good for Bethany. It could be good for him.” The more I thought about it, the more I thought that perhaps Gabriel was fighting the inevitable. “Apparently, she’ll get some kind of visitation, because she hasn’t been abusive and isn’t an addict or whatever. But Gabriel is fighting it so hard, and I wonder if . . .” I’d barely been able to let myself think about the reasons for Gabriel being angry. “He has such strong feelings; I can’t help but wonder if it’s covering up the fact that deep down, he wants her back. He wants his family back.” I wasn’t expecting it, but from somewhere, my eyes began to water. I had to swallow down sobs. “I can’t blame him.”

Hollie sat forward and grabbed my hand. “Autumn, are you in love with Gabriel?”

I shook my head. “I can’t allow myself to think about it. I’ll be off in a few weeks anyway. I’m going to lose him, whatever happens. It’s just . . . I think back to all those guys in Oregon that I used to date . . . They were just interim guys. I don’t mean that I didn’t like them, but they were for the moment. And Gabriel started off like that but now . . . Now I’m *his* interim girl. You know? The one he picks up as he’s passing through life from one serious relationship to another.”

Hollie squeezed my hand and I just tried to focus on not crying. God forbid, I stained this beautiful silk couch.

“And for once,” I continued. “I don’t think he was my interim guy, you know?”

Hollie’s face was full of sorrow. “I do know. It was what I was afraid of.”

“Usually, I can put a spin on things. Look to the positive. But now I’m in

that house, with him, and I'm so happy." My voice cracked and I took a breath. "I'm really, properly happy, Hollie. And I've been pretending to myself that it can go on like this. That I can be happy without having to spin anything for once in my life. That the present would last forever. And now I try to think of the positives of not living with Gabriel and Bethany. I try to think about how I'll be better off when I go travelling and start a new job but when I do, I'm utterly miserable. There doesn't seem to be a bright side without Gabriel."

"You'll find one," Hollie said. "It's what you do. You'll find out how to make this work and how to move forward. I promise you." She shifted closer and pulled me in for a hug, putting her chin on my head like she used to when I was a child. "In the meantime, we're going to get out of here and I'm taking you day drinking."

"Don't be crazy. We need to pick your flowers."

At that moment, the blonde lady was back.

"I've decided," Hollie said, standing. "I want that one but with wisteria and cream roses."

"As you wish," she said.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Is that even an option?"

"She's sure," the blonde lady said and gestured for the door. Apparently, we were leaving.

"I need you to do something for me," Hollie said as we stepped out onto the sidewalk. She turned me to face her and put her arms on my shoulders. "I know I've spent our entire lives telling you to think about your future but now, I need you to focus on this moment. I want you to enjoy each day you spend with Gabriel and Bethany. I want you to take each new experience in London and squeeze everything you can from it. Forget about what might happen with Penelope or what Gabriel could be thinking. Stop worrying about what's going to change when you start a new job or travel. Just enjoy. Just live. Just be."

I exhaled as I thought about what she'd said. "Did you inhale too many flower fumes or something?"

"Maybe," she said. "But it's good advice all the same. Don't ruin today thinking about tomorrow." She linked her arm into mine and leaned into the road to hail a cab.

"Where are we going?" I asked as a taxi pulled over.

"We're two American girls in London looking for a place to day drink."

And we have a black Amex. We're off to the American Bar at the Savoy, of course." She ducked and climbed in. "They tell me there's a slice of bright side with every cocktail."

Thank God for my sister. She was always there to pick me up when I fell. And sometimes, like now, just as I was about to.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Gabriel

That feeling I got the first time I laid eyes on Autumn—like my lungs had malfunctioned or my heart might need a nudge to restart—resurfaced every time she walked into a room. Even after four months of living together.

“You look so pretty, Autumn,” Bethany said.

“Beautiful,” I added as Autumn twirled around, the ruffles on her very short dress lifting as she moved.

“You promise to be good going to bed tonight,” Autumn said. She bent and kissed Bethany goodnight.

“And when I wake up, pancakes?” she asked.

“Pancakes for sure,” I replied.

“But Autumn will make them with blueberries.”

“Yes, I’ll make them,” Autumn replied, shooting me a glance that said *Your daughter understands your lack of skill in the kitchen.*

I gave the sitter my number again and headed out, taking Autumn’s hand as I did.

“She didn’t seem to mind,” Autumn said as we climbed in the cab. “That we were going out together.”

“Why would Bethany mind? She loves you.”

“I just wondered if she thought it was weird. What did you say when you told her?”

“I just said that you and I were going out to dinner.” Autumn and I had been careful not to show any obvious affection for each other when we were both with Bethany. We hadn’t had a conversation about it—it had just been

an unspoken agreement. We never slept in each other's bed. We never kissed each other good morning.

It was time that changed.

I wanted to take Autumn out to dinner—not to her sister's house but dinner, just the two of us. I didn't want to fuck her on the kitchen table anymore. I wanted her bent over a bed or naked in the shower. I still had a daughter I didn't want to confuse. But I also had Autumn, who I wanted to spend time with. I slid my hand up her bare leg. "You're stunning."

"It's a little short," she said. "But I'll take Hollie's hand-me-down Balmain any chance I can get."

"It's gorgeous on you. You heard it from Bethany."

"Then it must be true." She sighed and tightened her grip on her bag.

"You nervous?" I asked.

"Not exactly. I just was worried how Bethany would be. And it's a relief she's not weird about it."

"She was never going to be weird."

She shrugged. "Anyway, where are we going?"

I put my hand on her thigh, pulling her closer to me. "The Savoy," I said.

"Oh, I like it there. How weird is it that I've been to the Savoy before?"

She shook her head. "I'm getting a little too used to the good life."

"You deserve regular trips to fine hotels. You deserve everything good in life."

She looked at me and tilted her head. "You're wonderful."

Her words filled me up. I hadn't realized the size of the hole inside me until Autumn had come along. She'd filled it and I was overflowing. I wanted to lock in what we had now. Freeze time and spend the rest of my life like this, with Bethany and Autumn.

But tonight, I'd settle for the Savoy. I had an entire evening planned. And dinner was just one part of it.

When we pulled up, one of the doormen opened the cab and helped Autumn out.

"Mr. Chase," one of the staff said as we entered the hotel. "Let me show you to your suite."

"What's this?" Autumn said. "I thought we were going to dinner."

"We are," I said as we headed to the lifts. "A private dinner."

When we arrived on the top floor, the butler assigned to us opened the door to the royal suite and began to show us around. There were various

seating areas, a bedroom, a dining room, and a bar. The table had already been laid, ready for our meal.

“When would you like to eat, sir?” the butler asked as he opened the bottle of champagne on the bar.

“Give us thirty minutes,” Gabriel said.

“Make that an hour,” Autumn added. “I want to enjoy this view before we eat.” She looked directly at me, not taking in the London skyline at all.

I knew that feeling. As much as the city lights were beautiful, nothing matched watching Autumn.

The butler left and Autumn looped her hands around my neck. “You got this entire suite just for dinner?” she asked.

“Well not just dinner,” I said. “I just wanted to be with you. I love my daughter, but I wanted to have some time with you that wasn’t stolen or hidden or tucked away.”

That unintended pout of hers parted. “I like that idea.” She dropped her hands and stepped back. She reached under her dress and shifted her hips, pulling down her underwear. The black lace landed on the thick carpet and she stepped out of it, tilting her head before she said, “Wanna take in the view from the balcony?” She held out her hand.

Instantly I was straining in my trousers, desperate to be inside her.

I slid the balcony doors open and stepped toward the edge of the terrace. The wall separating us from the city was waist height, and I wrapped my arms around Autumn as we looked out onto the city. Impatiently, she ground her arse back into my crotch.

“Out here?” I asked. She turned around and looked me in the eye as she nodded. “You want me to fuck you in front of eight million people?”

She reached for my fly, but I turned her back around.

“Hands on the wall.”

She groaned, turned on by my words as she always was. “I know you’re so wet that my cock is going to slide so deep into you,” I whispered into her ear as I unzipped my trousers. “And I barely have to lift up this dress to get inside you. It’s so short. Is that what you were hoping?” I nudged at her entrance and she pushed back.

“So impatient for me.” I pushed her hips back a little and pressed her forward from the waist before sliding my hand onto her shoulder to keep her in place. I thrust in hard and deep. Wanting to give her what she wanted and wanting to have her as quickly as I could.

It wasn't New Year's Eve, but I swear fireworks burst into the sky at the perfect pressure of her pussy around me.

"Gabriel," she cried out.

She was right. It was so good. So fucking amazing. Her heat, her breath, that scent of almonds was all exactly how it should be. I pulled out deliciously slowly, before thrusting up hard and fast. And again. And again. And again. Jesus, I wanted to do this forever. I wanted to fuck this woman until I was ninety and barely able to stand.

"All those people out there in the city. You think anyone can see us? You think anyone knows how wet you are? How my cock is driving into you over and over and over?" I wanted everyone to know. I wanted to take a full-page ad out in the *Times*. Write it in the sky for the entire city to see. I reached around to her clit and slid my fingers between her folds. Her legs buckled. This is how I loved Autumn—weak with need for me.

"I love fucking you," I whispered into her ear. "I love making you tremble, making you weak, making you scream." I loved being with her. Seeing her with Bethany. I loved sitting with her and talking. I loved . . .

"I love you fucking me too," Autumn said breathlessly. She turned her head, looking up at me as if I were everything to her. And I wanted to give everything I had to her. She should have everything she ever wanted. And more.

I groaned, shoving deeper, clamping my hands over her hips to hold her still so I could get closer. She reached back, at nothing in particular—she wanted more. I grunted, trying to hold my orgasm off and give Autumn what she needed. I fucked harder, deeper, faster. On and on I drove into her, ignoring the clamoring of my climax rattling my bones, wanting to be let out. She froze as she reached the precipice and then began to shake as she fell over the edge, falling into my arms as she collapsed. I stilled and bent over and held her. We just stood there, London as our backdrop as our heavy breaths evened out.

I wasn't ready for it to be over. I wanted her to know how I felt. I wanted her to know how I wished I'd met her before. Before I'd been married. I wanted to have shared our entire lives. I wanted her history. Since the instant sizzle of our first meeting, it had felt as if we were destined. As if resistance was futile, because she'd been made for me. And I existed just for her.

I straightened and she turned in my arms. I lifted a leg and pushed into her again. I started to fuck, just small, intense movements, claiming her in

front of the entire city. In a weird kind of way, I hoped people could see. Everyone should know we were together.

“You’re so beautiful,” I said, slowing. “Gorgeous.”

She looked at me, her face turning serious for a second as she pushed her fingers into my hair. “So are you. Inside and out.”

She tipped her head back and I clamped my mouth down on her delicious skin, wanting to consume her. I trailed my teeth down to her collarbone and sucked and bit every exposed inch, like I needed to make up for the time we’d not been together. How had I lived without her for all the years that came before her? I wasn’t sure I could even remember my life clearly without her. Wasn’t sure what it was like before I had something to come home to at night when I’d missed my daughter’s bedtime.

She tightened around my cock as my teeth sank into her throat again. And I slipped my hands over her silk-covered breasts, squeezing her hard nipples. She shuddered against me and this time the pressure on my cock, the friction, the drag of her perfect heat was too much, and I exploded inside her with a groan.

I held her against my chest as we recovered our breath.

“Gabriel,” she sighed, her voice so soft it faded in the noise of the city. “My Gabriel.”

I was glad she knew it. I was hers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Autumn

I pushed the dollhouse back to where it lived by the window. I'd pulled it out to the middle of Bethany's bedroom for her to play with it more easily during Penelope's visit. Directing everyone's focus seemed like a good idea, since it helped avoid strained silences or Bethany getting whiny. So far, we'd dodged any awkward questions such as *Why do you want to be my friend?* and *Why does Jade always sit back and never play?* and *Why do you always cry when you leave?* Long may it continue. I'd have to remember to tell the new nanny when she arrived. She'd be here in less than two weeks.

"Is it time for lunch yet?" Bethany asked.

"Yes, let's just tidy up from you and Penelope playing and then I can fix you something."

The second visit had gone without a hitch. And Penelope had made Bethany laugh as she made up voices for the dolls that occupied the very grand house Bethany had stuffed full of furniture. Everyone was happy. Especially me. I swear the Savoy had put something in the water that made my soul float. Or maybe it was just being with Gabriel. Whatever it was, I'd been walking on cotton candy since the weekend. Even being forced to wear a turtleneck on a hot day to cover the marks Gabriel had left on my neck didn't worry me. It was worth it to be reminded of Gabriel's mouth on my skin.

The doorbell rang from downstairs.

"I'll get it!" Bethany cried.

"I don't think so," I said. It would only be a courier delivering something,

but Bethany wasn't about to start answering the door at four years old, even if she could reach the locks standing on her step stool. "It might be those new pens I ordered yesterday," I said. "If you want, we can draw your daddy a new picture for his office. They have glitter in them, and you know he's sure to like that." I held out my hand and we went downstairs to get the door.

"Glitter? He loves glitter."

"Right?"

"Shall I draw his favorite dinner?" she asked, making me laugh.

"That's a good idea."

"He really likes peas."

Where did this kid come up with this stuff?

I opened the door and my heart dropped to my stomach when I came face-to-face with Penelope.

What was she doing back here? And where was Jade? I flicked through the possibilities in my mind. Was she going to force her way in and snatch Bethany? I'd persuaded Gabriel to ditch the security guard. Maybe that had been a mistake. I took a breath. Perhaps she'd just forgotten something?

"Sorry to disturb you," she said, looking at Bethany. "Hi, Bethany."

"Hi," she replied and cocked her head. "Have you come to play again?"

Before Bethany could invite Penelope in, I interrupted. "Bethany, can you go and get your paper out for the pictures? I'll be there in a second." I put on my calmest voice and a fake smile. She'd know, but hopefully she wouldn't cause a fuss. She shrugged and headed back down the hallway.

I turned back to Penelope. What could she possibly want?

"I just wanted to say how much I appreciate you making our play dates so relaxed," she said.

"Okay," I replied, bracing myself for the real reason she was here. She could have said that in front of Jade.

"Bethany is obviously well looked after by you. And it's nice that she's got someone to care for her until . . ." Something behind her eyes stopped her from finishing her sentence. "I've missed so much of her growing up," she said. She clasped her hands together, her fingers jittering like she was either nervous or in rehab. "I've only realized how much I've missed since I started seeing her. I have so many questions. There's so much I want to know about her."

It was hard not to feel sorry for her. Bethany was a lovely child and three years was a lot to miss of anyone's life, let alone someone as young as her

daughter. "I understand," I said.

"I'd like to make up for it," she said. "I just want a fair shot at a second chance."

I pulled in a breath. From what I could see, Gabriel wasn't giving out second chances to anyone.

"You must understand this. As another woman." She looked up at me, desperate for me to do something that would help.

I nodded. "I don't make any of the decisions around Bethany. That's all up to Gabriel. I'm just the nanny."

"The thing is, I'd be happy to look after her while Gabriel's at work."

I wasn't sure how she wanted me to respond. She couldn't think I was going to hand Bethany over and go to the spa for the day, did she?

"If you think about it, Bethany doesn't really need a nanny now I'm back."

Oh God, was she trying to push me out of the job? She didn't know I was leaving anyway in a couple of weeks but even so, there was no way Gabriel would just let Penelope take over. "I don't know what to say. You need to talk to Gabriel."

She thrust her hands into her coat pockets. "You're fucking my husband." She said it so matter-of-factly. Like it was as obvious as the sun rising in the morning.

"I think you need to leave." I went to close the door and her arm snapped out to stop me.

"I don't want to cause trouble," she said. "But from what I can see, it's you standing in the way of me and my daughter. Me and my family. Do you see that?" she asked. "We're still married, and that means something. He never asked for a divorce. Not in all these years. I know he would take me back if . . ."

She didn't need to finish the sentence. I could fill in the gaps. She meant that if I wasn't around, she would be able to fit back into her old life with Gabriel.

Gabriel would deny it. But maybe it was true.

Had he really not asked for a divorce for all these years? He'd been adamant about not giving Penelope a second chance, but if that was really true, why hadn't he cut legal ties sooner? Why was the man I was sleeping with still married to a woman who left him three years ago?

It didn't make sense.

I stayed silent, the unanswered questions chipping away at my defenses.

“Gabriel’s a good man,” she continued. “I’m not sure if it’s serious between you or just convenient.”

Convenient? I might live under his roof, but I was his best friend’s future sister-in-law. And his employee. There was nothing convenient about me as far as Gabriel was concerned.

“But he’s my *husband*.” She emphasized the word as if I couldn’t possibly understand what she was trying to say. “I’m Bethany’s mother. And you seem like a nice girl. Do you want to live the rest of your life knowing you broke up a family?”

“You need to leave,” I said, as calmly as I could manage. There was no point in having this conversation. I needed to shut the door, get away from this woman, and organize my thoughts.

“If you weren’t on the scene, we’d all have a chance at being together,” she said. “You’re ruining Bethany’s chance of having her mother and father together. Of spending time with her mother, rather than the hired help.”

“I’m going to shut the door,” I said, my jaw clenched and my shoulder poised to ram closed the black door. I wasn’t the one who walked out on my family three years ago. She was trying to push the blame of what she’d done onto me. And I knew it wasn’t my fault.

“Do you really want to live your life as a homewrecker?” she asked. Her manner wasn’t menacing or threatening, but the implication was. She was telling me I was the problem. She was telling me I was ruining her life, Gabriel’s life, and Bethany’s life. Part of me knew it was manipulative, but was it possible for her words to be manipulative *and* true?

“I’m sorry,” she said, stepping back. “Like I said, I don’t want to cause any trouble. I know I’ve made mistakes and bad decisions. I just want my family back. I don’t want to miss any more of Bethany’s life.” Her voice faltered at the end of the sentence. She looked desperate. Like she was really remorseful.

It was hard not to feel sorry for her. Yes, she’d walked out three years ago and not been back before now. Yes, it was her choice. But now she was here, and she was trying to right her wrongs. She was trying not to compound her mistake. She was fighting for what was hers. How could I blame her?

“Penelope, this is a conversation you should be having with Gabriel.”

Her gaze dropped to her feet like she knew that wasn’t the answer. “That’s the theory,” she mumbled. “Like I said, he’s a good man, but he

doesn't forgive so easily."

"He's trying to protect Bethany." And himself.

"Sometimes people don't make the right decisions," she said. "I didn't when I walked away. But if Gabriel doesn't let me make it right, won't that be a bad decision too?"

Would he be more forgiving of Penelope in different circumstances? If he hadn't watched his mother forgive his father over and over and over, only to be let down and betrayed every time, wouldn't he think Penelope deserved forgiveness?

And if I wasn't living here. If I wasn't sleeping with him. What if?

"I think you should talk to him. Like you said, he's a good man."

"Are you a good woman?" she asked. She put her hand up to stop me answering. "I'm going, don't worry. But ask yourself whether or not you can sleep at night, knowing you ruined Bethany's chance of having a mother and Gabriel's chance of having his wife back." She turned and walked up the street. I watched her, fingering the neck of my sweater.

Had I taken her place? And if I walked away, would it leave a vacancy she would fill? Would my absence force Gabriel to finally, at long last, give someone a second chance?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Autumn

How didn't I know until now how awesome libraries were? They were particularly awesome if you wanted to know everything there was to know about travelling in Europe.

I glanced around to find nothing had changed in the hours since I'd last looked up. There were still a couple of librarians behind the main desk, none of whom ever seemed to speak to each other. There was a man on the computer on the far side, behind the thriller hardbacks. And the desk in front of me was still covered in piles of travel books.

All I knew was that I was definitely starting in Paris. Nope. A flight to Amsterdam. That would be better. And then on to Copenhagen and Stockholm. The pictures of Stockholm looked so different from London. That would be good. I would need distance by the time I left.

"You going travelling?" A bearded guy with a weird accent asked as he approached my desk.

I nodded. "Can you tell?"

"Make sure you've got Oz on the itinerary."

"Because I want to see the wizard?"

"Not that Oz." He chuckled. "Australia."

"Oh wow, no. I'm staying closer to home." London did feel like home to me now. Maybe it was because Hollie was here. Maybe it was because I was so pleased to be out of Oregon. Maybe it was because of Gabriel. But I couldn't think about him right now. "Just around Europe this summer," I said. "I take it that's where you're from—Oz, I mean."

“Absolutely. You can’t tell from the accent?” he asked. “But if you’ve not been down under, then make sure you put it on your list,” he said, pointing at the notebook I had open. “And don’t leave out the west coast. Shark Bay, mate. Best place on earth.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll make a note of that.”

He saluted and carried on walking, taking his books to the circulation desk.

Shark Bay? I’d never even heard of it. And I hadn’t even considered going to Australia. Europe had always been the plan. It was still. I had two weeks left before I was due to fly out, and I’d been putting off the planning for too long.

The conversation with Penelope had brought with it a lot of questions. I still didn’t have answers. But burying myself in travel books was a good distraction until I decided I wanted to figure out what was next.

My phone flashed with a message from Hollie. *What am I doing outside the Shoe Lane Library?*

I scampered to gather up my things. I’d lost track of time and forgotten I was supposed to be meeting her.

I emerged from the basement level to find Hollie outside, looking up at the sky.

“You okay?” I asked.

She snapped her head straight. “Fine. I didn’t even know this place existed.”

That was one of my favorite things about London. There was just so much of it. And it came in layers. The touristy sites—the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, St. Paul’s Cathedral—would take a couple of weeks if you did nothing else. Then there were the lesser-known things to see, like Portobello market, the Inns of Court, and Banqueting House, that would take months to do. Then there was everything else. The web of interesting things that bound the city together. Thousands of places that would stay hidden unless you tripped over them. One of the few buildings to withstand the Great Fire, the house Benjamin Franklin lived in, the street Dickens based Fagin’s lodgings on. I loved it all.

“London’s old but there are always new things to discover,” I said.

“I’m so hungry. Where are we going?” she asked, linking her arm through mine. “I don’t come over this way a lot, so I have no idea where to eat.”

“Up here,” I said as we headed up the hill. “We’re going toward Smithfield Market.”

“Eww, isn’t that a meat market?”

“It should be gross but it’s really beautiful. Look,” I said, pointing at the huge building ahead that looked like one of London’s Victorian railway stations, rather than a working meat market. “It’s beautiful.” The building was trimmed in ironwork that had been painted in purples and reds and greens. Statues kept watch from the roof.

“It’s like a meat palace,” Hollie said. “London is a strange place at times.”

“I’m pretty sure anyone who came to the Sunshine Trailer Park would say the same thing.”

We couldn’t have been further away from Oregon if we’d tried. And we’d tried.

“So, how come you’ve been in the library? You studying for something?”

“Planning my trip. It’s coming up soon,” I said. Sooner than I’d imagined it would.

We arrived at the restaurant and pushed through the dark red door before settling into a table toward the back.

“I came here once with Gabriel. Make sure you check out the back of the stalls. It’s a little shocking to my delicate sensibilities.” There were pictures—subtle ones—of women’s vaginas hung on the back of each door. The British were quirky.

“How intriguing. I think. As is your trip to the library. Tell me more.”

“Nothing to tell. Just planning my trip.”

Hollie scanned the menu, but I could tell she wasn’t taking it in. “I thought you might not end up going.”

“I know you did.” I pulled the napkin from the table and put it in my lap.

“Does this mean you definitely are?” she asked.

The waiter came over and took our order. When he left, Hollie looked at me expectantly.

“I guess. I’m just so confused about everything. I really care about Gabriel and Bethany. And honestly, if it was just that simple, I probably wouldn’t go.”

“But you have to think about your goals in life,” she said. “You don’t want to regret not travelling.”

“There’s that.” I’d be crazy to turn away from the opportunity to fulfil my

dreams. Unless those dreams had changed, and something had shifted. When I fantasized about travelling around Europe and seeing the gigantic world outside of Oregon, it was because I wished for more. It wasn't because now I didn't want to go to all those places and see all the wonderful things Europe had to offer. I did. But being in London faded the desire to spread my wings further. A little at least. And being with Gabriel—well, it showed me what else there was to want.

“What else is there?” Hollie asked.

“I got a visit from Gabriel's . . . What do we call her? Wife? Soon-to-be ex-wife?”

“Let's just stick with Penelope. What did she have to say?”

I gave Hollie the highlights.

“She's insane if she thinks you're standing in the way of her and her perfect life,” Hollie said.

“I know. But at the same time, there's part of me that thinks she deserves a second chance.”

“You think if you weren't around, Gabriel would just say, no problem, y'all, just move all your things back in and let's pick up where we left off?”

I knew it was more than just me standing between Penelope and her second chance. It was Gabriel's past as well. But I was concerned that with me in the picture, he'd never make the effort to face his demons and give the mother of his child a chance she deserved. “No, but maybe there would be a chance for things to be different. I guess we'll find out soon enough . . .” I laughed but it was hollow. Like a cough in an empty theatre. “Maybe it would be better to have a clean break.”

“I thought you were serious about him.”

I'd hoped I could have Gabriel and all these new experiences too, but maybe that was just greedy. I should be more than happy with an opportunity to travel to a dozen different countries. That had been my ultimate dream at one point.

“I know I wasn't all that supportive of you being with Gabriel at first, but over these last few weeks, I've seen how happy you are. How happy you both are. I was beginning to believe that it might be serious between you—serious enough that you'd both be willing to sacrifice things to make each other's dreams come true.”

“You're talking in fairytales,” I said. “We both know life doesn't work like that. We have to figure things out and work around obstacles.”

Hollie groaned. “Not always. I’m living proof that the fairytale is real. You were the one who convinced me not to give up wanting it.”

“I’m not giving up,” I said. I wasn’t sure that was true. This morning, I’d woken up before the sun and gone downstairs to find coffee. On the way, I’d watched Bethany asleep in bed. She was the most beautiful little girl, and she deserved the best of everything. “I just want what’s best.”

“For who?” Hollie asked.

“For everyone. I’m just considering whether I should take a step back. Can you imagine if Bethany turned around to me in fifteen years and said, if you hadn’t been sleeping with my dad, my parents would never have divorced.”

“You’re talking like you’re the reason Penelope left.”

“No, I’m talking like I don’t want to be the reason she doesn’t stay.” The more I talked about it, the more I realized I had to go. Not because I wanted to see the world. Not because I wanted to be sure that I wouldn’t resent Gabriel in twenty years because I hadn’t left. But because he needed me to leave so he could reach out and give his family a second chance.

“Is your guest room still available? I think I’m going to need a place to stay before I start my trip.”

Hollie grabbed my hand. “Are you serious? Of course. Always. But, Autumn, are you sure?”

I nodded. It was clear to me now that I couldn’t stay, and more than that, I had to leave with my whole heart. If I went with the promise of returning, Gabriel would never confront his past. He’d never give Penelope a chance.

I needed to help him. I needed to show him—show us both—that he needed me to leave. I just hoped I was strong enough to walk away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Gabriel

I closed the door behind me and sniffed the air, taking in the smell of cooking spices. Friday nights had fallen into a routine where Autumn cooked us a curry and I brought home some great wine to have with it. She'd been busy helping Hollie with the wedding recently, and I'd missed her.

"I'm home," I called, dropping my coat onto the rack and parking my documents case by the hall chair.

Autumn came down the stairs, her smile a little less enthusiastic than usual. "Good day?" I asked, smiling at her. She looked so beautiful when she had her hair up like that. Or down. Or with a hat. Or without.

She nodded and I pulled her into my arms as she got to the bottom of the stairs. She didn't mold against me as she usually did, instead pressing her hands on my chest. "I need to get our chicken out of the oven."

"Can I help?" I asked as I toed off my shoes and padded after her.

"It's all done," she said.

Was it me or was she avoiding my gaze? "What did you do today?"

She sighed as she slid the hot dish onto a trivet. "Usual thing. Nursery, then we went for a walk around Lincoln's Inn Fields."

Something was definitely up. On any normal day, Autumn would be bubbling over about Lincoln's Inn. About the "quaint" buildings and hidden walkways. It was the kind of place she loved. But today there was no enthusiasm in the way she spoke. Perhaps she was worried about the new nanny starting, although I'd offered the job to the woman Autumn had recommended and raved about. Maybe she'd had some bad news about the

interviews she'd been going on.

"You hear anything about the analyst job at the investment bank?" I asked.

She shook her head as she pulled out another dish from the oven and set it on the side. "Nope. They won't be making a decision for weeks yet. Said they'll let me know."

"And Bethany's okay, because you would have told me if she wasn't."

"Yes, she's happy as usual, although Bear Bear is in need of a few stitches under his arm. I have to do it before I go."

Hearing her talking about leaving was like a dull punch to my gut. I hated the idea that she was going to be away for an entire month.

"I'm going to miss you," I said, circling my hands around her waist as she stood at the kitchen side. "How will I cope?" This time she leaned against me, letting her body relax against mine. "I shouldn't be so selfish. You'll be back in just a few weeks. And you'll have a job by then and—"

She spun in my arms. "I don't know if I'll have a job. I don't know if I'm going to be in London. And I've been thinking . . ." She trailed her fingers down the buttons of my shirt.

"Sounds ominous." I was desperate to lift the heaviness that had settled in the air tonight.

"We haven't talked about it and I don't exactly know what you were thinking would happen with us after I left . . . but I think it might be better if we . . . went our separate ways." She spoke to the collar of my shirt, refusing to meet my eyes. The veins in my neck pulsed like the ticking of a clock.

"What are you talking about?" My face went numb. I dropped my arms and stepped back.

"I think you need to spend some time with Penelope." She exhaled as if she'd just unloaded a lead cloak from her shoulders.

"Has she been here again? What has she said this time? That you're responsible for terrorist activity in Iran and her shitty school grades?" I'd told my solicitor that Penelope had been trying to intimidate Bethany's nanny into leaving. She reassured me that it would count against her in any trial. But of course, no one wanted a trial.

"No, she hasn't been back," Autumn said, stepping toward me and cupping my face in her hands. "But I've been thinking about a few things."

Bloody hell. Penelope had got inside her head. Anger revved in my chest like the engine of a racecar before its first lap. "You need to ignore what she

said. She's manipulative and refuses to take responsibility for anything. She needs to remind herself that she walked out on us three years ago. I didn't even know you then."

"I know," Autumn said. "This isn't about me. Well, not entirely about me."

"So why are you talking about going our separate ways? Granted, you need to figure out a new job, but I'm here to support you in that. I know you're young and I'm really trying to hold back because I don't want to push you too hard too soon, but bloody hell, Autumn. I'd accepted you might not want to live with us, but walking away? Where's this coming from?"

She dropped her hands and closed her eyes as if she were trying to blink away reality. "I think it's for the best."

The blood in my veins sped up and gained force. "This isn't what's best for me. So, what you mean is, this is what you want." I fought against my instinct to leave her there and disappear into my workshop. I needed to stay and convince her she was wrong.

"I want what's best. *For you.*"

"That's you. I want *you.*" Perhaps I should have been clearer earlier, but I'd thought it was understood between us that what we had wasn't just a passing affair or some kind of transitory romance. It was more than that. It was . . . like she'd been made for me.

"You've said how you thought you and Penelope and Bethany were a perfect family—just what you'd always wanted after the childhood you had. And then Penelope blindsided you. You were devastated."

My family had been less than perfect. I'd accepted that there was no such thing. "Things happen, Autumn. I thought our marriage was something it clearly wasn't. I'm trying to move on."

"Penelope isn't a bad person," she said as if she hadn't heard me. "And she's desperate to try to make things right again."

"She doesn't have a time machine. So there's no making things right." It was almost as if people didn't understand what had happened. My lawyer was the same: Penelope was sorry. Penelope wanted to be in Bethany's life. Penelope *wanted*. She'd given up her right to want anything the day she left.

"Everyone deserves a second chance, Gabriel."

"Says who?" It was such a ridiculous saying. "If you murder someone, you don't get a talking-to and told not to do it again or there'll be trouble. You go to prison—partly so you *can't* do it again."

Autumn looked up at me. “Penelope didn’t murder anyone. And I’m not saying you should give her a second chance just because she deserves it. I’m asking you to do it for *you*. She’s Bethany’s mother and your wife. You need to give yourself a second chance at having the family you’ve always dreamed of. I don’t want to be the person who stands in the way of that.”

I tried to let her words soak in. Didn’t she understand that it wasn’t Penelope I wanted, wasn’t Penelope I saw completing the family in my dreams? “But I love you.”

I’d not said it before, but I’d felt it from the moment I saw her at Dexter and Hollie’s place. The feeling hadn’t been small. It hadn’t been subtle. It didn’t start as some seed and grow tall—it smacked me around the head and left bruises. I’d tried to ignore it. Deny it oxygen. Beat it back. But it refused to give up.

I didn’t want Penelope. I didn’t want anyone else. I loved *Autumn*.

Autumn put her head in her hands, covering her face so I couldn’t see her reaction. Silence thundered between us, stretching the few centimeters between us into a valley.

She didn’t say it back.

I knew she felt it. But she didn’t say it back.

She dragged her fingers from her face and exhaled. “You owe it to yourself to give her another chance,” she said after what seemed like hours. “And I can’t be the person who stands between you and your opportunity at having a life you always dreamed about, Gabriel. I can’t be the person that stops Bethany’s mother from being with her.”

“You’re not,” I said.

“I don’t want to be an excuse.”

“An excuse? What, you think I’m getting an itch scratched with you, so I don’t need to take my wife back?”

I hated the way she winced when I spoke. I’d never seen the expression on her face before—like she was in pain and didn’t know how to heal.

“I don’t want to be the reason you don’t try to make it work. The reason you don’t give your wife and the mother of your child a second chance.”

“Even if you weren’t here, I wouldn’t take Penelope back.” I’d made that decision the day she left. I wasn’t going to subject Bethany to the merry-go-round of Penelope coming in and out of our lives. She left; she’d have to live with that decision.

She looked me in the eye. “You said you loved me.” She said it like a

question.

“Yes. I love you. I think I’ve loved you since we met, though I wouldn’t admit it to myself.”

She blinked again and again and again. “Then do it for me. Do it because I asked you to. Try again with Penelope.”

“This is insane. I’m not going to take Penelope back. Us not being together won’t change that.”

“Prove it,” she said.

“You want me to call her and tell her?” She was shaking her head before I got the words out. “Then what? Tell me what I need to do to prove it to you and I’ll do it.”

“Try to make it work. Spend time with her. Take her to dinner. On a date. Remember why you married her. Try to picture that family you had in your imagination when you were a child and do your best to recreate that.”

“You can’t be serious.” I didn’t understand what she was saying. Why would giving Penelope a second chance be for her? It didn’t make any sense.

“I have faith in you, Gabriel. You think you saw second chances go horribly wrong when you were a kid, but you’ve been breathing second chances into every piece of furniture you restore. Every time you strip the varnish off an old desk or replace the hinges on a bookcase, you give that piece of furniture a second chance. It’s inside you.” She reached out and placed her hand on my cheek. I knew in that moment that there was nothing I could do to change her mind.

I wanted to sink into that feeling of her soft skin against mine, wanted to drink it in and commit it to memory. I’d do anything to make her stay.

“If I try and it doesn’t work, then what? I spend the rest of my life wishing for you?”

“I’m away for a month, Gabriel. Not even in the same country as you. Give it time. You all deserve some time to get to know each other again.”

“And then?” I knew I’d miss her as soon as she closed the door.

“Don’t think about the then. Just be in the present this summer. I’ll see you at Hollie and Dexter’s wedding.”

“What? That’s weeks away.”

“It’s really not long at all.”

“But we can talk and—”

“Please, Gabriel. Don’t think about me. Focus on your family. Give it these few weeks and see how you feel then. Do it for me,” she said. “For

Bethany. For you. Put your anger aside. See that Penelope isn't your father and taking her back doesn't mean you've become your mother. It's not just Penelope that deserves another chance. Or Bethany. It's you, too. You deserve that perfect family you always wanted."

Penelope wasn't my family. Not anymore. "And what if you're my perfect family? Are you really going to walk away?"

She shook her head and for a moment, I thought she might stay. "What if I'm not, Gabriel? What if you're meant to be with Penelope?"

She closed her eyes as if she were saying a silent prayer. A shiver passed through me and ice crawled up my spine, paralyzing every movement, every breath, every beat of my heart. And I didn't know if I'd ever feel warm again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Autumn

I'd been paralyzed by indecision since I opened my laptop last night. I hadn't slept at all and despite it being five after seven with the light bleeding around the edges of the curtains, I still hadn't decided whether I should cancel my Eurostar ticket to Paris the day after tomorrow. Maybe I should fly somewhere else. Some place less romantic.

Every click of the mouse and tap of the keyboard was an effort. Someone had opened the tap and drained all my energy. Then they'd come back and frozen any decision-making power.

I'd barely seen Gabriel since our conversation. It was better this way. He had a second chance this way. And I didn't have to live with the knowledge that I might have been the reason a family didn't reconcile. I'd spent the week focused on Bethany and settling the new nanny into the role. Last night, when the week was over and the new nanny was settled, I'd loaded my things into Dexter's car and come to stay with Hollie. I'd left Gabriel a letter, but whatever there was to say had already been said. I wanted him to be happy. More than anything.

There was a flight this afternoon to Madrid. Another tomorrow. There was even one on Thursday to Perth, Australia, and from there it was only a trip up the coast to see Shark Bay. I'd planned to spend the summer in Europe, but nothing about my life was going to plan at the moment.

I struggled into a sitting position and went through my flight options again. Would leaving today be running away? Or simply avoiding the temptation of running back to Gabriel?

The man who loved me. The man I loved so much I'd asked him to try to make it work with his wife.

I hadn't wanted to go. Leaving had been the most difficult thing I'd ever done. But more than I wanted to stay, I wanted Gabriel to have the life he dreamed of. And whether or not I liked it, that life wasn't with me.

I wanted him to have what he didn't growing up—have the dream become a reality. He'd fought me on it. I knew he would. But he'd soften over the next few months. He'd adjust. He'd remember what he'd had with Penelope.

"Is she okay?" I heard Dexter ask Hollie from outside my bedroom door. "I can't get Gabriel to pick up."

It would be better to get away soon. Then I wouldn't be able to waver or weaken or give in to the almost-overwhelming need to run back and tell him that it had all been a terrible mistake, and I loved him so much it caused physical pain to leave.

It would probably be too late anyway. I had no idea if he'd take Penelope back. I hoped he'd try at least. But I was almost certain that he'd never forgive me.

I booked the flight to Madrid. There was no point in staying here. I didn't want to spend the next few weeks miserable, with Hollie and Dexter whispering their concerns on the other side of closed doors. The weeks leading up to their wedding should be a special time for them. They should enjoy it without worrying about me.

I'd just confirmed my booking when there was a faint knock on the door. "Come in," I said.

Hollie poked her head in. "I thought you might be sleeping."

I shook my head. "Not much chance of that. But I'm feeling more positive now," I lied. "I just booked a flight to Spain. I'm going to be able to spend an entire week there now."

"Always looking on the bright side," Hollie said as she came in, her words sounding flat.

"What other choice do I have?" I asked.

"I thought we could go out for brunch," she said. "Somewhere nice like the Savoy."

My stomach curdled and I pushed away the memories from the night Gabriel and I had spent there. "Actually, I've got a flight to catch. My plane leaves at five."

“Today?” she said. “We haven’t had a chance to talk or anything. You can’t just leave.”

I nodded. “It will take my mind off of things. And it will be good to go. The weather’s amazing there.” I remembered the advice Gabriel had given—I needed to make sure I put the Thyssen on my itinerary. “I should start packing. You’re okay with me leaving things here?”

Hollie rolled her eyes. “Of course. Do you want me to come with you for a few days? I’m sure Dexter wouldn’t mind, and it might be nice for us to have some time together.”

I smiled at her, grateful for the offer, but she couldn’t solve this for me. She couldn’t salve this wound. I wasn’t sure anything could. Maybe time. Maybe distance. The first was out of my hands, but I could jump on an airplane and try to get some miles between me and the man I loved. Try to take the edge off this hot ache I carried in every muscle and bone. “No, honestly, I’m looking forward to it. It will be an adventure.”

“Why Spain? I thought you were going to start in Paris.”

“Too romantic,” I said, standing and pulling out the case I hadn’t even unpacked yet.

“Maybe I can come out one weekend? Dexter could come too . . . or not.” Hollie’s voice wobbled.

“I don’t want you to worry,” I said, kissing the top of her head. “I’m going to be fine. Us Lumen sisters always land on our feet. And I’m going to attend any weddingy stuff via video call. It won’t be a problem.”

“I don’t care about the wedding. I just hate to see you sad.”

“I know,” I said. Usually, I’d deny it. Plaster a smile on my face. But Gabriel would tell me that it’s okay for things not to be okay sometimes. And now was one of those times. “But you know what? I get to see you marry Dexter. That’s more than enough happiness for both of us.”

“You’ll definitely be back for it?”

My eyes widened. “Of course. As if I’d miss it. And I’ve got to come back and deal with my job situation. Or my lack of one.”

“So you’re for sure not leaving London?”

I couldn’t promise anything. Frankly, I’d go wherever I got a decent job. But I didn’t need to tell Hollie that. “How could I?” I asked. “You’re here.” I needed to leave for now. I needed space to breathe, and for time to do whatever it was time was supposed to do.

“Wherever you are, I’ll be there for you. You know that, don’t you?”

“I’ve never been in any doubt,” I said, plunking down in her lap and pulling my arms around her. Maybe that’s why I could always see the bright side? Because however murky things got, my sister was always out in front, finding a way through the darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Gabriel

From where I was sitting on the sofa, I sorted through emails and watched Penelope play with Bethany out of the corner of my eye. The irony was bordering on comical. Penelope had picked out the wallpaper in this living room. She'd said she liked the green, as it reminded her of springtime. She'd probably forgotten. Now, she was just an unwanted houseguest.

The new nanny had said I didn't need to work from home today and that she'd had experience with supervised visits from parents in our situation before. But there was no way I'd leave Bethany alone with a stranger who'd been working for us for just a few days. So I was here. With my ex-wife and my daughter in a corrupted version of what my life was supposed to have been. And on top of that, I was trying to forget that it had probably been Penelope's unscheduled visit that led to Autumn leaving. I was trying not to hate Penelope even more than I did.

My soon-to-be ex-wife was sitting cross-legged on the rug, playing a memory game with Bethany. The new nanny was hovering beside them and Jade sat and observed.

Bethany was giggling at the game in front of her. "Daddy, look," she said, holding up one of the small cards. "The monkey is wearing lipstick."

"It looks like your mouth when you've eaten an ice lolly," I said. "Find the other matching one."

She knew exactly where it was. "Here," she said, picking up one of the cards lying face down on the floor. She didn't even check it was the monkey before she held it up to me. She was smart and confident. Yes, definitely my

daughter.

“Clever girl,” I said.

She shrugged and allowed Penelope to take her turn. She didn’t make a pair and I couldn’t work out whether or not her mistake was deliberate.

“I’m bored,” Bethany said. “Daddy, please can we go to the swings?”

“You don’t have to come,” Penelope said before I could respond. “I can take her. Jade will be there.”

I wasn’t about to leave Bethany alone with her mother. And some time away from my laptop would be good. “Come on then,” I said to Bethany. “Get your jacket.”

Bethany had her coat and shoes on in record time. I grabbed my keys from the kitchen drawer and herded everyone out.

“Did you pick up your phone?” Penelope asked.

I’d forgotten it but I wasn’t going to let Penelope think she’d helped me remember. “Don’t need it,” I said.

Penelope chuckled. “How times have changed.”

I ignored her. I had no desire to share laughs about old times with her. I didn’t want to be reminded about how it had all been a lie.

Bethany’s hand slipped into mine as we took the familiar route around the back of the house to the park, Jade and Penelope following behind us. “Can you push me a thousand times?” Bethany tugged on my hand.

“My arms will fall off if I do that.”

Bethany laughed. “No, they won’t. Please, Daddy.”

“I’ll push you ten times,” I countered.

“Twenty,” she said.

“Deal.” If I could successfully negotiate with a four-year-old, my current transaction—a one-point-two billion tech acquisition—would be child’s play.

We entered the playground and found it almost empty. “Penpee, will you push me twenty times same as Daddy?” Bethany asked, racing toward her favorite swing.

I glanced over at Penelope and wondered how it felt that her daughter didn’t call her Mummy. Not that she was a mother. She’d resigned her position three years ago. But at least Penelope hadn’t pushed it—hadn’t demanded to tell her that she was her mother. I had to give her some credit for putting Bethany first, because that didn’t happen when she left. There was no way I’d let Bethany know that Penelope was her mother, only for Penelope to disappear again. Bethany would start to question if she was the

problem and worse, might wonder if I'd leave her too. Up until now, I'd always explained to Bethany that her mother lived far away and that she and I were a small, special family together. She'd known nothing else, so she'd simply accepted it.

"Absolutely," she said. "You need a hand getting on?" Bethany held her arms up and Penelope lifted her onto the seat of the swing and started to push.

"Higher," Bethany demanded. "High. High. High."

"Now you can do it on your own," I called out. When she got going, I stopped pushing her. Penelope wouldn't know this particular trick.

Autumn would. We'd laughed about it one evening just after we'd kissed for the first time.

I closed my eyes, trying to erase the memory of her from my head but knowing any time *not* thinking about her would be temporary. She lived permanently in my mind, if not my house.

Bethany brought me back to the moment. "Daddy, see how high I am?"

"That's really high. Be careful," I said.

Bethany spent ten times longer on the swing than I had patience for, and I wished I had my phone. Finally, when I'd pushed her double the times we'd agreed, she moved to the slide. There was nothing for Penelope to do other than stand aside and watch.

"Would you mind if I took a photograph?" she asked me, glancing at Jade.

I shrugged. "Go ahead."

Now she wanted to capture memories? She'd missed out on three years' worth of pictures.

"Thank you," she said after she snapped a couple. "It means a lot to me."

"Have you dropped this issue of getting custody?" I snapped as Bethany climbed the stairs to the slide again.

Penelope didn't respond as we both watched her get to the top of the stairs and slide to the bottom, then race around to start the process again.

"I know that I've hurt you," she said in a small, low voice. "And Bethany —"

"You can see she's completely fine."

She paused while Bethany came down the slide again only to race around to the steps. "I know that I've made choices that I regret, and I know they have consequences. But I'd like to try to not have the mistakes I've made last

forever.”

“You can’t undo leaving,” I said. “You can’t suddenly expect those three years to disappear.”

“I know,” she said, pushing her hands into her pockets and pausing again until Bethany was out of earshot. “But I left for three years. I don’t want to let that turn into sixteen. Or a lifetime.”

I tried to think back to my earliest memory. When I was Bethany’s age, I spent a lot of time hiding in the small cupboard in my bedroom. I’d climb in there when my parents argued. Every time my mother shut herself in her bedroom to sob. When I first became aware of her crying, I would try to comfort her—I wanted to somehow turn off her pain. But she’d tell me she was fine and would send me away to play. So I’d go to the cupboard where I wouldn’t hear and I could pretend it wasn’t happening.

I didn’t want Bethany’s childhood memories to be of her hiding anywhere.

At the same time, I didn’t want to create a new problem. I didn’t want Bethany to come to me one day and ask me why I hadn’t let her see her mother.

“I’m not trying to take her away from you, Gabriel. I would never. You’re a good man and a wonderful father. Bethany is very lucky to have you. I don’t want to ruin any of that.”

Didn’t she see that she already had? “There are no second chances,” I said. “Not when it comes to me. Not when it comes to my daughter.”

Penelope sighed. “I know, Gabriel,” she said in a resigned tone. “I know.”

Bethany moved on to the roundabout and Penelope rode on with her as she spun them both around. Then onto the monkey bars. Bethany had been trying for a while now to cross them without falling.

“Go as quickly as you can,” I said as she ran over to me to hand me her jacket. She nodded, determination in her eyes.

She got halfway across and dropped to the ground.

“You okay?” I asked, as Penelope rushed to her.

Bethany sprang up and went right back to where she’d started. “I’m going to try again,” she said.

“Good girl.” *Never give up.*

Penelope backed away. “See. If she gave up when she failed the first time, she’d never learn to master anything,” she said.

I huffed out a breath. I could see right through her. There was no way she

could equate the two circumstances and I wouldn't allow her to manipulate me. "But you did give up, Penelope. You gave up for three years."

Bethany passed the tricky halfway point and was almost across. "Keep going," I called. "You're nearly there."

Just before she hit the last rung, her hand slipped and she fell to the ground—just thirty centimeters or so. She'd been so close.

"How are your hands?" I asked.

She held up her palms. "Sore."

"Maybe take a break and try again next time. You were so close."

She nodded and skipped over to me to collect her jacket. I helped her into the sleeves so her top didn't ruche up on the arms in the way she hated.

"My palms were sore, Gabriel. I needed a break," Penelope said. "But I don't want to give up. Not on my daughter. And not on my marriage."

I didn't reply. I didn't have anything to say. Marriage and a child weren't trying to cross the monkey bars. Sometimes you just needed to push through—do what was being asked of you by the people who loved you.

Bethany raced back to me and slipped her hand into mine and we headed home, Penelope and Jade following. My mind started replaying my conversation with Autumn, as it had a hundred times since she left. I had no desire to try again with Penelope. But I wanted Autumn. More than anything, I wanted her to come back. If I was following my own advice, I needed to do what was being asked of me. Perhaps I just had to push through.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?" I called over my shoulder.

"Me?" Penelope asked. "Nothing. Why?"

"Meet me at Primitivo's at one," I said, referring to a restaurant around the corner from my office. We'd met a couple of times there before Bethany had been born. Lunch with Penelope would be the start of what Autumn had asked of me. I'd spend time with Penelope. I'd hear her out. But only because that's what it would take to get Autumn back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Autumn

So much for the amazing weather. It was raining. And not just in a gentle drip. This rain consisted of large, violent splashes of water my umbrella was almost useless against. My sneakers squelched when I walked, and my pants stuck to my legs as if I'd put them on straight from the washer.

But I was dry from my waist up thanks to the waterproof coat I'd brought from Oregon, and I wasn't cold. I was invigorated. It was as if the rain was determinedly washing away anything bad. I thought about Gabriel constantly. But I needed to focus on the positive—the man I loved got to have the family he'd always wanted. I had to be happy for him. My devastation at having to give him up would pass. At some point the sharp edges of loss would soften and I would start to feel whole again. In the meantime, I would distract myself. If that took getting soaked to my skin in Madrid, then so be it.

I saw some large white columns to my left, which must belong to the Prado. I raced toward them, desperate for shelter. I darted under cover and shut down my umbrella, stamping my feet in the vain hope that it would shake some of the water from my pants.

"I thought it was supposed to be sunny in Spain," an American, male voice said from behind me. I spun around and found a tall, handsome guy, trying to dry his face with his sweater.

"You're American." It was funny to hear that accent in such a faraway place. Perhaps it was a sign that right here was where I was meant to be.

"SoCal," he replied.

I laughed. No wonder he looked so butthurt. "The rain isn't personally

directed at you. And anyway, look at how green it is, even in the middle of the city. Trees need the rain. It's a tradeoff. You can't have the greenery without the water. Breathe it in." I faced the torrents and opened my arms in welcome. "It cleans everything away so we can start fresh." I had to believe that Madrid was the beginning of my future and not just a stop I was making while I ran from my pain.

"I'm Jackson," he said, and I turned to look at him. "And whoever you are, you just made me feel a lot better."

I grinned. "I'm glad. I'm from Oregon, so I guess I'm a little more used to the rain."

He shook his head and huffed a chuckle. "So, Oregon, want to go grab a cup of something hot before taking in the Goya?"

I shrugged. I was just thinking how I needed distracting. "Sure," I said. "As long as you don't spend the whole time complaining that Europe isn't just like California."

"I promise," he replied. A corner of his mouth turned up as he smiled, creating a dimple in his cheek that I wanted to poke with my index finger.

The Prado was waiting. My future was waiting. I just needed to keep taking it one step at a time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Gabriel

Penelope was always late but that didn't mean I had to be, so I got to the restaurant exactly on time. I reached the hostess's podium and saw Penelope waving from a table by the window. As much as I hated to admit it, every time I'd expected Penelope to stumble since she'd been back, she surprised me. She'd not missed a single play session with Bethany. She hadn't tried to push me to tell Bethany that she was her mother. She hadn't been underhanded and told her anyway. When I'd asked her to lunch, I hadn't had to negotiate on day, time, or place. And she was on time.

"Please can I get some water?" I said to the hostess. "You want anything?" I asked Penelope.

"Water's great." She grinned at me. "Did you come from the office?"

I sat down and my phone buzzed in my pocket. "Excuse me." I pulled out my mobile to see who had messaged me. Unsurprisingly, it was Mike. He seemed to get worse rather than better, constantly checking up on me—like I'd ever dropped the ball—and second-guessing my decisions.

"You need to make a call?" she asked. "It's fine."

I shook my head and picked up the menu. Mike would have to wait.

"I can't believe you're still doing it. Well," she said, shrugging, "I never understood why you did the job in the first place. It's not like you need the money."

There was no need to dust off this dance that we'd done a thousand times before. My job wasn't any of her concern. "You know I think it's important that Bethany has a good role model. It's good for her to see that everyone has

to go out into the world and earn a living.” Working, and working hard, wasn’t a bad thing. “I don’t want to be just another trust fund kid.”

“I know,” she said. “But I don’t think that’s the only reason you do it.” I didn’t ask her to elaborate. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. “You’re never going to end up as your father. You have far too much character for that.”

It was the kind of thing she would have said to me when we were married. At the heart of our relationship, there had always been mutual respect. It was what had always puzzled me about Penelope’s leaving. We didn’t argue. We bickered over little things but there had never been a fundamental disagreement. Or so I’d always thought. Her departure had come out of the blue. I’d been completely blindsided.

“Going to work keeps me honest.”

She paused and looked at me. “Really? Going to work and doing something you hate keeps you honest? Why not choose something you love?”

I wasn’t interested in a come-to-Jesus moment for myself. I wanted to hear about hers. “So, Penelope, why are you back?” I asked. “Why now?”

“I suppose I figured out what was important.”

“And that took three years?”

“There were reasons I left. And there were reasons why I didn’t come back. They weren’t necessarily the same. I don’t know how to explain it to you.”

“Try,” I said. I wanted to hear this. I *deserved* to hear this. “All I’ve gotten so far is some messed-up analogy about monkey bars.”

She smiled and shifted her fringe out of her eyes. The fringe was new. It suited her.

“I always loved Bethany, but over that first year of her life, it felt like the walls were closing in. It felt like my life wasn’t my own and that my choices had been taken away from me.” She looked sad but she didn’t look beaten or tired, and it occurred to me that before she’d left, that was how she’d looked—as if the color had drained from her face and someone had switched her into slow motion. The woman who sat before me was much more like the woman I’d married compared to the one who’d left.

“All I could see was a future being an unpaid servant to this squirming human, and I knew you wanted more than one child,” she said. “I felt as if my entire future was laid out for me. I didn’t like it.”

I kept my expression neutral. I wasn’t sure if Penelope was telling me she’d been depressed, and if that’s what she was saying, I didn’t want to be

insensitive. “You didn’t say anything at the time.”

“I don’t think I could have articulated it at the time. I just had this sense of panic, needing to run, needing to escape. I didn’t see that I wasn’t coping. I just felt this urge to leave. It didn’t help that I was clearly terrible at caring for Bethany.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I was so impatient with her. Remember when I screamed at her for crying? Like that was going to help.” She shook her head while she worried the edge of the menu with her nail. “When you were around, you were so patient with her, so calming. You only had to pick her up and she settled. It emphasized the way I didn’t feel any of those things. I was the opposite of calm. The opposite of patient. I just felt like a failure. Like she’d be better off with you and without me. I could get out of the way and let the two of you be.”

As much as I’d like Penelope to have turned into a monster, she was still the same woman I’d married. The woman who set her standards way too high and beat herself up far too much when she didn’t meet them. “I should have paid more attention. I had no idea you felt any of this.”

She reached over and grabbed my hand. “This is not your fault,” she said. “We were trying to navigate not killing a tiny human. That is quite the distraction.”

I smiled, remembering how we used to hover over her cot to check she was breathing, how we baby-proofed our entire house before Penelope had given birth, even though Bethany wouldn’t crawl for months. We’d been so cautious and careful about everything. Everything except our own relationship. That had been left to wither and die.

“After I left, over the following few months, I sort of emerged from a fog only to be enveloped in shame and guilt for leaving,” she continued. “I wanted to come back a thousand times. But what would I say? How would I explain myself?” she said. “I’d left my child. It’s the ultimate crime for a mother.” She pulled her hand from mine and took a sip of the water that had appeared on our table without our noticing. I waited as she swallowed and took a deep breath, trying to push away the obvious upset. “I loved you both, yet I abandoned you.” She shook her head. “I have to live with myself for doing that.”

She glanced down at the menu, clearly not trying to decide on her order. “Every time I thought about it, I ran further away in the hope that my shame

would be left behind, but of course it followed me around and just got bigger. I figured out that the only way it wouldn't just continue to grow and eventually eat me alive, was to turn around and face what I'd done."

"You're back to face the shame of leaving?" I asked. Was she asking me for absolution? She couldn't know me very well if she was.

She shook her head. "No, I had a lot of therapy to handle the shame. I'm back because I don't want to compound the mistakes I've made by staying away. I did a terrible thing to you both, but I don't want that to be the end. I don't want to walk away and never return. I want to move forward. Be Bethany's mother. And map out a new relationship with you."

I shook my head. Autumn would want me to agree and that would be that. But she didn't understand the scar Penelope's leaving had created.

She put up her hand to stop me from speaking. "Before you say anything, I know we can't go backward. That's not what I'm asking. Whatever happens in the future—whatever relationship we manage to salvage—I understand that it won't be what we had."

Whatever we'd had hadn't been enough. It hadn't stopped our family from falling apart.

"I know I'm asking a lot. And I understand it's difficult for you to trust me after what I did. But I'm patient."

It would have been far easier if Penelope had tried to excuse what she'd done, if she'd demanded that I let her back into Bethany's life or if she'd lacked remorse. But the way she'd explained things, it painted the situation in an entirely different light. The anger and bitterness I had toward Penelope seeped away until I was left with nothing but sadness. For her. For Bethany. And for me.

I nodded. "Thank you for telling me this. I'm sorry . . . sorry for not noticing at the time. For not coming after you. And for hating you for all these years."

She smiled at my confession. "I hated me too," she said, tears forming in her eyes. "And some of that feeling still lingers."

I drew in a breath and pushed back my shoulders. Penelope wasn't a monster, and I wasn't about to keep her in a cage, protecting Bethany from someone who cared for her. There was no going back. We could only move forward. "We should tell Bethany that you're her mother."

A guttural sob broke from Penelope's throat and she nodded. "Thank you," she whispered.

It was the last thing I'd expected to come out of this lunch. I'd expected to be going through the motions so I could tell myself I'd done what Autumn had asked. Autumn couldn't have known Penelope's reasons for leaving and staying away, but she knew enough to understand that I should hear Penelope out. She was the wisest woman I knew.

"You should come to dinner later in the week," I said. "We can tell her together."

"You're a good man, Gabriel."

"I'm going to ask you for something in return."

"Anything," she asked, her eyes brightening.

"Don't take her from me, Penelope. I can't give her up." My jaw tightened and my fists clenched like I was ready to fight anyone who would even think about taking my daughter from me.

"Never," she replied, shaking her head. "I promise."

I reached across the table and put my hand over hers and my chest loosened at the softness of her familiar skin. We had to find a way forward. For Bethany and for ourselves. We had to move on from the hatred and anger, the shame and guilt. Contrary to everything I'd taught myself to believe, we all deserved a second chance.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Autumn

As I looked up at the bulging, undulating steps, it struck me. “It’s like Barcelona is the younger, wayward sister of the grown-up Madrid.”

“Madrid is Prada and Barcelona is Lacroix,” Jackson said as we made our way up to the steps.

“La what now?” I asked. Every other sentence Jackson spoke needed translation. There was no way we had grown up in the same country. It felt like we inhabited different planets most of the time.

“*Christian* Lacroix,” he said as if I might be the stupidest person to ever walk the earth. “They must have Lacroix in Oregon.”

“In Oregon they might, but I’m certain Christian never entered the gates of the Sunshine Trailer Park.”

He cackled and then spun three hundred and sixty degrees. “I mean, it’s pretty. I’m just not sure it’s very me. It’s not that I don’t appreciate the drama, because you know I do. But I’ll take the baroque glory of the Spanish steps over this any day.”

I groaned. “No Rome references,” I complained. “Not today.”

I didn’t have to see Jackson’s face to know he was rolling his eyes. “Listen, I’m up before noon so we can spend an entire day in this place. I can’t promise I can go the whole day without mentioning Rome. Anyway, it’s where you first fell in love. It shouldn’t make you grimace. It should make you smile.”

I linked my arm into Jackson’s. “No offense. I just wish I was spending the day with Gabriel today. He loves this park.”

“No offence, but I’ve seen a picture of that man. I wish I was spending the day with him, too.” Jackson was also in Spain nursing heartbreak. Hiding or running or distracting himself. We were in the same boat and had been each other’s companions in misery for the last week.

I laughed. “We’re both each other’s consolation prizes.”

“You never know. He might take you here for your honeymoon.”

“That hopeless romanticism is what will get you into trouble next time,” I said to him. “Gabriel won’t be the man I go on honeymoon with. I honestly wonder if I even want to get married.”

“And they say the gays are dramatic.”

“I mean it. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t have done for Gabriel. If he’d wanted to get married, I would have. For him. I just can’t imagine feeling that way about anyone else.”

“Give it time, sweet girl.”

Time wasn’t going to do it. Each day grew worse. It just created space where I replayed our conversations over and over in my head. It made me crazy wondering if I’d done the right thing by leaving. Should I have stayed and fought? Why didn’t I tell him I loved him? My heart grew heavier and heavier with aching for him. And Bethany.

I missed them.

“You’re getting maudlin,” he said. “I can see it in your eyes. And it’s three hours before it’s noon and acceptable to drink. Even in Europe.”

“Should I send him a picture? We talked about this place.” If he and Bethany were here, we could have brought a picnic and a Frisbee and raced up the steps. Gabriel would have put Bethany on his shoulders so she could see out onto the city. She would love it here.

“I know, honey. But don’t do anything you’re going to regret.” He glanced around. “There,” he said, pointing at an ice cream stand in the distance.

“I can’t eat ice cream at this time of the morning.”

“It’s not an ice cream stall. It’s a souvenir stand. Let’s buy a postcard. You can write it with what you’d want to say to him and keep it until you’ve had time to think about whether you should send it.”

“Are you this sensible when you break up with someone?” I asked. I didn’t want to send a postcard. Or write one I knew I wouldn’t send. Getting in contact with Gabriel wasn’t the answer. He needed time to see if his family could be pieced back together. And I needed to give him that time.

“Nope. I’d be texting eleven times an hour and drinking in the shower in the mornings.”

I didn’t want to day drink. I wanted to make the most of the summer. Seeing Europe like this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and was the only kind of silver lining of an otherwise clouded sky. I needed to stay positive and make the best of things. “A postcard seems like a good option.” Even if I never sent it, there was something deep inside me that told me he’d feel what I wrote. He’d know I was thinking about him. He’d understand that I loved him.

CHAPTER FORTY

Gabriel

It felt like we were about to begin a séance. “I hate this place,” I said to Dexter, trying not to shudder as I took a seat at the round table of the private room where we often ended up if it was Dexter’s turn to choose the venue for our regular evenings out.

He shot me a look. “It’s one of the best private members clubs in Europe.”

“Did you bring your cauldron?” Joshua asked.

“No,” I replied. “But I brought some eye of newt.”

“I think it’s the red velvet curtains,” Tristan said. “Or that low ceiling with the star cut into it. It’s part witch’s lair, part nineteenth-century Parisian brothel.”

“I have no desire for a spell or a prostitute, so like I said, I hate this place.” The lack of windows, the wooden paneling. The heavy velvet everywhere. It was claustrophobic and depressing.

“Well, we’re planning *my* stag night, so I don’t care if you like it here,” Dexter said.

“Vegas!” Tristan exclaimed.

“Speaking of twenty-first-century brothels,” Andrew chipped in.

“We’re not going to Vegas,” Dexter said. “Apart from it being a complete cliché, we all vowed never to go again after last time. Wherever we go, if you get arrested again, you’re staying in prison, Joshua.”

“That was a shit show,” Joshua said. “Vegas is a terrible idea. Tallinn?”

A collective groan echoed in our velvet cave. “Way too predictable,”

Tristan said.

“What about Harry Potter world?” Joshua suggested. “We could rent the entire place out for the night. No one could get into trouble. It’s original.”

“Great idea . . . if this was my thirteenth birthday party,” Dexter said.

I couldn’t hold back a laugh. “What about Peppa Pig world?” I asked. Arguably, that could mean an overnight stay at my place.

“Or Legoland?” Andrew said.

“Okay, okay,” Joshua said. “Message received. At least I’m coming up with ideas, even if they are all shit. Climb down from the cheap seats, get in the arena, and make some suggestions, Gabriel.”

Why couldn’t we just stay in London?

“Rome? Great food, great wine. Beautiful women,” Joshua suggested. “All that passion. God, I love Italian women.”

“This isn’t about you getting laid,” I snapped. There was no way I was going to Rome. “I’m vetoing Rome.”

“Have you heard from her?” Tristan asked.

I shook my head. I’d not asked Dexter where she was or what she was doing. And I’d only seen Hollie once since Autumn had left. I’d come close to asking after her, but I’d held myself back. There was no point. She’d been clear.

“And how are things going with Penelope?” Joshua asked.

“Good, actually.”

Dexter’s eyebrows shot up. He filled the expectant silence around the table by topping up my wineglass.

“We had lunch and talked things through a couple of weeks back. We’ve told Bethany she’s her mother and she comes over to the house a few times a week.”

“Well, that sounds mighty civilized,” Dexter said. “And you seem okay about it.”

“It is and I am. It’s good for Bethany. Like Penelope said, she walked out, and it can be for three years or a lifetime. She’d prefer it to be three and . . .” I’d thought about it. I’d do anything for my daughter, and I wasn’t going to be the man who denied her a mother. “And so would I. It’s what’s best for Bethany.”

“So, she’s back for good?” Joshua asked.

“Yes, I think she is. And if she walks out again . . . Well, I’ll pick Bethany up and put her back together.” I didn’t think Penelope would leave

again. She'd grown up. We both had. And she wouldn't want to miss out on Bethany any more than she already had done.

"What about the two of you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. She's still the same woman I married but . . ." She wasn't Autumn. And when Autumn came back, I wanted to prove to her that I'd done everything I could to try with Penelope, even if that's not what I wanted. Autumn should have no doubt that I wanted her above all others.

"Too much water under the bridge?"

"I'm not sure I'm the same man she married." My phone buzzed, interrupting my thoughts. I pulled it out of my pocket to find Mike's number flashing at me and I groaned before ignoring the call.

"Wait, did you just ignore a work call?" asked Tristan.

I shrugged. I was sick of Mike. Ever since Penelope and I had lunch and she'd been surprised that I was still lawyering, it had gotten me thinking. "I've been considering that I might not like my job."

"This is hardly breaking news," Joshua said. "What would be a surprise is if you said you were giving it up."

"Actually, I wanted you lot to talk me out of resigning." Since Primitivo's, I'd mulled over the idea of leaving the law. Penelope was right that, in theory, I didn't have to work. The family trust meant that my father hadn't worked a day in his life, and I wouldn't have to either. I'd been a lawyer a long time, dealing with shitty clients like Mike and whoever came before him or would come after him. At long last, it occurred to me that I didn't have to do something I hated to be a role model.

"Excuse me, did I hear you correctly?" Dexter asked.

"I'm not saying I'm about to resign from the partnership. I'm just thinking about it." The more I thought about it, the more appealing it seemed. "But obviously it's a terrible idea and I need to hear it. I wouldn't even know what else I could do. I don't want to sit around doing nothing and I don't want to do something I'm going to enjoy even less."

"You don't have to work, do you?" Tristan asked.

"No, but I *want* to. It's important that I'm a good role model for Bethany. And anyway, what would I do all day?"

"You could do charity work," Joshua suggested. "Set up a foundation. Raise money."

Didn't thousands of rich men do that? It always seemed as much of an ego trip as a charitable endeavor. I'd rather just donate to someone else's

foundation.

“Set up your own business,” Andrew suggested, which was typical for him because he seemed to have a new business every time I saw him.

“Doing what?” I asked.

Silence stretched around the table. That was the problem with lawyers. No one could see them doing anything but being lawyers, including the lawyers themselves.

“You could go into politics,” Dexter said. “You’ve got high moral standards and great decision-making skills.”

“I think that disqualifies me,” I said. “And anyway, I can’t think of anything worse.”

“You could sell tables,” Tristan said. “Like the one you made for your kitchen.”

Warmth gathered in my belly as I remembered Autumn describing how I gave furniture a new lease on life. I drummed my fingers on the table. “I didn’t make it,” I said.

“But you . . . polished it up or something, didn’t you?” Tristan asked.

Or something. It had taken me six months of evenings to get that table into a useable state. “I do that for fun,” I said. “To unwind.”

“Right,” Andrew said. “So make it into your job and you’ll never feel like you’re at work. But don’t do it unless you feel it in your heart. In your gut.”

“You’re saying that you feel it in your heart every time you want to start a new business?” I asked, ready for him to say *of course not*.

“Absolutely,” he replied. Andrew was a rich man. His family were well off, but Andrew was *rich*. And he’d done it himself, jumping from idea to idea, building successful business after successful business. So, although I wanted to dismiss his romantic idea that I needed some kind of visceral connection to a business, he’d already proved he did it the right way. “The question is, do you *love* working with secondhand furniture?”

“I *love* having sex with women. I’m not going to turn that into a business,” Tristan said.

Tristan was a dick at times, but I saw his point.

“Never say never,” Andrew replied. “You might need those gigolo stripes at some point in this economy.”

Everyone around the table chuckled. Dexter opened his mouth to say something, and Tristan raised his hand to stop him.

“Spare me the obvious gags, Dexter. I know, I’ll be bankrupt by the end

of the week. Etcetera, etcetera.”

“You know what, Tristan? I will spare you. What I was actually going to say to Gabriel was that he should do whatever makes him happy.” Dexter turned to me. “Tune everything out. Ignore what you think you should do for Bethany. Ignore your reaction to your father’s poor parenting and what you *think* people think about you. If it was entirely up to you, how would you spend your time?”

“In my workshop,” I replied, without missing a beat. “But it’s fun. Doesn’t mean I’m good at it. And I know I’m a good lawyer.”

“You’d be good at anything you set your mind to. It’s who you are,” Tristan said.

I playfully punched him on the arm and glanced around when I didn’t hear the good-natured put-down coming from one of my brothers. Instead, they were all nodding.

“And no one’s the best at anything straight off the bat,” Joshua said. “Practice and you’ll get better. That’s just a fact.”

They made it sound so simple. But I thought about it—Dexter loved his business. Loved jewelry. He always said it ran through his veins. There was nothing that lit a fire in Beck like redeveloping real estate. In fact, they were all like that. Tristan tried to pretend he wasn’t, but he was a *passionate* geek. What exactly that he geeked out about I wasn’t sure—something to do with technology. But they were lucky—they’d managed to find the holy grail where their passions and their careers aligned. Most people weren’t so fortunate. I’d been vaguely considering resigning and maybe taking a couple of non-exec directorships of companies a bit like the older partners did when they retired. But these guys were telling me to rip up the rule book. “What? So I just resign and make the way I blow off steam my job?”

“Why not?” Joshua said.

“I’m a good lawyer. I’ve worked really hard for years and—”

“You might be a lawyer, but I know you understand your way around the business world enough to understand the concept of sunk costs,” Joshua said. “If you’re done, get out now. Don’t give any more of your time to a career you don’t enjoy.”

“Right,” Andrew said. “Not every business I invest in works. When it doesn’t, I get out. And sometimes it works for a while and then I need to move on because I’m bored, or the business needs to move on because it needs someone else. What worked yesterday doesn’t necessarily work today.

Law served you for a while. If it doesn't any longer, move on."

Move on and give myself a chance at a second career? It seemed so out of character. But something was pulling me toward the idea.

"If you had to put food on the table for Bethany, it might be different," Dexter said. "But you're in a position that most people can only dream about. Don't waste it. You should role model *that* for Bethany—making the most out of life."

I hated to think of Bethany doing a job she didn't like, especially if she believed her father had taught her a "grin and bear it" mentality. With the amount of time everyone spent at work, it would mean she'd spend most of her life unhappy. I tried to picture myself in my workshop every day. I liked the idea of not having to put on a suit. Not having to wedge myself into an overcrowded tube train. More than that, the idea of getting to spend an entire day on a project was like the sun breaking through thunder clouds. My mind started to race with ideas of what I'd like to work on. I'd seen a Victorian bedframe online I'd love to have a go at. It would involve some cane work, but it was something I'd been meaning to try. And I'd always hoped that one day, I'd actually make something—a chair or a table—from scratch. "I wouldn't know how to start." A new venture sounded completely daunting, but at the same time there was a feeling of freedom that began to unlock the pressure around my heart.

"I'll tell you where to start," Joshua said. "Tell Mike to fuck off and find another lawyer to harass."

"Then resign from that firm," Dexter said.

"And pick up your axe and do something nice with wood," Tristan said.

"My axe?" They made it sound so simple. And in theory it was. In theory, there was nothing stopping me from handing my notice in.

"Worst-case scenario," Andrew said. "You can always go back to law."

Penelope had been right—I wasn't my father. I wouldn't make entertaining a series of nameless women my life's work. If I left the law, I'd read my daughter a bedtime story more often. I'd spend more time in my workshop. I'd make pieces I'd only let myself dream of. I could travel.

Why had it taken my estranged wife to bring these thoughts to the surface? Or maybe it hadn't been her at all. Autumn had been the one to insist I give myself a second chance at a future I'd dreamed of. Perhaps I'd just had time to examine those aspirations more closely and found that what I wanted had shifted.

“Great. Now we’ve figured out what Gabriel’s going to do for the rest of his life, can we get back to planning my stag party?” Dexter asked.

“Yes, back to our cauldron,” Joshua said. “What about Barcelona?”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Autumn

It was raining, and I had no appetite for bad weather. Instead of being out sightseeing, making the most out of my last few hours in Croatia, I'd packed and repacked my case at least nine times. I was due to fly to Paris this afternoon, but I didn't want to go. How ridiculous was that? I was due to go to *Paris, France*, and I didn't want to go.

I was homesick. Not for Oregon. But for London. For my sister. For Gabriel. And Bethany.

"You called at the perfect time," Hollie said as she answered my videocall. "I'm deciding on napkins. To tell you the truth, Dexter decided on napkins and chose something ten times more expensive than we need, so I'm *rechoosing* napkins. Don't say anything if you speak to him."

"I promise. What are the options?" She held up two white napkins. "I prefer the plain ones."

"Great. Me too. The coordinator was pushing the scalloped edges, but I prefer the plain white." She collapsed onto the couch I recognized from her office. "So, haven't spoken to you since you left Greece. How's Zagreb?"

"Pretty. I wish you were here," I said, a little too weary to keep my smile from faltering.

"I wish I was there too. I could have come out. You want me to see if I can get flights?"

"Hollie, you're getting married in two weeks. You can't come out now. And anyway, I'll be back in London in six days."

"I've missed you so much," Hollie said.

“Same.” I didn’t have the energy to launch into how great the trip was, which was what I normally did when she told me she missed me. I didn’t want her to worry.

“You don’t sound like yourself. What’s the matter?”

I wasn’t sure whether or not Hollie was expecting me to have *gotten over* Gabriel by now, but we hadn’t mentioned him since I’d left London. “I miss you. I miss London.”

“Does that include Gabriel?” she asked.

I drew in a breath and prepared myself to disappoint my sister. “I’m so happy that I’ve had the chance to come to Europe, see all these amazing places. And I’ll never regret leaving. You might not like this, but as much as I wish you’d been here with me, I wish Gabriel and Bethany had been here too.”

She stared into the phone, her eyebrows pulled together, but didn’t say a word.

“It’s been weeks and I miss him more every day. Not less.” I thought back to the dinners Gabriel and I had been to at Hollie and Dexter’s place, and wondered how often he’d been there without me in the past month. It had taken me every ounce of willpower not to ask after him during every phone call. But just like I was out of energy, my self-control was at an all-time low.

Hollie’s frown might have been disapproving but it also might have been sympathetic. Did she know something I didn’t?

“Have you heard from him?” I asked.

“I was about to ask you the same question. I’ve been avoiding him,” she said.

“I told him I didn’t want to have any contact while I was away. I wanted him and Penelope to have a good shot at giving their marriage another chance.” A thousand times a day I’d wondered if that had been the right decision. He might have moved on already. He might have thought I’d given up on him. “You haven’t seen him at all?”

“Just once when I picked up Dexter. Wedding prep is a pain in my butt but it’s a great excuse not to have people around for dinner.”

“What about Dexter? Has he said anything?”

“About Gabriel? He’s banned from telling me anything.”

I understood why she didn’t want to hear how Gabriel was—she was a loyal secret keeper, and while it was one of the things I loved most about her, I just wish her lips were a little looser when it came to Gabriel.

“You think he’s back with Penelope?” I asked.

When Hollie didn’t respond I assumed the screen had frozen. I held my phone toward my hotel room door. Damn WiFi.

“You know what?” she asked finally.

My heart pounded like I was waiting to hear my fate. She knew something, I knew she did, just like I knew she didn’t want to tell me what it was. “What?” I braced myself to hear the truth. Better to find out here than watch him turn up to Dexter and Hollie’s wedding with Penelope on his arm.

“I think I know you pretty well.” That didn’t sound good. “I’ve seen you go through your fair share of boyfriends.”

We were veering off course. I wanted to know about Gabriel and Penelope. “Where are we going with this?”

“I’m saying that you’ve had lots of other boyfriends and I bet there’s been a few you’d have difficulty recalling a surname for.”

“Enough with the slut shaming, Hollie. You’re supposed to be on my side.” Was she saying I wasn’t good enough for Gabriel?

“Like, you’d just move on, right? You’d leave them in your dust.”

“Jesus, Hollie, you’re making me sound like a monster.”

“Sorry,” she said, grinning into the camera. “I’m just saying that you’ve been through Europe on your own and you haven’t met anyone. No crazy affairs, no Italian boyfriend, no flavor-of-the-week. You’re still pining for Gabriel.”

“Are you recapping all this for any particular reason or are you just testing the WiFi?”

“You’re in love with him.”

Hearing it from my sister was like being presented with evidence of an open and shut case. Of course I was in love with him—that wasn’t new information. But knowing Hollie saw it too proved it wasn’t going to be something I just got over.

“I know,” I said, standing up from the bed and staring out over the city. I was in love with a man who might well be starting a new life with his wife. A man who used to love me and who I hadn’t seen for weeks. A man who was hundreds of miles away, just where I’d left him. “What’s your point, Hollie?”

“My point is that you’ve had the opportunity to spread your wings and you still love him, so you need to get the heck back here and fight for him.”

I spun to face my suitcase. “You think?” Excitement fizzled in my chest before panic pushed past. Did she know something and wasn’t telling me?

“Who am I fighting? Is he back with Penelope?”

“Honestly I don’t know. I told Dexter I didn’t want to hear about any of it because it didn’t seem fair. But if you love him, you need to tell him.”

“I’m due to fly to Paris this afternoon. If he’s decided to go back to Penelope, I’d rather stay there and lick my wounds.”

“Fly to Paris,” Hollie said. “If things are going to work out, a few days won’t make much difference. Go distract yourself with the city and make a plan—I know you’re good at those. If you weren’t, Dexter and I wouldn’t be about to get married. Then get your butt back here and fight for him. I’m sure there’s a part of you that’s scared to care about a guy but—”

“I’m not scared of loving him. I just don’t want to get in the middle of him and Penelope if he can make a life with her. He’s not good at giving people second chances.”

“Sometimes they don’t deserve them.”

“That’s not for me to decide. That’s up to Gabriel.”

“Right. It’s up to Gabriel to decide if he wants you or not. Come back. Tell him you love him and then he can decide what he wants.”

Was that what I should have done all along? I’d been so sure that me staying around would have muddied the waters for him and kept him from giving Penelope a second chance, but maybe she didn’t deserve him? And although I wanted Gabriel to be happy, I wanted him to be happy with me. Because I knew he was the only man that I would ever want.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Gabriel

There had been nothing wrong with the evening. The babysitter had turned up on time. Penelope and I had arrived at the restaurant within a few minutes of each other. We'd been seated at a nice table by the window that overlooked the park. The waiter was friendly when he took our order and the starter had been delicious. There had been nothing *wrong* with the evening, but it wasn't right either.

"How's work?" Penelope asked.

So far, our conversation had revolved entirely around Bethany. It was a neutral, common ground that didn't create any roadblocks or conflicts. And it didn't give anything of me away either, not that I'd been consciously holding myself back. I was trying. I'd promised Autumn I would spend time with Penelope and get to know her again, and I was fulfilling my promise. Which was why we were at dinner. And why I felt so uncomfortable, I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

"Same old, same old," I replied. She didn't need to know that I was planning to resign. "What about you? Are you still writing?"

She shrugged. "I mean, in theory. I just don't enjoy it like I used to." Penelope had been a staff writer at a magazine when we split. She'd said she'd been doing freelance ever since.

"You've got something else in mind?" I asked.

"Not really," she said, moving the food around her plate. "I guess it depends on the next . . . however long."

"What do you mean?"

“You know. I obviously want to be around for Bethany. And you . . .” She said it as if it was a sentence she was expecting me to finish off.

“What does that mean?” I took a sip of my wine.

“Just that things are going well. We’ve been out to dinner a few times and Bethany and I are bonding. If things keep going along this route then hopefully . . . you know, it will get even better.”

I finished off my lamb and sat back, watching her. Things were friendly between us but if I were watching our interaction, I wouldn’t guess that we were married. Or dating. It wasn’t flirtatious on either side. Penelope seemed on edge, as if she were going for a job interview, and I felt as if I were going through the motions at a business dinner.

“Where do you see yourself in five years?” I asked. I couldn’t stop the images flooding my brain as soon as I’d asked the question. I was with Bethany. And Autumn. And we were sitting out in the garden on chairs that I’d made us.

She shrugged. “I guess, hopefully back with you and Bethany. As a family.”

I didn’t react, not because I didn’t see that picture at all, but because we’d been talking about her career. “What do you see yourself doing professionally?”

“I really want to make it up to you and Bethany. I hope you let me do that.”

“But that’s not a job, Penelope.”

“But being a full-time mother is,” she replied. “And a wife. That’s what I want to focus on. If you’ll let me.”

When I was a kid, there was a river we all played in during the summer months. It looked like a mud pit, so murky and brown that you couldn’t see the bottom. One winter, long after I’d outgrown summer afternoons swimming in the water, I passed by when I was training for my Duke of Edinburgh Gold. At first, I hadn’t recognized the place. The surface of the water was like a mirror, reflecting the trees and hedges on the bank. I stopped and looked more closely to find that the water was crystal clear—I could see right to the bottom. The bed was covered in smooth stone pebbles punctured by bits of weed and bigger rocks. It was an entirely different world that I’d never noticed beneath my feet. It wasn’t that I hadn’t been looking before—it was just a different time of year, which showed me something new.

I took a deep breath as I stared into Penelope’s eyes. The water was

crystal clear.

It was as if I'd never seen my wife until now. I'd never understood her drive or ambitions or what she wanted in life. When we were married, she just seemed to be excited by what I wanted—a life with her. A family with her. And despite her explanations, I hadn't really understood why she'd left. But now I saw clearly.

Penelope was desperately searching for something.

She hadn't found it in writing. And she hadn't found it in me. Or Bethany, or our life together. And that wasn't going to change the second time around. She needed to figure out her place in the world.

"I don't think that's going to work," I replied.

Terror slid across her face, but I continued as she started to protest.

"I'm not saying you can't be Bethany's mother, but I don't think that's going to be enough for you, Penelope. And you haven't been my wife for a very long time, despite what the law says. There's a lot of water under the bridge."

"But I'm still the same woman you married and you're still the man I married. We can try. I'm sorry I left and I'll work to regain your trust—"

"Lack of trust isn't the reason we're not going to work out," I said, my mind completely clear. "We're not compatible. I want someone who wants *me*. Not the idea of me. Not a husband. Not the father of her child. But me: Gabriel Chase. I'm not looking for someone who needs me to complete them."

I'd told Autumn I'd try with Penelope and I had. I could genuinely say that I'd spent time with her, wanting to understand why things hadn't worked between us. I'd looked carefully at that idealized image of family that I'd longed for. But I'd realized what I wanted wasn't simply the opposite of the life I'd had as a child. My dream had crystalized—had been for a while now but most especially in the past month.

I wasn't the same man I had been when I'd conjured up that ideal. I was a father now. I was older. I didn't want some fantasy. I wanted to be happy.

"I'm not asking you to leave our lives." I continued. "I'm not saying you can't be a mother to Bethany. But we can't be married anymore. And I think one day, you'll see that too. I don't think I'm what you're looking for."

"But I loved our life together."

"Are you sure?" I asked her, genuinely curious. "Some of it worked, Penelope. But if it wasn't enough for you to stay then, is it enough now?"

Minutes ticked by as she gazed out the window.

“I want it to be,” she said finally.

I reached across the table for her hand. “I know. But I’m not sure wishing something is enough makes it enough. If that was the case, you would never have left.”

“I did love you.” Her eyes pleaded with me to believe her.

Love seemed like such a meaningless word when it came to our marriage. I wasn’t sure it had been about love for either of us. “I thought you were my forever but looking back . . . I should have known. Looking back, you were always searching for something. And you didn’t find it in me. Or in Bethany.”

A churning in my gut stirred memories of that cupboard where I used to hide. The shouting. The crying. I knew it then. I understood all those years ago that my father should have left. My mother should have kicked him out. We weren’t enough for him. I didn’t think Penelope had cheated on me. Maybe she had—it didn’t matter. I was breaking this cycle. I wasn’t going to take her back when I knew nothing was solved and so nothing would change. Maybe she’d stay, but if she did, she wouldn’t be happy. We weren’t enough. She had to figure out what she needed to make herself whole.

“I think I’m broken,” she said. “You are the best of men. And Bethany’s adorable. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Maybe it was me. Penelope had left and now Autumn was finding her fulfilment in Europe. I knew Autumn had left because she thought it was best for me. But she was young. Perhaps down the road, she’d realize I wouldn’t be enough for her either. Something told me that it wasn’t the same. What Autumn and I had was deeper somehow than what Penelope and I had. We hadn’t talked about a future together, but I saw it as clear as I saw the plate in front of me. I knew we’d be together, knew it in my bones. “I don’t think it’s you. And I don’t think it’s me. You need to find you, rather than look for someone else to give you what you need.”

“Please don’t take Bethany away from me,” she said, her voice full of panic. “I know I don’t deserve a second chance, but I promise you, I’ll do nothing to hurt her again.”

I shook my head. “I’m not going to take her away. But she needs stability. We’ll figure out how to put her first without putting you last. Let’s agree now, in this moment, that we’ll figure out something that works for all of us.”

“Like I said, you’re the best of men, Gabriel Chase.” She took in a

juddering breath. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know.” For the first time since she’d walked out on us three years ago, I felt at peace. Relieved. We weren’t going to enter some kind of hell-loop where she came and went and we were both dragged into misery. Bethany wouldn’t have to hide in cupboards, and I wouldn’t waste my life wishing reality was something it wasn’t. Penelope and I weren’t meant to be. That had nothing to do with my anger or resentment, or not giving her a second chance. And it had nothing to do with Autumn.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Gabriel

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been away from Bethany overnight, but I was surprisingly relaxed about it.

"Why don't they have these kinds of waitresses in London?" Tristan asked, glancing around at the women in white bikinis and nearly see-through cover-ups who were distributing cocktails to the patrons at the rooftop bar. It was a little weird for a five-star New York hotel, but it was hot as hell and this was America, so I wasn't about to complain. "Alcohol tastes better when served by a woman in a bikini."

"You're a sexist dick at times, Tristan," I said, kicking at his chair under the table.

"We're in a hotel bar. Not a strip club. Don't be a twat," Joshua said. "Keep your eyes on New York." The city stretched out all around us. Three hundred and sixty degrees of Manhattan. From up here we could see everything from the Chrysler building to the Brooklyn Bridge.

Dexter just shook his head. "I can't wait for you to fall hook, line, and sinker for a girl. You'll realize what an idiot you've been."

"There's no way I'm settling down," Tristan replied.

"You will fall at the feet of the first woman who falls in love with you," Joshua said. "All your chat is just that. Chat."

"Whatever you say," Tristan replied. "At least I actually get laid. Unlike you."

"I have sex plenty," Joshua replied. "But I'm not a fifteen-year-old boy so I don't have to tell everyone about it."

“How’s Bethany,” Dexter asked, clearly wanting to change the subject.

“I spoke to her just before I came up. She’s good. Excited that Penelope’s staying over.”

“Oh wow,” Beck said. “Penelope is looking after her?”

“The nanny’s there as well. But yeah, it’s good for the two of them to have some time together.”

“Sounds like things are still going well,” Beck said.

I blew out a breath. “So far, so good.” In many ways it would be easier if we could slip into our life before she left. Especially now when we knew each other and ourselves in a much deeper way than we had done before.

“She still want you back?” Beck asked.

I shrugged, swirling the whiskey in my glass. Penelope hadn’t said anything more since we’d had dinner together. She’d been seeing more of Bethany, but she hadn’t suggested dinner again and neither had I. “I don’t think so.”

“And you’re not interested?”

I shook my head. “She wasn’t the woman I thought I married. I’m not saying that to criticize her. It’s more a reflection of me having an image in my head of what I wanted and trying to mold everything to fit. That image is gone. And Penelope and I are Bethany’s parents, but we’re not ever going to be husband and wife again.”

“You sound okay about it,” Andrew said.

“I am. But . . .” I wasn’t a man who asked for help or advice. Tonight, I needed both. “I do have other things on my mind.”

“You need to leave your job.”

“Oh, I did that already. Just before I left for the airport.”

Dexter beckoned one of the waitresses over. “A magnum of your best champagne, please.”

“We have a double celebration on our hands,” Beck said.

I winced. Dexter might cancel the champagne if he knew what I was about to say next. “I’m also in love with Autumn.” I glanced at Dexter. “Sorry, mate.”

“Yeah, I had a feeling,” he replied. “You spoken to her?”

“Not since she left. She made me promise to give things a go with Penelope. But it’s not my wife I want. It’s Autumn. I never thought I could ever see myself trusting a woman, trusting myself to be with a woman again. Not like I had with Penelope. But I love Autumn. I trust her. I want to build a

life with her.”

“You can’t help who you love,” Beck said.

“You okay with this?” I asked, looking at Dexter.

“I’m with Beck on this. I can’t speak for my future wife, but we’ll win her round. She’s very fond of you.”

“Thanks, Dexter,” I replied. “I appreciate it. I’ve got to focus on winning Autumn over first. I need something . . . big. To show her that I’m serious. She might have given up and moved on—it’s been weeks, and she was determined I should get back together with Penelope—but I’ll do what I need to do to get her back.”

“Right,” said Tristan. “The best brains in London are around this table. We can figure something out.”

“A coven emergency, as Stella would describe it,” Beck said.

“Stella thinks we’re witches?”

He shrugged. “She’s just jealous.”

“But she comes to most of our drinks nights,” Andrew said.

“I know,” said Beck. “But she’s not here tonight, so she’s jealous.”

“You should tell her that we’d prefer her company to yours any day,” Joshua said.

“I’ll make sure I pass the message on. And while we’re passing messages on, get your fucking hair cut. You look like a student.”

“I’m busy, and what can I say, Miss Tuesday Night likes something to run her fingers through.”

“Miss Tuesday Night?” Beck asked. “You don’t even have names for the women you fuck now? You’re starting to sound like Tristan.”

“Maybe I’m concealing her identity,” Joshua said.

“You’re both animals,” I said.

“I’ve got it,” Tristan said. “You go down on one knee during Dexter and Hollie’s wedding breakfast. During the speeches or something.”

“Firstly—no,” Dexter said. “And secondly, no fucking way. What are you thinking, Tristan? Sometimes I wonder how you manage to dress yourself in the morning, let alone trick people into paying you to mess about with their computers.”

“What’s your problem? Proposing in front of everyone’s a grand gesture,” Tristan said, looking genuinely confused.

“That will take the focus off the bride and groom and their wedding,” I said as if I was explaining to Bethany that she shouldn’t eat the sandwich

she'd just dropped in the dirt.

Tristan shrugged. "Don't blame me that Dexter's a selfish narcissist who wants all the attention to himself. The brief was to think up a grand gesture to win back Autumn. I fulfilled the brief."

"When's she back in London?" Andrew asked. I couldn't answer him. I didn't know where Autumn was, who she was with, or when she was coming back.

"I guess she's coming back for the wedding." I glanced at Dexter.

"Yup. She's back next Wednesday."

My heart tumbled in my chest. In just days she'd be back in London.

"She's coming back on Eurostar."

That little piece of information planted a seed of an idea in my brain. "She's in Paris now?" I asked.

"I think that's what Hollie said."

Paris. We should be there together. I wanted to kiss her by the Seine. Hold her hand over *moules frites*. Watch her face when she saw the Venus di Milo for the first time. Plans started to form. I could go to Paris. Find her. Tell her I loved her.

"You know where she's staying?" I asked.

"No clue," Dexter said.

That wasn't a dealbreaker. I could ask Hollie, or I could call Autumn and just ask her. We might not have spoken in weeks, but it wasn't like she hated me. There'd be no reason for her not to pick up . . . unless. "She on her own?"

"I don't know." Dexter pulled his phone from his pocket. "Let me ask Hollie."

Did it matter if she was on her own? It wasn't like that was going to stop me. If she'd met someone, I'd just have to fight for her. I could do that. She might not have told me she loved me, but I knew her well enough to be confident that what we had was special. The kind of thing that wasn't just replaced in a few weeks. She'd left *for me*. She'd stayed away *for me*. Well, I'd done as she'd asked, and I knew there wasn't a future with me and Penelope. There was no reason for Autumn to be anywhere but by my side. "It doesn't matter," I said standing. "I'm going to leave you guys to it. Sorry to miss the rest of your stag do, Dexter."

"What?" Andrew said.

"I'm going to get a flight to Paris." I beckoned the waiter over.

“Just like that?” Tristan asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. Just like that.” I gave the waiter my card. “Put everything from tonight on here, please.”

“Sometimes you’ve gotta do what you’ve gotta do,” Dexter said.

“And I’ve got to go and get Autumn.”

“Good for you, mate,” Beck said. “Go for it. Keep us posted.”

Beck got it. Dexter got it. The others would someday. I didn’t want to be away from Autumn for another moment. I didn’t even want to wait until next week. I didn’t have to be back in London until the day after tomorrow. Hopefully it would be time enough to find Autumn and make her realize that I loved her, that she loved me, and that our futures were inextricably linked. There was no point in resisting it any longer.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Autumn

As I stood speechless, taking in the red windmill teetering on top of the building opposite, I couldn't help but wonder why someone before Baz Lurhmann hadn't made a musical about the place. Paris was all crimson and bright lights and optimism against the dull, grey sky. I pulled out my guidebook, complete with color coded Post-its and dogeared pages. Paris was always meant to be the first stop on my trip, and I'd spent so much time looking forward to being here that I was kind of nervous now I had finally landed. It was like the first day of a new job or a first date with . . .

If only he was here.

Hollie had told me to fight for him, but I wasn't sure what that meant. It didn't feel right to stand between a man and his wife, try to separate him from the life he'd always wanted. But being without him didn't seem right either.

What had been a bright blue sky until about five minutes ago had darkened, and as sure as night follows day, a sprinkle of drizzle began to speckle the pavement. The rain had followed me around in Europe. I pulled my tote from my shoulder and rummaged around trying to find my umbrella. But it wasn't in there. Damn it, I'd left it on the bed in my hotel room. I shouldn't have been so optimistic.

Never mind—it was getting late anyway, so I'd make this my final stop. I'd just wanted to see the lights of the Moulin Rouge at twilight. I zipped up my tote and straightened as the clouds above me darkened. I tipped my head back and saw not a cloud . . .

But an umbrella that someone was holding over my head.

I turned and came face-to-face with Gabriel. The man I'd thought constantly about for the last four weeks.

He grinned. "Need an umbrella?"

My heart lifted in my chest as if it was chasing the moon. "Gabriel? What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd show you Paris. Unless you have other plans?"

I couldn't help but grin up at him like he was my sunshine breaking through the clouds. "Where's Bethany? Aren't you on Dexter's bachelor trip?" I gazed up at him and felt instantly like *right here* was where I was meant to be. How had I spent all these weeks away from him? I'd pushed so much aside—so much grief at having to leave him, so much love that I had for him, and now it all came crashing back in, threatening to overwhelm me. My knees weakened and I stumbled, but he caught me, his hand around my waist.

"You okay?"

Of course, I was more than okay. I was with the man I loved. "What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

"I didn't want you to see Paris without me," he said, like that explained everything. He hadn't moved to take his hand from my waist, and no matter how strong or strong-willed I was, not a single thing could have caused me to step away. "And I had a feeling you'd want to come here as soon as the light started to fade. You know, because of all that Baz Luhrmann genius."

He'd remembered. "It's so cute, right?"

"Cute?" He shrugged. "If you say so."

"What about Penelope? And Bethany?"

"Bethany's fine. She's in London. With Penelope as it happens. I did as you asked. I spent time with her."

My stomach churned at the thought of him dating someone else, even if it was his wife. He was mine. Did he know that?

"But she's not the woman I want. Not because I won't give her a second chance, but because we were never right for each other. When we married, we were both hoping we could find something in each other that was missing. But that's not the way life works."

"But your perfect family?" As much as I wanted him, I wanted him to be happy—to get what he'd always wanted.

"There's no such thing. I should have realized that a long time ago, rather

than being bitter about mine falling apart. Being Bethany's father should have shown me that I'm a different man to either of my parents, but it took me so long to see it. I'm not about to repeat their mistakes. I don't need to prove that to anyone. Not even myself anymore."

He looked peaceful. The dark circles that sometimes ghosted his eyes had lifted, and the corners of his mouth twitched as if he were trying to hold back a grin.

"I've missed you," I said.

He cupped my face and gazed at me like I was treasure he'd been searching for his entire life. "I've missed you more than I thought possible. And I'm never going to let you go."

Relief swept through my body. "I never want you to."

"So, no French lover that I need to fight off?" he asked, brushing my hair from my face.

I slid my hand up his chest. "There's never been anyone for me except you." All those boyfriends before had been shadow boxing. I'd been waiting for Gabriel all along.

He pressed his lips against mine and my entire body sagged with relief. He was here. Kissing me. There would be no telling myself it was best for us to remain apart, or that I would be happy if he was happy. My life would be all silver linings and lemonade with Gabriel—no clouds, no lemons.

Finally, what seemed like hours later, our kiss ended. "I guess we should start your tour. I don't want you to miss anything."

I grinned as he took my hand and led the way. I realized this was how it was between us—him wanting to make me happy, me wanting to make him happy. It was a perfect balance.

"How did you manage to get the time off work to be here?" I asked, suddenly worried that we had to make the most of every moment rather than saunter down the street, dodging the mopeds.

"You're taking up with an unemployed lay-about. I resigned."

I came to an abrupt halt. "You quit? Did Mike push you over the edge?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Meeting you and then losing you made me look at my life with new eyes. I'd been working for similar reasons that I got married—to make sure I bore no resemblance to my father. I want to hang out with Bethany more. With you. It means we can travel and—"

"I know I don't have a job yet, Gabriel. But I want a career."

"Right. And if you have to take an assignment somewhere else in Europe

or back in the U.S., we can come with you.”

My heart threatened to explode in my chest. Could life really be this simple? This good?

“Are you not going to work?” I asked.

“I’m going to give second chances for a living. You’re a wise woman, Autumn Lumen.” His smile was infectious.

“I am?”

“The furniture. Restoring and renewing things. It makes me happy.”

Just watching his face as he talked made it obvious that his mind was set. He had been renewed by the prospect of a different life.

“That’s wonderful. And bonus for me, I get to enjoy the fruits of that labor.” I squeezed his bicep, my thoughts already spinning with images of Gabriel hard at work.

“All of me is yours,” he said, his eyes darkening. He pressed his lips to mine and pulled away abruptly. “I need to stop that. Or I’ll be dragging you back to the hotel. I promised you a tour.”

I’d be happy to skip the tour and spend the next week in bed, but Paris was calling, and we had a lifetime to be naked.

As we wandered along the Seine, the sun dimmed further and sky turned darker, the drizzle turning to huge, fat raindrops that thudded against the sidewalks, splashed onto our cheeks, and dented the surface of the river. “The rain has been following me around,” I said.

“It’s raining? Really? From where I stand, the sun is shining all over the place.”

If I didn’t already know that Gabriel Chase was the man for me, that sealed it. “Did you just quote my favorite movie at me?”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I’m so in love with you that I don’t even notice the rain.”

I wasn’t sure what I’d done to deserve Gabriel, but I was going to spend the rest of my life grateful that I’d found him.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Gabriel

I didn't approve of the jumpsuit Autumn was wearing.

"Stop growling," she said, grinning at me. "It's a wedding. It's not like we can get frisky during the ceremony."

"It's not quick to get out of. Or into. It's a ridiculous piece of clothing."

"It's gorgeous."

"You're gorgeous," I corrected. "You could wear anything and make it look incredible."

"Back at you," she said, kissing my cheek and smoothing her hands down my suit. "I'm going to miss you being in a suit every day."

"If you like, I can dress up once in a while."

"Ohhh, roleplay. Interesting." She nudged me with her hip.

"I'm not sure we need roleplay to keep things interesting," I said, grabbing her bottom and pressing my hips against hers.

She pushed me away. "We have five minutes to get downstairs. And I haven't finished my hair because you've *interested* me plenty already this morning."

I watched as she had to do exactly nothing to her hair for it to look completely amazing. She stepped into her strappy black heels. "Yeah, I'm going to need you to wear those for me later when everything else is off."

"That can be arranged." She glanced at me as she dropped her phone into her bag. "In the meantime, let's go and watch our best friends get married."

I held out my hand and she took it. "Us next, right?"

"Us next, what?"

I pulled the hotel room door closed and we started down the hallway. “You know—getting married.”

She shook her head. “You’re crazy. I’ve been back in London a week. We’ve only just told Bethany.”

“I’m not saying we need to start thinking about it next week, but I want to marry you. That’s not a surprise, is it?” I wanted to do it all with Autumn. I wanted to make love with her, wake up with her, cook, travel, father her children, and spend my life with her. I’d wait if that’s what she wanted, but I had no doubt about where I stood.

“I guess not. And I’m not saying no, obviously. I need to find a job and figure out where I’m going to live—”

“What do you mean, figure out where you’re going to live? Are you thinking that we might not be living together?” I was clearly making assumptions about our future that I shouldn’t have been. A pit opened up in my gut, but I took a breath and waited for her answer. I was beyond jumping to conclusions.

She shrugged. “We haven’t talked about any of this stuff. But we’ll work it out. It’s not like we don’t have the rest of our lives together.”

Relief and warmth and sunshine flooded through me, closing up the pit again.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you too,” she replied. “And I want to live with you . . .”

“But?” I could hear the unspoken word echoing down the hallway. We got to the lift and she turned to face me.

“But honestly, I don’t want to live in the house where your ex-wife picked out the wallpaper.”

“That’s just as well, because the house is up for sale.”

She tilted her head as a smile crept across her face. “It is?”

“I want a fresh start with you. I don’t want to live in the past anymore. And I want to live in *our* house. Not my house. You’re not going to be an overnight guest or the nanny. You’re going to be my wife. My best friend. My partner. We should pick out the place we’re going to raise our family together.”

“Raise a family?” she said, looking like I just asked her the difference between a turret lathe and a toolroom lathe.

“I hate to tell you, but Bethany comes as part of the deal.” I knew that’s not what she meant, but she was so easy to tease.

“Of course,” she replied. “But . . . Gabriel . . . I’m not ready for—”

I slid my hand around her waist and pulled her closer. “I know. I’m thinking too far ahead. I just want to future-proof the house. We’ll wait as long as you want. I want you to be happy.”

“You always know the perfect thing to say,” she said, and we stepped into the lift.

“Now you know that’s not true. I’m going to get it wrong a lot. I’m impatient and surly at times. But promise me you’ll always know that you are at the center of everything I do. You and Bethany. You two are everything I think about, everything I am. I might need you to help me back on track from time to time but know that I love you, even when I veer off course.”

The lift doors pinged open, and we made our way toward the suite where Dexter and Hollie were getting married. “Gabriel Chase, I love the way you love me. I love you just as hard. And I’m going to make mistakes too. But I know that we’ll be with each other until one of us isn’t in this world anymore.”

I nodded, knowing what she was saying because it was exactly how I felt. We had just strolled through the corridors of a hotel on the way to a wedding, but it was as if we were the ones who had just been married. Our promises wouldn’t get any stronger for being made in public or put on a register somewhere.

This woman was my soulmate. There hadn’t been a ceremony invented that would bind us any closer than we already were.

“Shall we go watch your sister marry one of the best men I know?”

“What’s wild about today is that I think she feels for Dexter the same kind of forever love that I have for you.”

“What makes that wild?” I asked.

“I just never thought we could both be so lucky.”

I pulled her closer to me as we came to the door to the suite, content to let her believe that of the two of us, she was the lucky one.

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

Autumn

I glanced around at the huge kitchen, dining, and living areas arranged around the central outdoor courtyard encased in glass. It was so big. So grand. I loved it but it also made me a little uneasy.

“You’ll get used to it,” Hollie said, reading my mind as she uncorked a bottle of champagne.

“I hope so,” I replied. “I know I live here but I’m not sure I can quite believe it at the same time. Does that make sense?” My life had changed so completely in the last few months. Not only had I moved continents, but I’d discovered my future, and I knew who I was going to share it with.

“You’re still the same person. Just remember that. It’s not so different to our trailer back in Oregon.”

We both burst into laughter. Gabriel and my new home couldn’t have been further from where and how we’d grown up. But she was right. It didn’t make us different people. We loved the men we loved, regardless of whether they were rich or poor.

“I’m still bummed I couldn’t get you to move to Knightsbridge.”

“I like Smithfield,” I replied. “And it’s a super easy commute.” The investment bank where I’d interviewed just before I’d flown to Madrid had offered me an entry-level investment analyst job. I’d been there about a month and I was *loving* it. I felt like I was living in an eighties movie. I

wasn't sure how, but life just kept getting better and better.

"I'm so proud of you," she said, slinging her arm around my shoulders. "Your career is going to be amazing. I feel like you've taken flight since moving to London. There's something about this place. We've both come here and spread our wings and we're living our best lives."

Hollie had always believed it was possible. Her vision of the world out there had meant she'd pushed me to focus and study and not make the wrong choices. She'd shaped the woman I was today—the life I had, and how happy I was. "I love you," I said.

"I love you too," she said. "I'll love you even more if you pour me a glass of that champagne."

The crash in the hallway made me spill the alcohol over the glass. "What the hell?"

We poked our heads out to find Gabriel, Dexter, Tristan, and Joshua carrying in a huge . . . grandfather clock.

"Don't worry, it's not ours," Gabriel said. "It's so bloody ugly."

Gabriel spent hours trawling websites and auction houses, trying to find new projects. One of the reasons we'd bought this house was because of the huge workshop next door. But he managed to fill the cavernous space with desks, chairs, bureaus, tables, and really, any piece of wood looking for a little TLC and a second chance. At least this clock hadn't been adopted.

"Whose is it?" Hollie asked suspiciously.

"Glad you asked," Dexter said, grinning. "I thought it would look great in my office."

"As long as it's going somewhere I don't have to look at it," Hollie said.

The four of them heaved the monolithic timepiece upright. "Don't think you're keeping it," Dexter said to Gabriel.

"Believe me, I don't want it," replied Gabriel.

"That makes two of us," I said.

"Make that three of us," Hollie said.

"Marriage is about compromise," Dexter said, lifting Hollie into his arms and kissing her.

"It's a good thing I love you," she said.

"Stop with the PDA," Tristan said. "It's making my stomach churn."

"You're just jealous that I have a hot wife," Dexter said.

Tristan rolled his eyes. "Get me a drink."

Tristan tried to pretend he wanted nothing to do with a committed

relationship, but I couldn't help but think he just hadn't met the right girl yet. He was always focused on who was hot rather than who he liked. Joshua wasn't a lot better, but he was a little more discreet and a better flirt.

They all circled the kitchen island, where I was filling a row of champagne flutes. Gabriel went straight to the wine fridge and pulled out another bottle.

When everyone had a full glass in their hand, I raised mine. "Here's to Tristan finding the love of his life when he's least expecting it. May she torture and tease him until he begs for mercy."

Joshua chuckled and I pointed at him. "And here's to Joshua finding a woman who's as good a flirt as he is."

"Gabriel, I don't know how you managed to trick Autumn into falling for you, but congratulations," Joshua said, ever the charmer. "If anyone deserves to be happy, it's the two of you."

We all clinked our glasses and it felt somehow as if we were cementing together our extended family. Beck, Dexter, Joshua, Tristan, Andrew, and Gabriel had known each other forever and were brothers in all but name. It was heartwarming to see such strong men support each other through the turbulent ups and downs of life, but the icing on the cake was how they had welcomed me, Hollie, and Stella into their lives as if we were long-lost sisters. The group really did feel like family.

"Oh, and did I tell you, I'm moving in," Joshua said. "Your house is so bloody cool."

The corner of Gabriel's mouth twitched. He loved this house. It had taken a bit of persuasion for me to agree to it being our home—it was just so big. But the workshop next door was ideal, and the short commute had sealed the deal.

"You'd be welcome," I said.

"No, he wouldn't," Gabriel said, looking at me as if I'd lost my mind. "We already have Bethany to look after. And unlike my daughter, I'm not sure Joshua is housetrained."

"He's more than housetrained," Dexter said. "He organizes his lovers by the days of the week."

"That's just because he has a terrible memory and can't remember their names," Tristan said.

"You're out of line, Tristan," Joshua replied.

"Okay, tell me Miss Sunday Afternoon's name?"

Joshua flushed scarlet with rage, but before they could come to blows, my sister interrupted.

“My prediction is that Joshua will find someone special soon and he’ll be moving in with her, so no need to panic,” Hollie said as she patted Gabriel on the back.

“How much champagne have you had?” Joshua asked. “You’re way off base. I’m never going to live with a woman. I don’t like to share my space.”

Hollie grinned at him like he had no idea what was coming. And if I knew anything about my sister’s determination and single-mindedness, she’d have Joshua in love and married within a year.

I pulled Gabriel to one side as Hollie and Joshua continued to bicker, and Dexter and Tristan looked on, delighted at Joshua being tortured.

“I love you,” I said. “And your wild, dysfunctional group of friends.”

“I love you too,” he said. “And as much as I loved this house as soon as I saw it, I love it even more, now I see you in it.”

That’s how life would always be with Gabriel and me. Life was made better by being together. The dark moments in life wouldn’t be so scary when I was holding his hand and good times would just be made better by being side by side, step-by-step with this beautiful soul next to me.

A few weeks later still...

Gabriel

A twitch in my trousers told me that maybe this blindfold I’d just secured around Autumn’s eyes would come in handy a little later this evening.

“Gabriel,” she said, her tone hushed. She brought her fingers up to the edge of the black silk bandana.

“Take my hand,” I said. “You’re fine.” I led her from the hallway into the dining room, which had a clear view of the internal courtyard.

When I had her in position, I stepped back. I wanted to take in her reaction when she saw what I was about to show her. “Autumn Lumen, I wanted to do something special as this is an anniversary.”

Her hand shot to the blindfold. “Anniversary?”

“Don’t take it off yet,” I said. “Yes, it’s the fifteenth month anniversary of the first time I ever laid eyes on you, wearing pajamas and eating ice cream with your sister at Dexter’s place.”

Autumn tipped her head to the side. “You are too sweet.”

“You know that’s not true.”

She laughed and I took a deep breath, relishing the sound that filled my soul every time I heard it. “You’re sweet with a side of dirty between the sheets.”

“I wanted to mark it,” I continued. “So I made you something.”

Her delicious pout widened into a smile as if just hearing the words was enough of a gift.

I pulled the tie fastening the blindfold and it fell to the ground. Her eyes grew large as she took in the two Adirondack chairs set out in the courtyard. “A classic American design made with the strength of English oak,” I said, watching her reaction as she stepped out into the courtyard.

“They’re beautiful,” she said, smoothing her hands over the wood. “You made these?”

She turned to me and I stalked toward her, wanting to hold her expression of pride and happiness in my memory forever.

“After the jewelry box, I thought maybe I’d do another project from scratch,” I said. “I thought that when we’re too old to travel, we can sit in these chairs and reminisce over the times we went to a thousand faraway places.”

“I love that idea.” She slid her palm over my cheek, and I circled my arms around her waist. “And the stool,” she said pointing to the matching one I’d also made. “That’s for Bethany,” she said, knowing exactly what I’d been thinking. “And you can make more for our other children.”

“When the time comes,” I said. There was no rush to add to our family, but we both hoped more children were in our future.

“I miss her when she’s not here,” she said.

“Me too,” I replied. “But it’s good that Penelope’s in her life.” Penelope had started a fine art course and found a place to live between the college and Smithfield. She had shown no signs of abandoning Bethany and they’d grown closer. I hoped she found whatever she was looking for in Bethany and in her art. If Penelope was happy, that was good for our daughter.

“She’s going to love it,” Autumn said. “You’re so talented.”

“I’m so lucky,” I said, squeezing her tight. “Oh, and another thing.” I nodded at the white envelopes on her chair.

“More anniversary gifts?” She picked up the envelopes and I took a seat, pulling her onto my lap. “I don’t need anything more. What could be better than these beautiful chairs?”

“What about somewhere to go that we can reminisce over while we sit in them?”

“Are you serious?” she said, ripping open the envelope. “India?” She glanced over the paperwork.

“Did you know that the Taj Mahal was built as a monument of love?”

She pressed her lips to my cheek. “I did know that.” She kissed me again—my jaw this time.

“I’m thinking I might propose,” I said, holding my breath for her reaction. She was still so young, and I didn’t want to put her under any pressure, but I knew that I’d be with her until my dying breath. I saw no reason why we weren’t as publicly committed as we were privately.

She pulled away, checking to see if I was serious. She trailed her fingers along my neck. “Will it involve karaoke?” she asked. “Because if it does, I’m definitely saying yes.”

“Karaoke? At the Taj Mahal?”

She pulled back to meet my eye, her expression deadly serious. “There’s never a bad place for karaoke.”

“And if I say there will be strictly no karaoke involved when I propose marriage to you, are you going to say no?”

She huffed out a breath and glanced at the ceiling, like she was really having to consider it. “It won’t be a *definite* no.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “You’re ridiculous. You’re totally going to say yes.”

She shrugged. “Maybe I’ll propose to you. On the plane on the way over. When the seatbelt signs go off, I’ll jump into the aisle and belt out ‘Defying Gravity’ at the top of my lungs and end on one knee, bearing a ring.”

“Okay, if you’re going to threaten me with stuff like that, I’m never travelling with you. Not ever. And the proposal is off.”

She looped her arms around my neck. “No deal. You’re totally going to propose. And so long as there’s karaoke at the wedding, I can cope with a song-free proposal.”

“You sure you’re ready?” I asked, serious again. I didn’t want her to feel rushed.

“It doesn’t matter how young or old I am. I’m going to spend the rest of my life with you. If we get married now or in ten years, what difference does it make?”

She was right of course, because she was the wisest woman I knew.

Autumn was someone who'd always seen the light in me and whose darkness didn't scare me. She was my forever—horrific singing voice and all.

Read Joshua's story in [Mr. Park Lane](#)

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MR. PARK LANE - CHAPTER ONE

Hartford

At twenty-nine, I was a doctor who'd travelled and worked in some of the most deprived places in the world, but just the *thought* of Joshua Luca had me sliding my sweaty palms down my jeans and wishing I could steady my racing heartbeat.

I hadn't seen him in over a decade, but Joshua could still get to me, and I hated it.

It wasn't like we'd ever dated.

It wasn't like I'd been pining for him all these years.

It wasn't like he'd even ever noticed me. Certainly not in the way I'd noticed him.

Joshua had been an almost obsession until, at seventeen, I broke my leg and swore off teenage infatuations for good. In one night, I grew up and let go of my silly crush.

I'd forgotten all those old feelings before my mum announced she'd arranged for me to stay with Joshua for a couple of months until I "found my feet"—unintentional irony, given the cast on my left leg. I didn't argue. It wasn't worth telling her that if I'd figured out living in a war zone, I was pretty sure getting settled in London would be a piece of cake.

Cake. My much-missed friend. Not something there was a lot—or any—of at the Medicines Sans Frontiers outpost Yemen where I'd been stationed. As soon as I'd dumped my bag and showered, I'd go on the hunt for something lemony. With sprinkles.

I should try to keep my focus on cake. Anything but the memories of

Joshua's summer sun-streaked hair. His long, lean, tan legs. The way the dimple in his left cheek would appear whenever my sister was around. His permanent half-smile hinted that he was always in on the joke. And his cool confidence meant that if he ever ended up in trouble, he managed to talk his way into forgiveness. He'd seemed like a god to my teenage self.

I wasn't sure he would remember anything about me. Maybe the unibrow? The braces?

Our parents had been friends since I could remember. Joshua was the same age as my brother. My sister was a year younger, and to my eternal frustration, I was the baby. The baby with a crush on her older brother's best friend.

I was nothing more than a lurking spectator during games of tennis, dares, and talks about girls. Almost like I'd been a part of the scenery—the background in Joshua and my brother's summers. Unlike my older sister, Thea, who'd embraced the denim mini-skirt trend like she was a twenty-five-year old supermodel. Thea was always at the center of everything. I'd watched as she twirled and giggled in front of Joshua, who responded with cocky grins and pouty lips. He'd definitely remember Thea. Unlike forgettable, invisible me.

I'd never told a soul my fantasies about Joshua. And at seventeen I'd swallowed them down, determined to keep them tucked away in a deep, dark place forever.

Now, as I stood in the airport, about to come face-to-face with him, an unwelcome, familiar shiver breezed across my skin and tripped my pulse.

My phone buzzed. I dipped out of the queue so I didn't breach the mobile ban. It was my mum. I released my right crutch and slid open the phone.

"Have you landed, darling?"

The thing about working in war zones was that your parents always worried. War zones didn't worry me. Reunions did.

"Yep. Will be heading to get my bag in a minute. Can I call you when I get back to Joshua's place?"

"Of course. Marian said it's a wonderful flat. He's such a good boy. Has his own company, a marketing agency. Just bought them a new car, you know."

I must have heard about the new car at least three times. "Yes. The Lexus. I remember." I was never going to be the daughter who bought her parents a brand-new car. I didn't earn that kind of money. And even if I did—they

didn't need one.

"He's done very well for himself. Very reliable. I'm sure he'll be waiting for you."

"I could have made it into town on the Heathrow Express." I hated the thought of Joshua going out of his way for me. I was sure he had better things to be doing on a Tuesday than playing chauffeur to me.

"You have a broken leg, Hartford," she said in her you-don't-get-a-say tone. As soon as I'd told my parents I was coming back to London, my mother had pushed her perpetual interfering into a higher gear. I knew it was an expression of her relief. After three years abroad, I'd be a couple of hours away instead of a couple of time zones. Now I was back, I'd have to get better at dodging her well-intentioned help bombs.

I glanced over my shoulder at the wave of people herding down the corridor, heading for the queue. A flight must have just landed, and I didn't want to be stuck behind them all. "I shouldn't keep him waiting. I'll call you later."

"Send my love to Joshua and call me when you've settled in."

There was my icebreaker with Joshua. I could tell him I'd spoken to my mother and she sent her love.

I re-joined the queue and told myself if I could handle treating sick kids on folding beds in searing heat, I could handle Joshua Luca.

No. Big. Deal.

The doors out onto the landside concourse slid open. I scanned the audience of cab drivers with signs and people waiting for loved ones to appear. Set back from the crowd, as if a spotlight was positioned over him, Joshua stood, leaning against a post, head down, focused on his phone.

A fizzle of desire bloomed in my chest. I had to remind myself to breathe. He was still gorgeous. And I was furious about it. I'd set down my torch for Joshua a long time ago and wasn't about to pick it back up. It could only lead to trouble. Again.

His shoulders had broadened, but the dirty blond hair still had a way of looking perfectly tousled. And that magnetic confidence? It was still palpable

from ten meters away.

He glanced up and right at me, as if he could hear me thinking. I felt his lopsided smile between my legs.

Vagina, you're a traitor.

I grinned and started toward him as if I'd just been searching him out in the crowd, rather than drawn to him like lightning to a metal rod.

“Hey.” I tipped my head back to meet his gaze.

He took his time and made a slow, unapologetic sweep of my body from head to toe and back again, lingering on my lips and my cheeks on the way back. “Hartford?”

Should we kiss? One cheek or two? Hug? Why did I feel so awkward?

Twenty-nine, I reminded myself.

A doctor.

A crush on Joshua Luca leads to nothing but trouble.

I pulled him into a one-handed hug, pushing myself up awkwardly onto a one-legged tiptoe so I could reach around his neck. He stiffened almost unnoticeably before hugging me back.

“Good to see you,” I said into his hairline.

I could feel his large hand through my jacket span almost the entire width of my back. And that smell? I'd forgotten that. What was it, and how had it not changed in all these years?

Without asking, he pulled my backpack from me like it weighed nothing and slung it over his shoulder. “That's it? No more luggage?”

I shrugged. “Nope. Just me.”

He nodded toward the exit and I followed him. “What happened to your leg?”

I glanced down at my cast as if I needed to clarify which leg he was talking about. “Oh nothing. Just an accident.” I didn't want to get into it. I just wanted it to heal. Quickly. So I could get back to work. “Tell me about you, Joshua Luca. What have you been doing since I last saw you?”

He shot me another trademark smile. “When was the last time I saw you?”

“I can't remember . . .” I knew exactly. I refused to think about what had come after my accident. For years afterward, I ruminated about the night I broke my leg. Joshua had come to collect my brother before heading out to celebrate the New Year. He was in his second year at university and had just turned twenty. As I'd watched him from the top of the stairs, I'd never been

so aware of our age difference thanks to the new stubble on his jaw and the flat, toned stomach he unintentionally revealed when he'd reached for my brother's jacket. He'd turned into a man and I still felt like a child. My glimpse of him had lasted thirty seconds max, but it was etched in my memory like a tattoo. Those few seconds had been the last good memories I had of Joshua.

"You lost your braces."

Of course he would remember those.

"Shocking, isn't it? I thought I was going to have to wear them forever. I also tweezed my monobrow. And I got a couple of degrees along the way." People could change. I wasn't who I'd been back then. "It's been a while."

"Right." He glanced over at me and furrowed his brow before looking away. "This is us."

He pressed a button on his key fob and the boot opened on an expensive-looking car. He slung my backpack in before heading the wrong direction to the passenger seat.

And then he opened the door. The passenger door. For me.

I shook my head. Had he grown up in the fifties? It was all part and parcel of that Joshua Luca charm he'd had since he came out of the womb. I wanted nothing to do with it.

"What?" He looked genuinely confused.

"I can open my own door," I said as I hobbled into the vehicle, pulled my crutches with me, and settled into a buttery leather seat. I wasn't going to be reduced to a melting mess by a small act of chivalry. Not that he was *trying* to make me melt. He didn't see me like that. Joshua didn't have to *try* to make women melt.

Joshua shrugged and shut the door before moving around to the driver's side.

"Sorry if I smell like Yemen. You might need an air freshener in here after our journey."

He pulled out of the parking space and we started twirling through the narrow passages of the multi-story car park. "Yemen? I thought you flew in from Saudi Arabia."

"No direct flights from Yemen."

"Should you be going to places that don't have direct flights?"

I laughed. "You sound like Patrick. I was working with Medicines Sans Frontiers. I wasn't on holiday. But I appreciate the big-brother vibe."

“Right,” he said, that frown appearing again. “You want a water?” He pulled open the lid to what looked like a built-in cool box under the arm rest between us and took out a bottle.

“Thanks. You got any cake in there?”

“This isn’t Tesco, but you might find an apple.”

“I haven’t had an apple for thirteen months.” I scrambled about and found an apple as green as I’d ever seen. “You want a bite?” I held up the fruit then abruptly pulled it away as my imagination offered up an image of him sinking his teeth into . . . me.

Was he a biter? For a split second, filthy images reeled through my brain: Joshua in bed, naked. Joshua over me, arms flexed and gaze trained on my lips. His hips pushing—

Stop.

I needed to get a grip, buy some brain bleach and dose the butterflies in my stomach with propofol. I was going to be living with this guy for a couple of months. I couldn’t be following him around, drooling like some teenager with a crush. Besides, I knew that an obsession over Joshua was dangerous. Literally. I needed to construct an impenetrable Joshua Luca forcefield around myself.

This was strictly a friend zone.

I didn’t know where to look first: the amazing one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view toward the Millennium Wheel, the ginormous living room with sofas that looked like gooey marshmallow, or that pesky dimple in Joshua’s left cheek that had had me hypnotized since I was twelve.

“This is where you live?” I asked, trying to pretend I hadn’t noticed the dimple. “You have exceptionally good taste for someone whose greatest childhood pleasure was giving my brother wedgies when he least expected it. It looks like a huge hotel room.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and his gaze hit the floor in exactly the same way as when he used to flirt with Thea. He managed to combine confidence with bashfulness in a way I’d always found completely adorable. Joshua didn’t have a shy bone in his body, and I wondered when exactly he

realized how sexy a little humility can be. “I can’t take credit for the decoration. It’s residences of the Park Lane International.”

“Residences? As in, you live in a flat that’s part of a hotel? You can order room service whenever you like? And use the gym and stuff?”

“And stuff,” he confirmed, nodding.

“Wow.” I’d spent the previous year sleeping under canvas on a fold-up bed. Five-star luxury was going to take some getting used to. Except I wasn’t about to get used to it. I glanced around, trying to see where I might put my things. There only seemed to be one door. Maybe I was on the sofa. “Where am I sleeping?”

“The oven? The bath?” Joshua grinned. “Or maybe the bed in the bedroom? It’s a conventional choice but definitely the most comfortable.”

Joshua towered above me, his chest wider and broader than it had been when I’d last seen him. He still had the sense of humor of a seventeen-year-old boy. “I’m laughing on the inside. Seriously, Joshua. Which way?”

He shrugged. “I’ve not been in here before. I’m next door in apartment P1. I guess it’s over here.” He strode across the living room and pushed open a door. “Yep. This is the bedroom.”

“Wait, you don’t live in this flat? I thought I was coming to stay in your spare bedroom.”

“You hoping to see me in my boxers in the morning?” He grinned and widened his eyes suggestively.

I couldn’t deny I’d wondered what Joshua looked like in his boxers in the sixty minutes since we’d left the airport, but I certainly wasn’t about to admit to it. “Mum told me you had a spare bedroom.”

“This is like the guest bedroom for the penthouse. It’s a separate flat that’s only available for residents of my place. It’s like having a pool house or something.”

Decoding the guy-speak, he wanted his own space. “Joshua, if you didn’t want me to stay with you, you just needed to say. I have other friends.” I wasn’t sure I had that many in London, actually. Most of them were scattered about the country. And the world. But I didn’t need Joshua taking pity on me—I could have figured it out. My mother had begged me to stay with him—told me that he was lonely in London and needed the company. Clearly she just wanted to get her own way. Past experience should have been a warning, but I’d been too tired to argue with her and agreed to stay with him until I found a place of my own.

“You’re acting like I’ve asked you to stay in the boot of my car.” He was completely unfazed by my reaction. “I got this place for three months. It’s no big deal.”

“Wait, you rented it for three months?” I couldn’t bear to think how much that might be costing. “Return the key. There’s no way I can afford—”

Joshua stepped toward me and stroked my arm as if he were trying to tame a wild horse. I tried to ignore the heat, the way his fingers seemed to press into me with authority, the way he smelled so incredible when he was so close.

“It’s no big deal. I’m not expecting you to pay for any of it.”

I shook off his arm. Physical contact threatened to ignite my old crush like a match to tinder. “Joshua!” He didn’t get it at all. “That’s even worse. I’m not expecting you to cover my rent. The entire reason you stay in someone’s spare room is to avoid incurring the expense at all.”

“But *you* don’t have the expense. If it makes you feel better, you can pretend it’s my spare room.”

“I need a shower.” I collapsed on the sofa, jetlag, travel, and the last thirteen months catching up with me all at once. I sank into the marshmallow cushions and wondered if I’d ever move again. “Have you paid? Can you get your money back?”

“No. I signed something. And anyway, where else are you going to go? Someone’s spare room or worse, a *sofa*, when you can be here?” He nodded toward the view. “You’ve been off curing the sick in faraway places. You can see this as your reward.”

I didn’t want praise or thank-yous. “You’re ridiculous.”

He smirked. “You’re welcome. I presume you’re hungry.” He messed about on his phone. “You haven’t turned into one of those do-gooding vegans, have you?”

“Yes, I’m hungry, and no.” I’d been dreaming about eating a burger as big as my plaster-covered leg for the last year. Nothing about my fantasy involved vegetables.

“Thank God. Burgers then?”

Despite my irritation with Joshua, a small smile crept across my lips. He might be my exact opposite when it came to lifestyle, but when it came to taste in food, apparently we’d been separated at birth. *And maybe some cake*, I didn’t say. I was picky when it came to sponge, and I wanted to be able to take some time deciding on my first post-Yemen piece. “There isn’t much I

wouldn't do for a burger right now.”

“Interesting,” he said, sliding a glance at me as he tapped away on his phone. Then he sat down on the sofa opposite. “Maybe I can think of a few things.” I wasn't sure how a dimple could be suggestive, but Joshua's managed it.

His bold flirtations had never been directed at me before. It was sort of flattering, but I had to remind myself it was simply how he operated. He didn't know how *not* to flirt. To Joshua, flirting was some kind of unconscious habit, as automated as breathing.

“It's nice to see you haven't changed a bit.”

“It's nice to see you have.” He paused and for a split second, looked at me like we were long-time lovers rather than virtual strangers. He blinked twice, cleared his throat. “Except the disapproving scowl is still the same.”

“Hey,” I said, tossing an expensive cushion at him. He batted it away like candy floss. “I don't scowl.”

He chuckled. “Don't worry. It's cute.”

Cute?

I was going to have to supercharge my forcefield.

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