

Better once than Never

NGREEMIN

NUHAA BARDIEN



Better Once Than Never

Nuhaa Bardien

Copyright © 2024 Nuhaa Bardien

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic means or mechanical methods, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. For permission requests, contact nuhaa@nuhaawrites.com

Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1-0370-1021-7

eBook ASIN: B0D6S27QB3

Cover design and illustration by Anre van Rooyen

Printed in South Africa

For Shameez, without whom this book would not have seen the light of day.

“Thy friendship makes us fresh.”

Contents

[Better Once Than Never](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Author's Note on Language](#)

[Preface](#)

[Books by Nuhaa](#)

[Score](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Note from the author](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Author's Note on Language

The author would like you to know this book is set in the UK and therefore UK English is used. Please make use of a 'z' where you see an 's' and remove the 'u' where you please.

Preface

Dear Reader,

Better Once Than Never is a contemporary romance touching on some heavier topics such as; parental abandonment, family trauma, parental death (mentioned) and a scene with attempted assault.

If you are sensitive to these kinds of topics, please proceed with caution or make an informed decision about whether you should continue.

Stay safe and happy reading.

Nuhaa

Books by Nuhaa

By the Book Series

Till This Night

Better Once Than Never

Score

'Our fine musician groweth amorous.'

ACT I SCENE I	TALK TOO MUCH COIN
ACT I SCENE II	HONEY WHISKEY NOTHING BUT THIEVES
ACT I SCENE III	THIS IS ME TRYING TAYLOR SWIFT
ACT I SCENE IV	SOMETHING ON MY MIND PURPLE DISCO MACHINE
ACT I SCENE V	NEW PERSON, SAME OLD MISTAKES TAME IMPALA
ACT I SCENE VI	I'M FAKIN' SABRINA CARPENTER
ACT I SCENE VII	TEMPORARY FIX ONE DIRECTION
ACT I SCENE VIII	ON MY MIND ELLIE GOULDING
ACT I SCENE IX	WILDEST DREAMS (TAYLOR'S VERSION) TAYLOR SWIFT
ACT II SCENE I	I LIKE ME BETTER LAUV
ACT II SCENE II	I WANT YOU TO WANT ME LETTERS TO CLEO
ACT II SCENE III	FIRE FOR YOU CANNONS
ACT II SCENE IV	JUST FRIENDS WHY DON'T WE
ACT II SCENE V	BETTER KHALID
ACT II SCENE VI	I WANNA BE YOURS ARCTIC MONKEYS
ACT II SCENE VII	DEATH OF A BACHELOR PANIC! AT THE DISCO
ACT II SCENE VIII	MUSIC SOUNDS BETTER WITH YOU NEIL FRANCES
ACT II SCENE IX	WILDFLOWER 5 SECONDS OF SUMMER
ACT II SCENE X	THERE'S NO WAY LAUV FT. JULIA MICHAELS
ACT II SCENE XI	THE LESS I KNOW THE BETTER TAME IMPALA
ACT II SCENE XII	ONE THAT GOT AWAY MUNA
ACT II SCENE XIII	BAD IDEA! GIRL IN RED
ACT II SCENE XIV	DO I WANNA KNOW? HOZIER (LIVE AT THE BBC)
ACT II SCENE XV	OUT OF MY LEAGUE FITZ AND THE TANRUMS
ACT II SCENE XVI	FEELS LIKE WE ONLY GO BACKWARDS TAME IMPALA
ACT II SCENE XVII	ELECTRIC TOUCH TAYLOR SWIFT FT. FALL OUT BOY
ACT II SCENE XVIII	THE SIDE OF PARADISE COYOTE THEORY
ACT II SCENE XIX	LOVER, PLEASE STAY NOTHING BUT THIEVES
ACT III SCENE I	CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE HALEY REINHART
ACT III SCENE II	ABOUT YOU NOW MEADOWLARK
ACT III SCENE III	HEAVEN WRITTEN SOLDANA
ACT III SCENE IV	IMPOSSIBLE NOTHING BUT THIEVES
ACT III SCENE V	DRESS TAYLOR SWIFT
ACT III SCENE VI	I WOULD DO ANYTHING FOR YOU FOSTER THE PEOPLE
ACT III SCENE VII	I HEAR A SYMPHONY CODY FRY
ACT III SCENE VIII	CHAMPAGNE KISSES JESSIE WARE

*Better
once than
Never*

Chapter 1

Act I, Scene I: London Wedding Expo

Kalina

‘**W**hy are you bouncing around like your butt’s on fire?’ Scarlet, my friend and new roommate, asked.

She kept me company at the London Wedding Expo where Hotel Verona, where I was now the Event Manager, held a booth for the fifth year in a row.

It was my first time managing it, and I’d not accounted for bathroom breaks.

‘I need to use the loo; I drank at least two litres of water today.’

She shook her head in disbelief. ‘Too much water for a day like today. Go.’

‘I can’t leave the booth unattended.’ This was the biggest task my boss had given me to date. I was the head event planner at the hotel, but I wasn’t about to do anything to ruin the title.

‘Well,’ Scarlet said, sweeping her arm up and down her statuesque frame.

‘Would you mind?’ I was ready to beg her—knowing it wasn’t a requirement.

‘If it means you won’t wet the floor, yes. Nobody will know.’ She tossed some of her dark blonde curls over her shoulder, then reached out to take the white lanyard—where my name and exhibitor details were printed on a laminated card—from my neck and dropped it over her own.

‘Thank you.’ I grabbed my phone and shoved it into the pocket of my pink wrap dress before I ran on the balls of my feet to the nearest bathroom. A broken ankle was not

something I needed. Not with it being the start of our busy season.

I was a pro at dodging the couples crowded around the booths and aisles, and weaved around them to avoid being stuck in the crowd. There was nothing worse than being caught behind a couple trying to decide between off-white and ivory for their place settings.

My doctor would give me a stern talking-to during my next check-up if I continued this way, but today I made it in the nick of time.

With relief on my side; I used the full-length lit-up mirror to check my appearance while I washed up. After five long hours of being “on”, my dress had wrinkled along the long-cuffed sleeves, and my hair frizzed around the high ponytail and made it look like I’d rubbed my head with a balloon. The whole look screamed, “Trust me with your wedding and the beginning of your happily ever after.”

I sighed. This was about as good as it was going to get.

With one last attempt to neaten up, and a fresh coat of cherry tinted lip gloss, I made my way back to the booth.

Scarlet chatted away with a couple, who looked sold on using Hotel Verona as their wedding venue, and left me questioning whether she was in the right industry.

I picked up my pace but a trolley, transporting a rather large swan ice sculpture, sped by.

‘Hey watch it,’ the assistant yelled.

I halted to avoid its path but the heel of my shoe caught in the thick carpet. I braced myself for a fall and collided with a wall instead.

‘Kalina,’ the wall said.

Hands gripped my waist to steady me, and it took me a few seconds to realise walls didn’t talk, and the voice in question came from the green-eyed, blond giant before me.

‘Titan.’ I nodded in greeting.

His tall frame was dressed in his standard all-black ensemble—dark jeans, leather boots, and a black knit jersey I knew had to be some cashmere blend.

He would settle for nothing less.

Photographer, playboy and perpetual flirt, Titan Andersson had become a permanent fixture in my life over the last nine months, when his best friend met mine and—after some secrets, scheming, and a little bit of convincing to both of their families—decided they never wanted to spend another day apart.

He also happened to be Scarlet's older brother.

Titan needed a place for his sister to stay, when she moved to London from South Africa, and Savi was moving out. The timing was perfect.

‘What’s the rush, dimples? You need to be more careful. Death by ice sculpture isn’t graceful. Even if it’s shaped like a swan.’ His lips curled into a teasing smile.

I ignored the nickname he insisted on using, and focused on his hands resting on my waist.

‘If you must know,’ I started while shaking him off and flattening my palms against the sides where his grip left tiny wrinkles in the fabric. ‘My bladder was about to burst, and I am still on duty.’

‘I do love it when you talk dirty to me.’ He laughed. The kind which shook his shoulders and made his eyes tear.

I ignored his remark. It wasn’t surprising coming from him. ‘What are you even doing here? I thought Scarlet and your second shooter were running your booth?’

‘Seems she’s chosen to abandon me for you,’ he said, and waved over my shoulder. With a look in Scarlet’s direction, I caught the cheeky air kiss she blew our way. ‘Besides, I have to show my face sometimes. There’s an expectation you know.’ He jutted his chin out.

I rolled my eyes. ‘You know this is a wedding expo, right? Where brides attend with partners they plan to *marry*?’ I

crossed my arms over my chest.

He ran a hand through his short-styled hair, the exact same shade as Scarlet's. It was infuriating when his hairstyle remained intact.

The shared genetics between the two of them was enviable. Same eyes, nose, lips, and tall frame. The only difference was their varying skin tones.

'They're not married. Yet.' He flashed his signature grin at me.

'You're the worst,' I groaned.

He had a surprisingly straight moral compass, but was always ready with some suggestive comment or question.

'Oh, dimples.' His voice dropped an octave and he leaned down, 'You don't even know the half of it.'

A line and a move. Titan's MO.

I shook my head to clear it. I usually brushed his behaviour aside but sometimes they threw me off. I crouched down to unhook my heel from the carpet.

When I looked up at him, a reply at the ready, I spotted a familiar head of dark, wavy hair coming toward us through the crowd. My heart stilled in my chest.

'What's wrong?' Titan asked, his voice had lost its playful edge.

I stood and tried taking calming breaths while I hid behind Titan's towering frame. 'Jesse's walking this way.'

My somewhat of an ex—and new brother-in-law of my best friend—Jesse, was not someone I wanted to see today.

Or any day.

Our last interaction had been in front of our families at the registry office a few months ago when his brother married my best friend, and I hid my heartbreak with a smile.

Titan looked over his shoulder, then back at me. 'Go. You have a clear shot back to the booth.' He tipped his head at the

gap in the crowd beside us.

‘Titan,’ I said, my voice laced with panic as Jesse got closer. If you asked me why, I wouldn’t be able to tell you, but the words flew out of my mouth, ‘This is going to sound like a weird request but, could you kiss me?’

‘What?’ He looked as perplexed as I’d thought he would.

There were two things Jesse hated: public displays of affection and Titan. I had no time to explain my reasons.

‘Could you kiss me? Please?’ I repeated.

‘Kalina, that’s...strange. Even for you.’ He raised one eyebrow.

‘Please?’ I hoped the desperation in my face and voice were evident.

‘I...okay—’

I was one step ahead of him as soon as he’d given me permission. I stood on my toes—a necessity even in three-inch heels—wrapped my arms around his neck, and pulled him down until his lips met mine.

The loud din of conversations fell away as silence wrapped around us. He cupped my face and tilted my chin up as he kissed me back.

My mind stilled as I became aware of his soft lips and shallow breaths. Like he was too scared to move. This unserious and playful man surprised me with his gentle touch.

Kissing Titan was not at all how I’d imagined it would be. Not that I’d thought about kissing him.

At least not often.

I braced my palms against his chest, a mixture of a soft knit fabric and hard muscle.

The sweater—definitely cashmere.

The firm muscle where my palms rested—unclear. But his trainer deserved a generous tip.

‘Lina?’ A voice broke me from the moment and I pulled away from the embrace.

Titan gripped me closer with the hand resting on my waist.

Jesse’s gaze flicked from me to Titan and back again. His mouth opened and closed, like a goldfish, emitting some strangled noise.

‘Jesse, hi. I didn’t see you there.’ I tried keeping the lie out of both my tone and face.

‘The two of you?’ he sniped.

‘Mmm hmm.’ I nodded in confirmation. Which was easier than saying actual words.

I wasn’t good at lying.

Titan straightened and squared his shoulders; making him appear even taller. ‘Some kind of problem, Jesse?’

Before he could respond, a svelte brunette woman walked up to us, took Jesse’s hand in hers and interlocked their fingers. She placed her left hand on his chest where a giant, shiny rock sat on her elegant finger.

Titan’s hand stiffened against my rib for a second, but his expression remained unfaltering.

‘Baby, they have the Vera Wang dress I wanted, a little over budget but I think we can swing it.’ She pouted up at Jesse.

He cleared his throat, and she followed his gaze to where Titan and I stood.

As I looked up at the three of them, all ridiculously tall and beautiful, I realised my plan wasn’t going well. To be fair I hadn’t thought past the kissing Titan phase of it.

‘Titan, oh my God. It’s been ages.’ The brunette woman squealed. She took a step forward to place a kiss on both of his cheeks.

Now, that threw me off.

‘Lexie, how nice to see you.’ His voice said otherwise, but his face gave nothing away.

‘Don’t feel too bad about things not working out between us. I wouldn’t have met my Jesse if it did,’ Lexie said.

‘Great...’ Titan replied.

Jesse smirked while I had to inhale to stop myself from throwing up.

Or crying.

Or both.

‘Who’s this?’ Lexie asked, and all three heads turned to me.

‘Titan’s latest, I presume?’ Jesse said.

Titan’s jaw clenched and he pulled me so close I felt the heat of his body through the thin fabric of my dress.

I never knew side ab muscles existed before.

‘Watch it.’ Titan glared at him.

Jesse paled and looked like he’d swallowed a frog.

If it came down to an actual showdown between these two; my money was on Titan.

‘We better get on. I’m hoping to win the destination honeymoon. Ciao.’ Lexie waggled her fingers at us before she grasped Jesse’s hand and pulled him away.

‘Fuck, I hate him,’ Titan said on an exhale. He turned to me. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, why?’ My eyes welled up, and I blinked to make it stop.

‘He’s an asshole. Don’t worry about him.’ His gaze was tender.

‘I’m not,’ I snapped. I didn’t need to have a meltdown during working hours. Not outside of the office anyway. ‘Sorry, he threw me off. I haven’t seen him since...’ The words caught in my throat.

I wasn’t about to tell Titan about my encounter with Jesse a few months ago. When I’d thought our feelings were mutual, and shared my first time with him only for him to disappear immediately after.

Titan's gaze was fixed to mine and the fluorescents made his eyes look like golden delicious apples.

'It's unnerving when you do that.'

'Do what?'

'The laser focus thing.' I gestured to his eyes.

'What?' He looked perplexed.

'Never mind.' I shook my head to clear it. I lifted a hand and chewed on the side of my thumb. 'I should go.'

'Okay. Thanks for the kiss.' His playful grin replaced the concerned frown. He was enjoying this a little too much.

'Don't feel flattered, you were in the right place at the right time.'

'I'm happy to be of service anytime you need it.' He winked.

There he was. The Titan I knew. All beautiful blond hair and shiny green eyes, filled with mischief. His hair stood out like a halo above him, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

'Doubt it would be necessary.'

'The offer still stands.'

'Goodbye, Titan.'

'Bye, dimples.' He released his hand from my waist.

'See you when I see you.' Which was nearly every other day when he visited Scarlet.

'Don't wait too long now, I miss you when you're not around.'

I sighed dramatically, turned around—this time with some care—and made my way back to the booth.

'Mind telling me why you were making out with my brother?' Scarlet asked.

'I wasn't making out with him. It was a peck.' Compared to the last kiss I'd had—Jesse nearly ten months ago—it was delicious.

But I was not about to confess to his sister.

‘Mmm hmm. I saw what I saw.’ She raised one eyebrow at me.

Was it something they taught everyone in the Andersson household?

‘Which was nothing.’

‘Okay, sure...’

I busied myself with the already neat stack of pamphlets. ‘It was a friend helping another friend.’

‘They sure do use the term “friend” differently in this part of the world,’ Scarlet teased.

‘It was a one-time thing.’

‘Oh, I’m sure it was.’ Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

I knew her brother and if his actions were anything to go by—currently talking up a blonde staff member of the expo right across the way from us—then the kiss was like any other greeting we’d shared.

Chapter 2

Act I, Scene II: TA Studio, Hackney

Titan

The golden street light shone through the gauzy curtains and woke me with a start.

Fuck. I hadn't meant to fall asleep. The blonde woman from the expo lay beside me; her breathing slow and her arm draped across my chest. With some careful manoeuvring, I slid out from under the comforter and away from her embrace.

I ran my palms over my face and willed myself awake.

Dark piles of clothes were strewn across the floor, leaving a path from the door to the bed. I followed each item, locating my jeans, shirt and sweater from the trail.

My watch flashed with a notification: one a.m.

Well, shit.

Once I'd discerned nothing was left behind, I tiptoed toward the open door.

'Titan...' the woman murmured.

'Hey,' I whispered.

'Could you let Roxy out when you leave?' She sighed then turned over.

'Sure.'

'I had fun,' she mumbled.

'Yeah, thanks,' I mumbled in response.

Small snores emanated from the bed.

I hurried down the stairs where I was greeted by the large German Shepherd I'd met earlier. 'Hey, girl.' I rubbed her between her ears. She spun around in circles in front of my legs as she urged me toward the door. 'Okay, okay, I need to

get there first.’ I nudged her with my knees and opened the French doors to the backyard.

After giving her a secret little treat, I locked up and did one last check. I tapped the pockets of my jeans: keys, phone, and wallet.

My leather jacket and helmet hung on one of the hooks in the entryway. I shrugged on the jacket and looked up at all the framed photos on the walls.

Faces I’d never see in real life and people I’d never meet.

I often wondered, during my meetups with these women, if I’d get along with their friends and family.

With one last glance I shut the door behind me.

With my head dipped low I made my way into the brisk night air. The city was illuminated, and the streets littered with people ending their nights.

I firmly believed that no good decision could come after one a.m.

My motorcycle was parked nearby, and as much as I’d regretted falling asleep, I enjoyed pushing the speed limit.

Fifteen minutes later I arrived at my studio. The moon brightened the otherwise eerie space through the large windows. While checking my inbox, I used the light on my phone to guide me through the entryway and up the spiral wrought-iron staircase.

My calendar had already been filled with appointments and meetings, and one look at the timestamps of the requests told me Scarlet had been up way later than I’d expected.

I shook my head as I reached the landing on the mezzanine floor. She never rested, no matter how many times I’d insisted. Maybe I’d buy her those shoes she’d been eyeing for weeks. She deserved it for putting up with my shit and for being a really great assistant.

Having her around when we’d missed out on so much time together wasn’t too bad either.

With five hours before my work day—and three hours of sleep the previous night—I wasted no time in showering and climbing into bed. A deep urge to forgo my morning gym session came over me, but I needed it to stay sane for the day ahead.

Besides, the kiss from Kalina kept my mind running for a while. A weird request, but not unwanted. Her lips were soft and she smelled amazing.

I turned in for the night with a triumphant smile at the thought of Jesse’s unimpressed expression.



‘Stacey, can you put your hand up like this?’ I asked and demonstrated to the model how to adjust her pose.

She mirrored the movement.

‘Yeah, hold it right there,’ I said and looked through the viewfinder of my camera before I snapped a shot. I looked at the display then adjusted the focus before retaking it. After twenty minutes we got the shot I’d been looking for. Relief washed over me. It’d been four hours of non-stop shooting and I needed another coffee.

Maybe a double shot.

‘We’re done. Thank you,’ I said without looking up. I walked over to the table along the edge of the studio to set down my camera when the unmistakable click-clack of high-heeled shoes echoed on the concrete floor.

‘So, a couple of us are going out for a bit of a boozy lunch. Do you want to join?’ Stacey asked. She tossed some of her bright red hair over her shoulder and narrowly missed taking my eye out.

‘Thanks, but I don’t mix business with my personal life.’ It wasn’t a complete lie.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked. She brushed her fingers along the deep vee of her black dress.

I was way too sleep-deprived to deal with this. I wasn't in the mood to go out with this specific group who gossiped behind one another's backs. I'd worked with her so-called friends enough to know an afternoon spent with them would leave me full of regret.

Besides, my roster had been filled up—workwise and the more unprofessional kind.

I opened my mouth to reply when Scarlet bolted toward us, her dark blonde curls bouncing around her shoulders as she stepped between Stacey and me.

'Stacey, we're gonna need the dress and shoes, if you don't mind. You can leave it in the dressing room. Thanks.' Her voice dripped with false sweetness.

Stacey spun around and marched off in a huff. I didn't have to see Scarlet's face to know a smug expression was plastered across it.

'You're welcome,' she said sarcastically then turned to face me. It was like looking in a distorted mirror. Same eyes, same hair colour, but her skin was tawny brown to my beige.

'Thank you, Scar.' I reached out and rubbed her head. She let out a disgruntled sound as she tried to duck out of my reach.

'You are the worst.'

'We've missed out on a lot of sibling bickering. I need to make up for it.'

She gagged but a small smile tugged at her lips before she turned away.

Scarlet's move to London meant we could catch up on the years we'd lived apart. While I visited her and her mother often, the last ten years were the hardest after my mother's passing.

'I don't know what I'd do without you here. So, thanks,' I tilted my head toward the dressing room. 'For, you know.'

'You don't pay me nearly enough to manage your little black book,' she replied.

‘I appreciate it nonetheless.’

‘Is everything okay? You seem off.’ Her gaze focused on mine. Is this what Kalina had meant? It was a little unnerving.

‘Yeah, everything’s fine.’ I scrolled through the images on the camera, then looked up to meet her hard green gaze. *Was that what I looked like when I was upset?*

‘You’re lying.’

‘I’m not,’ I said and looked down at my camera again.

She crossed her arms over her chest. ‘Are we going to talk about the kiss at the expo? Or should I pretend I didn’t see you making out with *my* friend and roommate?’ Scarlet plopped down in the seat at my white lacquered desk. She lifted her booted feet to rest on the tabletop.

‘I knew her before you did,’ I said.

‘But I’m her close friend and confidant which trumps friends by association.’

Ouch.

I sat in the black executive office chair. ‘Everything aside, we were not making out.’

‘There was obvious lip-on-lip action from where I stood.’ Scarlet inspected her red nails. They were perfect, thanks to her bi-weekly manicures on my company card.

I reclined in my seat. ‘I can’t tell you why, but she asked me to kiss her and I was being a good friend.’

‘You both seem to have the same definition of friend. Which is a terrible definition at best.’

‘Both?’ I tried not to sound too intrigued but failed dismally.

‘Ah ha.’ Scarlet pointed an accusing finger at me. ‘So, there *is* something going on.’

‘Nothing’s going on.’

‘For now.’ She smiled.

‘She wanted to get a rise out of Jesse, and given how irate he was, it seemed to work.’

Scarlet frowned. ‘She was quiet for the rest of the day. Even when we got home, she went straight to her room. I’ve never seen her like this.’

I had. After the wedding, Kalina was quiet in the car ride home. Her smile from the dinner had dropped as soon as the door had shut. ‘If he wasn’t Ted’s brother, I’d have wiped the constant shit-eating grin from his face.’

Ted and I’d been best friends since we met at uni nearly eighteen years ago. He was like a brother to me, but I’d wanted nothing to do with his actual brother from the moment I met him.

‘Jesse’s an immature piece of shit. Lina’s lucky you were around.’ There wasn’t a hint of sarcasm in Scarlet’s voice.

I didn’t feel lucky. I hadn’t done enough to stop him from hurting her in the first place. When I’d had a feeling he was messing around with her a few months ago, he’d actually been using her to gain information about her family and their hotel group.

But she put on a brave face and I never pushed. ‘She doesn’t need me. She can take care of herself.’

‘True, but it’s good to know you have friends who would commit a felony for you.’ Scarlet pulled her phone from her pocket then laughed at something on the screen.

Our conversation ended, but my thoughts still ran rampant. Even if I went back in time, there wasn’t much I could do to stop Kalina from seeing Jesse. I couldn’t tell her how to live her life.

Scarlet giggled profusely.

I raised an eyebrow at her in a silent question.

‘Something my friend sent me.’

‘Friend. Sure...remember what I told you. Men cannot be trusted.’

‘Oh, you’re one to talk.’ she scoffed

‘Exactly why I said it.’ I leaned my head back against my interlocked hands.

Stacey emerged from the changing room. ‘You sure you don’t want to join us?’

‘Thanks, but maybe some other time.’

‘Okay, see you soon.’ She dropped the dress and shoes on my desk with a loud thud before she sashayed out of the studio.

Once the metal door shut, Scarlet groaned aloud. ‘Finally, I thought she’d never leave.’

‘As I was saying, you can never trust men.’

‘Really? You think I go around believing what they say when I have such upstanding male role models?’

‘Low blow.’ I crossed my arms over my chest and pushed aside the discomfort there.

Scarlet’s eyes widened. ‘Sorry. I know you’re not like him, but you’re doing the same thing he did.’

The him she referred to was our father.

‘It’s not the same thing. The women I meet know it’s purely physical. No feelings. Or promises.’

She scoffed. ‘You think it’s better?’

‘It’s called being honest. Everyone knows the expectations, or lack thereof, and nobody gets hurt. And most importantly, I’m not cheating on anyone.’

‘You’re too afraid to let anyone get close to you. Close enough to share them with the people in your life. To let them get to know the real you, and you can keep lying to yourself all you want, but you’ve left a trail of broken hearts in your wake. You can’t be so intimate with someone—more than once—and not expect feelings to develop.’

‘We’re all adults and no one’s complaining. It’s the perfect arrangement with no emotions.’

Scarlet shook her head. ‘Firstly, eww. Secondly, there’s no such thing.’ She returned to scrolling on her phone.

I was about to counter her comment when she nearly toppled out of her seat and onto the floor as she flung her feet off my desk. ‘Check your phone.’

I reached into my pocket and yanked it out, scrolling through my notifications until I saw the email.

From: **Mae** <maedubois@dbdiamonds.com>

To: titan@tastudios.co.uk

CC: scarlet@tastudios.co.uk

Date: Oct, 06th, 12:45 PM

Subject: Application: Brand Photographer

TA Studios.pdf

Good day Mr Andersson,

Thank you for applying to DB Diamond for the photographer position. Please note you have been shortlisted and will be contacted in the next two weeks with the information for your interview.

Please find attached the specifications for the material needed during the interview, this includes a brief for a photo-shoot, in your specific style, to showcase your work.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to email or call me.

Looking forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely

Tiffany on behalf of Mae DuBois

‘T, this is huge.’ Scarlet jumped out of her seat.

I was speechless. This was something I’d done one night on a whim—and maybe one drink too many—and now I was shortlisted?

‘Aren’t you excited? You were excited when you told me about the application.’ Scarlet’s face dropped.

‘I am.’ I shook my head. ‘Sorry, I didn’t think I’d be considered if I’m being honest. Mae is particular about her brand. It’s a little terrifying.’ She was all about tradition, values, and legacy. All things I had very little experience in.

‘Why are you so hard on yourself?’ She reached out and squeezed my arm.

I exhaled. ‘You know why I do this. His voice plays in my head.’

‘Don’t let it rule your mind. It’s already affected your actions.’ Scarlet walked around the desk and wrapped me in a hug. ‘You should appreciate what we’ve gotten from him—our really great looks—and leave everything else behind.’

I choked out a laugh, which didn’t feel genuine, but it made Scarlet smile. ‘Thanks.’

‘Want to go out tonight? Celebrate?’ She shimmied her shoulders.

‘It was an acceptance of my application. I haven’t gotten the job.’

‘Yeah, but we haven’t gone out in ages. You’re getting old and cranky,’ she teased.

‘You can come with me to Savi and Ted’s engagement party.’

‘Did I miss something?’ Scarlet tilted her head.

To anyone else, the statement would seem normal. But Scarlet had the right to be confused.

‘No, her parents missed out on all the traditional celebrations after they’d eloped, so they’re making up for it by having every single traditional wedding event you can think of. Savi is their only child after all.’

‘Do the parents know they’re already married *and* expecting a baby?’

Trust Ted and Savi to forge their own paths. After they were legally married, Ted travelled with Savi to South Africa for

two months, where she finished her hotel management course, and came back with more than a certificate of qualification.

I laughed. ‘Yes, of course. There’s going to be great food, drinks, and dancing.’

‘Sold. Sounds fun.’ She typed away on her phone.

My phone vibrated on the tabletop, and we both looked down at the screen to see our father’s name. His ears must’ve been on fire.

‘You going to get that?’ she asked.

‘Nope.’ I pressed decline. ‘I don’t want to start the night off in a bad way.’

‘Fair... Oh, let me ask Lina for something to wear.’ Scarlet bounded off while she typed away on her phone.

The mere mention of Kalina had me thinking about the kiss at the expo.

And the taste of her cherry lip gloss.

Chapter 3

Act I, Scene III: Hotel Verona, London

Kalina

‘Who’s downstairs? Anyone tried to strangle each other yet?’ Savi asked. She dabbed some red lipstick on her lips with her ring finger and stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror.

She was my best friend and my favourite cousin. She was also the most beautiful, having inherited our grandmother’s striking green eyes and her father’s deep brown skin.

‘It’s a little chaotic, but in a good way. No one has started a fight. Yet.’ I was seated on one of the luxurious occasional chairs in the suite of Hotel Verona as we readied ourselves for her—for all intents and purposes—engagement party. I’d made a quick stop at the ballroom on my way up to see her. ‘Your mom has everything under control.’

She smoothed her hands down the front of her skirt. ‘I trust you more than anyone in this building. I don’t think anything could ruin my mood.’

‘You look stunning and the happiness shows.’ I beamed at her.

‘Want to know a secret?’

I nodded.

‘We’re having a girl.’ Her smile spread wide and I couldn’t help but follow.

‘A little girl. She’s going to be so loved.’ I gave her arms a squeeze and studied our reflections in the framed mirror. Hers in a heavily beaded seafoam and gold-coloured lehenga, and mine in a dusty pink saree. Her eyes were green like sea-glass, while mine were brown. She’d inherited the daintier features of our grandmother, while most of mine stemmed from my mother’s side.

‘Thank you. Could you help with the back, please?’ She pointed to where the laces were done up halfway.

I tightened and looped the strings. ‘You’d think Ted would know how to do this by now.’

‘He’s great at undoing them.’ She smirked at my reflection.

I dry heaved. ‘Thank goodness I didn’t have to walk in on the two of you...again.’

She giggled. ‘It’s certainly not the last time. He wanted to bring his mother, so you’re off the hook. For now.’

‘One day I’ll get you back.’

‘Can’t wait,’ she said a little too enthusiastically.

I perched my chin on top of her head and gave her a warm smile.

Our skin was about three shades apart, hers a warm rich brown and mine a honey gold.

The most similar thing about us was our dark hair. While Savi’s cascaded down her back like a waterfall, mine fell straight between my shoulder blades. It took a lot of work on my part to get the volume she was naturally blessed with.

‘Are you excited?’ I asked.

‘I’m happy our parents are excited about it, and we get to celebrate with both of the families.’ Ten months ago; the Rays and the Montagues would not be seen in a room together.

All it took was one masked ball to change everything.

‘You two deserve all the celebrations of love.’

Her hand flattened against her abdomen, where her belly was still hidden, and her face turned a shade closer to her outfit.

‘Can I get you anything?’ I asked.

She shook her head and took steadying breaths. ‘It’ll pass in a bit.’

Her morning sickness had turned into any time-of-the-day sickness.

‘Let me find your mom and make sure everyone is where they’re meant to be. I’ll see if your husband is around too.’

‘Husband,’ Savi repeated, a dreamy smile spreading across her face.

They’d been married for a few months, and she still said it with such reverence.

She fell back into the chair I’d vacated and lifted her legs onto the footrest. ‘What would I do without you?’

‘You’ve already eloped. The least you could do is show up to your post-marriage engagement? I don’t know what to call any of this.’

A peal of laughter escaped her, and I had no choice but to join in.

‘See you soon.’

I took a deep breath as I left the room and aimed for the lifts. It steadied my racing heart as I anticipated coming face to face with the BAA’s—Busy Aunty Association.

The older women in our family were fuelled by gossip, scandal, and unsolicited advice.

My situation with Jesse nearly eclipsed Savi and Ted’s union, but Savi’s parents and our grandmother put out the fire before it’d begun. It didn’t stop my body from recoiling as the lift doors opened in the foyer of the main ballroom. Their cackling laughter and loud voices spilled down the passage as if they were trying to outdo one another.

I was met with a flurry of kisses and hugs as I greeted the seven aunties—four from Savi’s mother’s side and three from our fathers’—in turn.

‘Lina, you’re looking well. So healthy.’ One of the auntie’s said. Her statement was laced with underlying meaning I knew was code for, “You look like you’ve gained weight but I don’t want to say it.”

As if I hadn’t noticed the changes in my own body every morning. In the way my shirt buttons puckered ever so

slightly, or my skirt required an extra tug on the zip. It didn't bother me, at least not until she'd said it.

'Lina, my nephew is in town. I invited him tonight to meet you,' another aunt said.

It'd only taken thirty seconds.

Which was actually a record.

Older Indian aunties were always trying to set you up with one of their cousin's sons, best friends, brothers.

'Thank you, Aunty,' I said between gritted teeth. I wanted this conversation to end. The large table near the doors was laden with gifts for Ted and his family and I needed to do something with my hands, so I took to re-organising the layout. First by colour then size. It drowned out the voices around me as they planned my future without so much as a question directed at me.

'Let her be,' Radha Aunty said, coming to my rescue. Savi's mother was as beautiful, and as feisty, as her daughter. It's often why they clashed heads.

'Thank you, Aunty.'

'Besides,' she whispered, 'her nephew is about as interesting as a toilet brush. Don't worry about them.'

I did a terrible job of trying to stifle my laugh. My aunt was like a mother to me, and she knew me better than I knew myself sometimes.

'Let me check the setup.' I made my way out of the firing range and into the ballroom.

The space was filled with guests and had been transformed into something Tinkerbell would be proud of. I'd tested the string lights about a thousand times, and gave backup batteries to anyone who'd had pockets.

'Could you make sure those,' I pointed to the gauzy fabric hanging overhead, 'don't touch any of the lights?'

'Yes,' one of the wait staff replied.

I walked through the rest of the room, and tried not to look back or I'd be stuck all night trying to fix every imperfect detail. The light din of conversation turned into cheers and gushes as Savi walked into the room with her mother and father at her sides. She glowed and smiled widely as they walked her over to the cream and gold chaise.

My phone buzzed and I was surprised to see a text message from Titan.

Hey dimples, you here? I have something to tell you.

18:35

Of course, who do you think's running
this ship?

18:35

You know I like a woman in charge.

18:35

You can't see it, but my eyes rolled all the way back into my skull and now they're stuck

18:36

Well, turn around so I can see.

18:36

I spun, almost tripping over the pallu of my saree, but Titan reached out and grabbed my arm to steady me.

'Careful, don't want you falling for me.' His smile made the corners of his eyes wrinkle in amusement. 'Again.'

I straightened and he let go, but didn't step back, which left little room between us.

'Why are you dressed like you're in mourning?' I asked as I eyed his all-black ensemble accessorised with a shiny silver watch.

'It's classic.' He adjusted the lapels of his jacket as if it needed fixing. Nothing he'd ever worn had been ill-fitting or creased. Ever.

‘It’s depressing. You need some colour in your life.’

‘What you’re there for.’ His gaze skimmed down my frame, and I couldn’t stop the heat pooling in my cheeks.

He looked about ready to do a victory dance.

‘Relax, dimples. How was it?’ He glanced towards the foyer where the sounds of laughter and chatter increased in volume. His question needed no elaboration.

‘Horrible. Aunty Sima set me up with her nephew.’

Titan had been around my family long enough to see them setting me up with some nephew or cousin’s son.

‘What?’ His question was followed by his arched brows. When he lifted both then you knew you’d truly shocked him.

‘Apparently, he’s here tonight.’

‘It’s a family event. Tell him you have to do something for the bride.’

I considered his suggestion. ‘Not a horrible idea. Thank you.’

‘If all else fails, you could signal me over.’ He crossed his arms over his chest.

‘While it would be entertaining, don’t waste your energy on me. I am a single woman, nearing the end of my childbearing years—according to them at least.’

‘My energy could never be wasted on you.’

I shook my head. ‘Always flirting.’

‘Not flirting. Facts.’

I laughed. ‘Sounds like a line. Does that usually work?’

He smiled like he was the keeper of all the secrets. ‘You tell me?’

‘What are you two whispering about?’ my grandmother interrupted. and I jumped about a green turtle length away from Titan.

‘Dadi.’

She appeared out of thin air, dressed in a beautifully beaded champagne saree. Her green gaze darted between us and a look filled with mischief crossed her face. ‘Am I interrupting something?’

‘Of course not,’ I stepped closer and leaned down to touch her feet before I pulled her into a long hug.

‘Aditi,’ Titan said. He did the same.

‘Titan, my my, have you grown? You seem taller and more... muscular.’ She patted his arms and craned her neck to meet his gaze.

‘Nope, still the same six foot four.’

‘So healthy and strong,’ she said, directly to me, then turned to him again. ‘I told you to call me Dadi.’

‘I would like to earn the title.’ He flashed her a cheeky grin.

She looked over at me. ‘When are you going to put him out of his misery?’

‘Dadi, please.’

‘I’m ready as soon as Kalina says the word.’ Titan wiggled his eyebrows at me.

He could charm the pants off anyone. Well, almost anyone.

‘Let’s find you a seat,’ I said and wrapped my arm around my grandmother. I needed to escort her away from Titan. The two of them together spelt trouble. Dadi and Savi were about the same size and this often led to people assuming our grandmother was demure and meek. She was anything but, and when Titan was around, she was cheekier than usual.

‘You keep denying it beta, but that boy is good for you.’

‘Dadi, we’re friends,’ I said as I deposited her in one of the soft seats. ‘Barely.’

‘I want to see you happy.’

I smiled at her. ‘I am happy.’

She squeezed my hand, and the creases in her forehead deepened while her eyes drooped downward. ‘I worry about

you. When I'm not around anymore, I want to be sure you're being taken care of.'

'I've been looking after myself for some time now. Besides, you'll be around forever.' Thinking about a time without her in my life made my throat tighten.

She shook me from those thoughts as quickly as they'd begun. 'I don't mean money. You may not look like us, but you have your father's heart. You need someone who lights a fire in you.'

My heart stuttered in my chest. I'd grown up without my mother in my life, but I'd always been reminded I was the spitting image of her.

'I love you, and don't worry about me. I'll find someone.' I kissed her on the cheek and walked out of the room before she could see my glossy eyes.

I'd made it halfway through the foyer when Titan caught up to me, his long strides ate up the distance between us.

'Don't,' I said. I didn't need his witty or snarky remarks right now.

'I wanted to make sure you were okay.'

I steadied my breathing. 'She only says those things because she has a crush on you, and you won't date her.'

Titan beamed. 'If she weren't like a grandmother to me, I might've considered it...'

'Stop.' I shook my head and laughed.

He chuckled. 'Mission accomplished.'

'Talking up my grandmother?' I tilted my head to the side.

'Getting you to smile,' he said and brushed his finger against my cheek.

Heat spread up my neck until it reached the skin under his fingertips. My mind replayed the kiss from the expo and the gentle way he'd cupped my face.

‘Lina.’ My aunt bustled towards us; a tall, dark-haired man in tow. She squeezed herself into the space between myself and Titan.

He backed off toward the ballroom while mouthing, “*sorry*”, at me. He was weak.

‘Aunty Sima.’

‘Lina, this is Arun. Arun, this is Radha Aunty’s niece I was telling you about. She’s thirty, single, and works in the family business.’ Of course, my aunt had to start with my credentials.

I offered him a tight-lipped smile, unsure of what more could be added to the list.

‘Nice to meet you, Lina,’ he said.

‘I’ll leave you two alone.’ Aunty Sima disappeared before I could protest.

A few beats of silence passed over us before I spoke, ‘Are you in town on business?’

‘Yes, I’m in town for a conference. Aunty Sima insisted I come here tonight.’ He didn’t seem enthusiastic about it.

‘Oh? Great. I love conferences. I mean, obviously,’ I said and gestured to the foyer.

‘You work here?’ He crossed his arms over his chest. On him it was almost condescending. When Titan did it, I knew it was for comfort.

‘I do. I’m the conference and events manager here. I have a lot of insight into conferencing. Where is your one being hosted?’ Since my boss had taken up the position of managing the new Cape Town Layla hotel, I’d taken over the entire department.

‘The, um, BDC.’ He looked over my shoulder at the ballroom where loud music emanated.

I wracked my brain for the venue information until it came up. ‘Ah, they were one of the first venues to implement an event app and website for virtual seminars. Pretty cool you

wouldn't need to fly in for the conference and you could log in from home.'

His lips parted slightly then closed again. He cleared his throat. 'Yeah. It's, uh, cool.'

'I mean, given how things are changing and you can find everything online, it does make it accessible for those who don't want to miss out on work or family responsibilities.'

I watched his face in apt fascination as he chewed the inside of his lip and tapped his finger against his arm. 'Most people like the break,' Arun said.

'I guess, the option is nice. Like, the family and friends who couldn't make it tonight get a live-streamed version of the event straight to their phones or laptops.'

'Seems impersonal.'

I scoffed. 'What's more personal than being there for the ones you love?'

'Through a screen?' He tilted his head to the side.

'It's better than nothing. Before it was all about recorded lectures and seminars which were then edited, and uploaded to a drive weeks later. This cuts out all the work and time.' It amazed me how far the industry had progressed.

'You seem really excited about all of this.'

'I am. I can show you some of it if you'd like?' I added a casual shrug.

'Maybe some other time. I think my aunt is looking for me.'

I turned toward the passage, where she'd disappeared earlier and when I turned back, he'd spun on his heel and made a beeline for the lifts.

Great. I'd scared another potential date away.

Savi waved me over through the open doors and I hurried to her, putting aside what'd happened with Arun.

'Hi.'

‘Could you get me something to drink, please? All this talking is draining. Are you okay? You seem off.’

She never missed anything.

‘Do you want a snack?’ I asked.

She lit up like a Christmas tree. ‘Would absolutely love one.’

‘Be right back.’ A task to keep my mind and body busy. It’s like Savi could sense my unease. I made my way to the sleek bar and sidled up its edge.

Titan slid up beside me, leaned his elbow on the black countertop, and sighed. ‘It’s not good for us to be apart.’

‘Are you going to bother me all night?’ I motioned to the bartender who walked over. ‘One sparkling and one still water please,’ I said before looking over at Titan.

‘Can I get a Fiodh Hybrid, neat. Thanks.’

‘Still like your whiskey, I see?’ I’d accidentally taken a sip of his drink the night we’d met. I could still feel the burn of the liquor.

‘Sweet of you to remember, dimples.’

‘It’s my job to pay attention to details.’

‘What else have you noticed about me?’ He leaned closer.

‘You never take anything seriously.’

‘Nonsense, I take you very seriously.’ His green eyes shimmered as they reflected the fairy lights above.

‘That is the cheesiest thing you’ve ever said to me.’

‘It worked, didn’t it? How did things go with that guy?’ He wasn’t one to beat around the bush.

‘He seemed more interested in getting away from me.’

‘I’m sorry.’ His face softened.

I shook my head. ‘It’s okay. Nothing new.’

A peal of laughter came from the doorway and we turned to see Jesse and Lexie standing on the threshold.

‘Great,’ I muttered under my breath. ‘Their smug grins rubbed in my face all night.’

They greeted Savi’s parents and schmoozed their way through the crowd until they reached Savi.

‘Lexie asked me to be the photographer for their wedding, by the way. Want me to turn them down?’

‘Why would I care?’ I turned back to the bar, trying to figure out where our drinks were.

‘You and Jesse—’ Titan started.

‘There’s nothing going on between Jesse and me,’ I said, with a little more bite in my voice than I’d intended.

The bartender appeared, placed our drinks on the bar in front of us, and flitted away. Titan downed his in one large gulp, and didn’t even flinch. I remembered Titan’s face from the night of the ball. Behind his black mask his green gaze had twinkled down at me. Much like it was now.

Maybe if I’d danced with him instead of Jesse that night, I wouldn’t be in this predicament now where everyone treated me like a delicate glass ornament.

I shook my head to clear it. ‘Everything okay?’ I asked.

Titan’s gaze was far off somewhere behind me. ‘Yeah. Jesse can’t stop staring at you.’

‘He is not.’ I didn’t dare turn around to check.

‘You can’t see what I can. “*It’s my job to pay attention to details.*”’ He looked so pleased with himself I thought he was about to break into a song and dance.

I grabbed the bottles and shoved it underneath my forearm. ‘You are insufferable.’

He leaned down towards my ear. ‘But you like it.’

It sent tiny shivers through my body. ‘Could you be serious for once.’

‘I am,’ he said. His face was clear and not laced with any emotion.

‘You are not.’ I held the bottles against my chest and marched toward Savi.

It took Titan three steps to catch up.

Aunty Sima, Aunty Jiya, and another woman, whose face I couldn’t place, came bustling toward us with determination.

‘Lina, what did you say?’ Aunty Sima all but screamed. Her cheeks were flushed a bright red.

‘What?’ I asked, more out of surprise than an actual question.

Aunty Sima placed a hand on her forehead as she shook her head.

Scarlet walked towards me, heard Aunt Sima’s voice, and thought better of it as she diverted her course behind me. I looked over my shoulder where Titan had taken a few steps away, leaving me to fend for myself. Neither of them would survive the zombie apocalypse.

‘Arun left,’ Aunty Jiya said.

‘Maybe he has an early morning. He said he’s here for a conference.’

‘It was something you said.’ Aunty Sima chastised me.

All I focused on was the condensation from the bottles as it seeped through my saree and soaked my skin underneath. I wanted to cry.

It was happening once again. Something I’d said or done made men run in the opposite direction.

‘Nevermind Arun, beta,’ the strange aunty said. ‘I have someone who’s perfect for you. He’s forty, a little bit older, but he has two kids already, and he’s been divorced for almost two years. A starter family for you.’ She leaned in close and whispered. ‘He’s an Englishman, but it’s okay now since Ted’s in the family.’

‘Sure. Yes.’ I nodded rapidly. I wanted this nightmare to end. ‘Savi needs me. Excuse me.’

I stepped around them and made it to the safe haven that was Savi and Ted.

‘Everything okay?’ Savi asked, looking at my face then at the aunties still huddled around one another.

‘Yes, it’s perfect. This is your night. Don’t worry about anything else.’ I handed her the bottle of sparkling water.

Titan and Scarlet joined us and before either of them could open their mouths I glared at them and shook my head. ‘You left me alone with them. I could strangle the both of you.’

‘You seemed to have a handle on things.’ Titan shrugged.

‘No sweetmeats for either of you.’

They both pouted at me. I was, of course, lying. But I needed to threaten them if only a little.

‘You look beautiful,’ I told Scarlet. I’d left her some options for tonight, and she’d chosen the emerald green lehenga my father had gifted me from his last trip to India.

‘Thank you,’ she said with a little curtsy.

I spent the rest of the evening ensuring Savi and Ted had the best time being celebrated and loved.

Then spent the night crying under a mountain I’d built with my blankets. At least there were no men there to make me feel like I couldn’t hold a conversation or keep them interested long enough to go on a second date.

Chapter 4

Act I, Scene IV: The Ancient Flea Pub, London

Titan

The weekend came a lot sooner than I'd anticipated.

With work deadlines, Ted and Savi's engagement party, and this week's edits behind me, I could finally go out and celebrate the way I needed to.

I pulled up outside the red brick building where the green and yellow sign was still as battered and dingy as the first time I'd come here almost eighteen years ago. *The Ancient Flea Pub*, where my friends and I'd spent many nights watching the games, picking up women, or drinking ourselves under the table.

The space was packed and the voices carried across the room; a cacophony of laughter, swearing, and excitement. I walked toward the bar, greeted the bartender, and ordered my favourite beer.

I leaned against the countertop and scanned the room. There were the regulars who I'd seen over the years, witnessing their lives progress as they settled down, started families, and moved into the country. Some people had come to pick up people—much like myself—only now, they'd arrive with someone on their arm; a comfort and ease between them as soft conversations happened with their heads bent-together. There'd been proposals in this room, and I'd popped in for lunch a couple of times to find couples with their kids, having some quality family time.

'Here you go,' the bartender said, breaking me from my thoughts as he placed the glass in front of me.

Maybe it was a good thing. I was venturing down a mental path which wouldn't be conducive to my being here. Tonight

was about de-stressing and having a good time.

I sat and took one sip before a voice travelled through the crowd. 'Hey man.' Nick greeted me. He was one of my closest friends from university, and still as single as I was.

'Hey. I didn't order anything for you. I wasn't sure if you'd make it on time.'

He sat on the stool beside me and gestured to the bartender he'd have the same. 'I was busy at the office, but I needed a break.'

'Glad one of us is making use of their architecture degree.'

He thanked the bartender for his drink, downed half of it, then took a deep, steadying breath. 'You're lucky it's not you.'

'Taking one for the team,' I said, slapping him on the back.

I looked around the room when I spotted a familiar, but unexpected, face. Seated at one of the booths towards the back was Kalina who nodded at the man across from her. He spoke and laughed so loudly; I heard him all the way from my seat.

Kalina's face contorted until her eyebrows drew together and her lips pursed. She shook her head and straightened her features again. I'd seen her do it before, like she drifted off mid-conversation then snapped back to it.

I drank from my glass and observed them for a while. The way she averted her gaze when she spoke to him, to the way she got excited and moved her hands animatedly.

He gestured to their glasses and she shook her head.

'Who do you have your eye on? She's already on a date.' Nick's gaze followed mine.

'Savi's cousin.'

'Ah, the pretty one I assume? She really is pretty.'

I glared at him.

'What?' He shrugged. 'Those were your words.' He sipped his drink. 'I thought she was single?'

'Not for someone like you.'

Nick laughed. 'Not what I meant. Who's the old guy?'

'I'm not sure...'

I turned to the bar to set my glass down, when I caught the eye of a dark-skinned, brunette woman. She spoke to her friend then smiled at me. Something about her face seemed warm and welcoming.

It was all I needed.

Before I could get out of my seat, she'd started over to us. 'Hi, I've seen you here before, haven't I?'

'It's likely. This is one of my favourite pubs.'

'Mine too.'

'You here with your friends?' Nick leaned around her and looked over at the two women she'd been talking to.

'Yeah, but they're leaving soon, and you seem like you've only settled in.' She tipped her head at our glasses.

'Let me see if I can get them to stay.' He hopped out of his seat. 'Or get them to leave with me.'

While everyone thought I was the wildcard, I had nothing on Nick.

'Can I get you something to drink?' I asked the woman.

'I'll have what you're having.' She sat on the now vacated barstool.

I waved the bartender over. 'Two more please.'

I looked over her shoulder at Kalina and her date. He stood beside their table and hugged her while she awkwardly patted his upper arm.

I suppressed a laugh at the look of confusion on her face.

I pulled out a note from my pocket and set it down on the bar. 'I'll be right back.'

The woman nodded.

Kalina's date and I walked by one another as he aimed to leave. She shrugged on her bright pink coat with her gaze on

the floor.

‘Not our usual meeting spot, but I’ll take it.’

Her head shot up. ‘How long have you been here?’ Her tone was accusing.

‘Long enough to watch all of that,’ I said with a smirk and tilted my head at the table.

‘You’re so invasive.’

‘This is a public space, dimples.’

She mumbled something incoherent, but likely an insult.

‘Who’s the old man?’

‘Mr. Allen.’

‘What?’ I shook my head.

‘He likes to be called that.’ She tugged on the collar of her coat.

My eyebrows shot up. ‘Seriously?’

‘Entirely. He introduced himself that way and insisted I use it.’

‘How old is he?’ The man had a head full of salt and pepper hair.

‘Forty-two.’

‘Kalina, entering your sugar daddy phase?’ I grinned at her.

‘He’s only twelve years older than me.’ She shook her head. ‘And only six years older than you.’

‘Still a little young then?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘You have too much time on your hands.’

‘It didn’t seem to end well.’

Kalina shifted on her feet and worried the edge of her sleeve between her fingers. ‘Yes, I’m aware.’

Now I felt like shit. ‘I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I wanted to check if you were okay.’

‘I’m fine, Titan.’ Her tone, posture, and eyes said otherwise. ‘You don’t have to check on me all the time.’

‘Are you sure? I can leave with you if you want me to.’

She looked toward the bar to the woman I’d met. The woman, whose name I had yet to discover, wiggled her fingers at us. I winked at her and held up two fingers.

‘You seem to have your hands full.’

I stuck my hands in the pockets of my jeans. ‘Say the word and I won’t.’

‘It’s that easy for you?’ She mirrored my action by placing hers in her coat pockets.

‘I can teach you,’ I joked.

She scoffed. ‘Enjoy your evening.’

I opened my mouth to respond, but it was drowned out by a shriek.

‘Fancy seeing you two here.’ Scarlet hugged Kalina then me.

‘What are you doing here?’ I crossed my arms over my chest. This was no place for her.

Scarlet flicked her curls over her shoulder. ‘Same thing as you; relaxing, getting out, enjoying people’s company.’ She wiggled her eyebrows at us.

‘Me and him? No way.’ Kalina scoffed at the idea.

‘Is it so bad to be out with me?’ I asked.

‘Yes. We have very different ideas of what constitutes a relationship,’ Kalina elaborated.

Scarlet inspected her flawless manicure. ‘All I’m saying is you two seem to have a great time together whenever I see you. Titan, you could do with a little seriousness.’ Scarlet directed her gaze at me. ‘And you could let loose once in a while.’ She nodded at Kalina. ‘You both have so much to learn from each other.’

Kalina’s face twisted; like she was calculating in her mind. ‘I think you should enjoy yourself, and not come home too late.’

And you,' she said, looking up at me, 'be safe.' She strutted away and out the door.

'You shouldn't even be here.'

Scarlet waved over to a group of people at a booth. 'Enjoy your night out. I'm meeting some friends and you need to relax.' She hurried off before I had anything else to say.

I focused on the woman at the bar, and not on the men Scarlet would be surrounded by.

Thirty minutes later, I left the pub with the brunette—we'd agreed names weren't necessary for what we were about to do—and walked back to her place.

I waited until she was asleep before going through the motions; clothes, keys, jacket, and helmet. At least this time it wasn't the middle of the night when I arrived home.

Chapter 5

Act I, Scene V: TA Studios, Hackney

Titan

I regretted my decision to go to the gym.

The combination of the late night and exhaustion from my work week had me pushing myself a little harder than usual.

‘Great, I think you can call it a day.’ My friend Alex grabbed the bar before I dropped it on my face.

‘Thanks,’ I exhaled.

He clapped me on the shoulder. ‘You did great for someone who complained the entire time.’

It hurt to laugh. ‘Watch it or I’ll add extra plates to your bar when you’re not looking.’

He grinned and I knew it was because he could lift it regardless. Our friendship consisted of financial investment advice from him, and a spotting partner who could save him if necessary.

It was never necessary.

With some exertion on my end, I lifted my arm to check the time.

If I left now, I could get back when the cafe up the street—The Brewery—opened. They had the best cinnamon rolls.

The gym was only ten minutes from the studio, so I ran.

I’d expected the cramp as soon as I stopped outside the door to my building. What I hadn’t expected was Kalina; holding a brown paper bag and two unmistakable yellow cups with a castle and The Brewery logo printed on the sides.

She was dressed in her pink coat, her outfit from the previous night peeking through the unbuttoned front. Somehow her

makeup was still intact and her hair swooped up onto her head in a messy bun.

The combination was unnerving. She was the most put-together dishevelled person I'd ever seen.

'Hi, I rang the buzzer, but I haven't been here for too long.' Her brown eyes were wide and she looked ready to drop everything she was holding. 'I realise I should've called you first.'

'Here, let me,' I said and reached out.

She deposited the items from her arms into mine and let out a sigh of relief. The morning sun made her skin and hair golden. She looked like a little statue or figurine. The kind handed out at awards and placed up on a mantle for you to admire.

I glanced at my watch. 'It's not even seven a.m., Kalina.'

'I've been up the entire night, so it feels like one long day. Besides, you get up with the sun.'

I shrugged. She knew me well. 'Come on up, you can tell me why your walk of shame brought you to my doorstep.'

Kalina scowled at me, but walked beneath my arm as I held the door open. 'Not a walk of shame.'

'Kidding, dimples.'

She left a rich floral scent in her wake. One I'd associated with her and would have recognised in the dark.

We took the lift to the fifth floor in silence. Kalina's heeled boots, the only sound, as it clicked along the polished concrete beside me.

I placed my palm above her head, and pushed the heavy metal door.

'Thank you,' she whispered, then stepped inside.

The studio was dark, thanks to the light-tight shades, and I flicked on the lights in the reception area.

Kalina stood in the entryway and stared up at the frames hung on the walls. 'I haven't been here since the day Scarlet

moved to London,' she said. She walked alongside them, taking in the black and white prints of buildings I'd admired and captured on film.

'Kitchen?'

She nodded then shrugged off her coat, depositing it on the hook by the door. It was the first time I saw her outfit properly; a fitted short black skirt and a cream knit sweater. It was a perfect blend of sweet and sexy. Much like her. She followed me into the kitchen, eyed the barstool, then her skirt before opting to lean against the marble island instead.

'To what do I owe the pleasure, dimples?' I placed the bag and cups on the countertop beside her.

'I have a...proposition.'

'One second,' I said and lifted a finger. I made my way to the bathroom and discarded my gym top in the washing basket before grabbing a T-shirt. I pulled it over my head as I walked back. 'A proposition? Sounds raunchy.'

Kalina cleared her throat, but it didn't go unnoticed as her eyes roamed over my briefly exposed abdomen.

I liked that she didn't try to hide it. Or, maybe she didn't realise she was doing it.

'Yes, anyway,' she said, and shook her head. 'Hear me out.' She offered one of the coffee cups to me.

'If your question is about how to hide a body, I will say I was seduced and had no idea about it beforehand.' I took a sip from the cup. It was exactly the way I liked it. 'Thank you.'

She cracked a smile, her light brown eyes looking like honey under the lights. I leaned closer to see what other colours were flecked in her irises.

'I want you to teach me how to be like you.'

Her request shook me from my reverie. 'A photography lesson? Sure.' I leaned an elbow onto the counter.

'No.' She swatted my arm playfully. 'I want to have the lines and be flirty, and I want to be able to read a guy's mannerisms

and figure out what to do from there.’

‘Oh...not at all what I thought you’d say.’

She groaned. ‘I need to get out there, without the chance of getting hurt again. You don’t even bat an eye when you see women. Like with Lexie? You were so calm, while I was dying inside at the mere idea of seeing Jesse.’

‘My, um, methods aren’t for you.’ I took another sip.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I don’t date.’ I considered what she’d said. ‘Besides, I’ve been hurt too.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you have, but wouldn’t you say you have the upper hand? At least from what I can tell, you make the rules.’

‘You make it sound so malicious and conniving.’

‘Toe-may-toe, toe-mah-toe.’ She brushed her hand through the air.

‘How would this even work?’ I set the cup down and crossed my arms over my chest.

‘I’m glad you asked,’ she said. She pulled her laptop from her bag and set it down on the countertop. Her fingers flew across the keyboard before she swung the screen around to face me.

This document stands between Party 1 (Kalina Ray) and Party 2 (Titan Erik Andersson). Party 2 will teach Party 1 how to date in a more casual capacity and help Party 1 find a date for the Montague-Ray wedding.

‘How did you know my middle name?’ I looked over the screen at her.

She took a sip from her cup. ‘That’s your concern?’

I continued reading.

Further referred to as ‘Agreement’, this document will cover the stipulations, clauses, and any additional information either party should know about the other to make this Arrangement as easy as possible.

‘Agreement?’ I asked. ‘Why does this sound like you’re going to harvest my organs?’

‘I wouldn’t tell you if I were,’ she said, unmoved by my comment.

1. This Agreement will be valid from the date and time this document is signed up to and until the Montague-Ray wedding on the 28th of November.

2.

Party 2 will include, but not be limited to, the following in their lesson plan:

a.

Flirting and charm.

i. How to attract someone

ii. What to do once you have their attention

iii.

Using what you have to your advantage

b.

Date etiquette.

i.

First date rules

ii.

How to get a second date

iii.

Dating apps?

c.

Conversations and topics of interest.

i.

Easy topics for conversations

ii.

Index cards?

d.

Figuring out if the man is a giant asshole and not worth Party 1's time.

'Thorough,' I said, amusement teasing at my lips.

'We have to cover all the bases.'

'This is...more than the bases.'

'I've watched enough rom-coms to know how this works,' she said.

'Yeah...not the most ideal place to be getting your information.'

3. Both parties must attend any Montague-Ray pre-wedding events to get maximum exposure and practice.

4. Practical tasks may be given (if there is sufficient heads up).

5. This Agreement shall be nullified in the event of death or coma of either party 1 or 2.

'What is this?' I asked, scrolling to the second page.

'Some things you might need to know.' She inspected her pink manicured nails.

Facts (Party 1):

- Party 1 likes her caffeine in the morning. If she has it in the afternoon, she crashes.
- She also likes pizza. A lot. Even though she is lactose intolerant.
- Party 1 will ensure Party 2 has an unlimited supply of cinnamon rolls.

'The last point isn't fair,' I said.

'What?' Kalina asked, and stood beside me to peek at the screen. Some loose strands of her hair brushed against my arm, and her scent drifted toward me.

Focus.

‘Oh, I have to make it worth your while.’ She smiled and reached over, pulled the brown paper bag to the edge of the counter, and opened it.

‘You didn’t...’

‘Do bribes work with you?’ She rummaged through it and pulled out a foil container.

I already knew what the contents were.

‘You’re not playing fair,’ I said, salivating.

‘These are the rules.’ She grinned.

She lifted the container and revealed two cream cheese iced cinnamon rolls inside.

I rubbed my palm over my face. My mind wasn’t in the right state to make this decision, but those cinnamon rolls were all I needed.

‘You still have one more section to read.’

Facts (Party 2):

- Party 2 likes his coffee black.
- He also likes to wear a lot of black (don’t buy him any other colour because even though the green T-shirt is organic cotton, and you bought it for his birthday, he will thank you then proceed to never wear it.)

‘Hey, I’ve worn the T-shirt,’ I exclaimed.

‘Don’t even try it. I’ve seen you since your birthday and it has never once made an appearance.’

‘You should come over more often then. I wear it here all the time.’ I winked.

She groaned.

‘You’re so easy to unnerve.’

- He will never admit it but Scarlet has him wrapped around her finger.

It was true and it made me smile.

‘I knew I’d get it right.’ She was chuffed with herself.

‘Do you really think you have much to gain from my experiences?’

She walked toward the cabinets and pointed to the one on her right. ‘This one?’ She pulled on the door handle before I replied, revealing the neatly stacked white plates. ‘I knew it.’

I laughed.

‘It’s the most logical place to put them.’ She pointed to the toaster and cutting board on the marble countertop below. She placed the two plates down beside the laptop. ‘And to answer your question, your experiences, and your male psyche, are the perfect combination for this task. You also stick to your rules.’

I quirked my brow in a silent question.

‘I know you have some kind of system. Scarlet said it’s like a well-oiled machine.’

‘Weird that the two of you spoke about this.’

‘We all talk about it behind your back,’ she said with a teasing smile.

‘Oh?’

‘Yeah, it would make such a cool app, managing and scheduling appointments. You could make a fortune.’

I chuckled. ‘No sleeping over and I don’t do consecutive days.’

‘You’ve never seen the same person two days in a row? Not even a long weekend?’

‘Nope.’

Her lips turned downward. Was she impressed?

‘What else?’ she asked eagerly.

‘If there’s someone else in your life—even partial interest—then things end.’

‘Even a crush?’

‘I don’t cheat; physically or emotionally.’

‘Good to know.’ She nodded.

‘And the deadline?’ I spun the laptop around to face her. ‘Why is it Savi and Ted’s wedding reception?’

‘Hopefully I’ll have learnt a thing or two by then. I want to show up at the wedding with someone, so I don’t have to deal with my family harassing me about my love life or setting me up on blind dates.’ She opened the container and the sweet scent of cinnamon and vanilla filled the space.

‘Easy?’ I licked my lips.

‘Yup.’

I exhaled. ‘How do you come up with these ideas?’ First the kiss at the expo, and now this. I would love to spend a day inside her head.

‘I lie awake and think of ways to torture you.’ She smiled.

‘We have vastly different definitions of torture.’

I enjoyed the way it made her cheeks flush. It was a great colour on her. As usual, she ignored my remarks.

‘You think this is a terrible idea?’ Her brow furrowed, and her shoulders slumped with defeat.

‘I don’t,’ I said, and ran a hand through my hair. ‘I think you could do it on your own.’

She pursed her lips and revealed those crescents in her cheeks. ‘Yes, but it’s obviously not going well if I’m here on my knees begging for your help.’

I smirked. ‘Now that is an image.’

She stepped up to the barstool and I watched as she manoeuvred her foot onto the footrest without any luck. The hem of her skirt was too restrictive.

‘May I?’ I asked and took a step closer. I reached out to place my hands on her waist. She was warm and soft, and my hands fit perfectly in the gentle curve in her waist.

She nodded, and I lifted her up onto the seat.

A sound escaped her, somewhere between a squeak and a scream. ‘Thank you.’

Everything about her drew me in; her scent, her voice, the look in her eyes. I needed to create some distance between us, but the quiet pleading look in her eyes had me agreeing to this plan before I thought it through. I reached out to grab two forks before I sat beside her and offered her one of the utensils. ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’

‘I’m the one who showed up here with the contract? It’s of my own volition.’ She placed a bun on each plate.

‘Okay.’

‘Okay? You’re in?’ Her face lit up.

‘On one condition.’

‘Which is?’

‘You call me Master Yoda.’

‘No way.’ She laughed and ran her finger over the trackpad to sign the document.

‘Pity,’ I said, a smile playing on my lips.

Signed on the 06th of October.

Party 1

Kalina Ray

I’d barely lifted my hand to sign when she broke a flaky piece of the warm pastry, and popped it into her mouth. She let out a little moan and I cleared my throat roughly. Was she trying to kill me?

‘Sorry. They’re so good. I mean, I can make them but no one does it like The Brewery.’

‘You’re going to make my training really hard,’ I groaned.

‘I could change the treats to something else? Carob buns? Add some protein powder to it?’ The crescents in her cheeks deepened.

‘Don’t you dare,’ I said and scribbled my signature on the screen.

Party 2

Titan Andersson

I grabbed the plate from her and held it above her head and way out of her reach. ‘Did you bring your lactase?’

She reached into her bag, took out a pill box, and gave it a little shake. ‘Happy?’

‘Very.’ I slid the plate back. ‘Am I the only one who cares about your health?’

She picked off another piece and grinned. ‘Yeah, pretty much.’

I pulled apart the outside layer; they were freshly baked every morning, and it took a lot of restraint on my end not to buy one on the daily.

‘What does Savi have to say about this?’ Kalina and Savi were joined at the hip, and nothing slipped past either of them.

‘She doesn’t know.’ She was mid-chew and her cheeks rounded with the pastry. It was adorable. ‘With the inn opening soon, being so very in love with Ted, and her morning sickness becoming day and night sickness, I don’t want to add to her plate.’

‘Always putting everyone else first.’

‘Maybe that’s the problem?’ she mused.

‘I doubt it. People love being put first.’

She had a little bit of cream cheese icing at the corner of her lips and I reached out to swipe it with my thumb, before absentmindedly putting it in my mouth.

Shit.

She gulped. ‘See? You do it so effortlessly and with so much confidence. All I’m thinking is how would I know if someone was going to freak out if I did that?’

I laughed nervously. ‘I didn’t know you wouldn’t, but I do know your boundaries.’

She sighed. ‘I don’t know how you’re going to teach me, but good luck.’ She hopped off the stool and grabbed her things,

popping her laptop back into her bag.

‘You’re welcome to stay. My day is wide open.’ I leaned against the backrest of the barstool.

‘I should get home and sleep since this kept me up all night.’ She grabbed her cup and tapped it against mine. ‘To a foolproof plan and an excellent execution, even though I have no clue where we’d begin.’

I wanted to see her in her element. ‘I think I know where to start.’

‘Are you going to tell me?’ she asked and bounced from one foot to the other.

I smiled. ‘Nope. I like watching you freak out.’

‘Sadist.’

‘Well, if you wanted those kinds of lessons you’d have to sign up to the premium plan.’

‘Ha-ha.’

We walked to the doorway, but she paused after slipping her coat on. ‘Thank you for not laughing at my contract and taking it seriously. I think it’s good we have rules and boundaries. It keeps things professional like a business deal.’

‘First lesson,’ I said, leaning over her until her back was pushed up against the door, ‘know your strengths.’ She swallowed as I lifted a hand and tapped her cheek with my finger.

‘My great organisation skills?’

‘You draw people in.’

‘Like a venus fly trap?’

I laughed. ‘We’re not murdering people.’

‘Yet. But, seriously, thank you for agreeing to this.’ She twisted her fingers together.

What I couldn’t tell her lingered in the air around us.

I would never say no to her.

Chapter 6

Act I, Scene VI: The Brewery, Hackney

Kalina

Dimples, I have an idea for our first lesson

18:40

What is it?

18:40

I don't want to give too much away, but meet me at The Brewery on Saturday morning

18:41

So vague

18:41

Patience

18:41

I have none

18:41

You will learn, young Padawan

18:41

We are not doing Star Wars references

18:41

Come on...you know you want to...

18:42

Never

18:42

I'll change your mind. 8am

18:42

Thank you and bye



I straightened my coat before I walked into The Brewery.

It was too early on a Saturday for it to be busy, but a few patrons were scattered around the tables. Titan was one of them, focused on his laptop toward the back.

He looked up as I stepped closer and his green gaze met mine.

‘Are we having a meeting?’ I asked.

‘Kind of.’ He gestured for me to sit.

I shrugged off my coat and he made no attempt to hide his gaze as it raked over my appearance.

‘Can I help you?’ I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

‘We’re going to be trialling some things today and I want to see you in your natural element.’ He nodded approvingly at my golden yellow slip dress. ‘This works.’

‘I asked for dating advice, not a fashion consultation.’ I tugged on the sleeve of my black turtleneck.

‘All part of the package, dimples. But I know you need no help in that department.’ He flashed a grin at me.

I fidgeted with the thin strap of the dress. ‘Dadi makes a lot of my clothes, so they always fit well and don’t have irritating seams.’

‘They do look like they were made for you. Always appreciated.’ His lips curled into a smile.

He never skipped a beat.

I harrumphed and sat down. ‘What did you mean by natural element?’

He pushed his laptop aside and crossed his forearms on the table. ‘I need a baseline, so I need to watch you work.’

I blinked rapidly. ‘I’m so confused. You’ve watched me work.

We've been working together.' Since Ted and Savi were now married, the Montagues and Rays did business together. With Titan being an honorary Montague, we'd never worked together before and now I couldn't seem to turn around without finding him in the hotel. He was one of the most in demand wedding photographers.

He let out a little laugh, and it made the corners of his eyes wrinkle. 'Not that kind of work. I want you to ask someone out.'

'What? While you sit there and watch me?' I shook my head.

'Kind of. Did you bring your earphones like I asked?'

I reached into the pocket of my dress and pulled out the little case.

'Put them in.'

'Am I going to listen to some motivational speech?' I adjusted them until they fit.

He gestured to my phone and I handed it over. 'No.'

I watched with apt fascination as he scrolled and tapped away on the screen.

'So...what am I waiting for?' I said after nothing but silence between us for a good minute.

He smiled then brought my phone closer to his face. 'Hello there.' His voice was clear in my ears, and sent a little shiver down my spine.

'Oh.'

'Is it too loud?' he whispered.

Somehow worse. 'It's fine.'

'Okay, you're going to get up and get coffee and two phone numbers.' He held up his fingers.

'What?' I widened my eyes.

'You need to practise, and I need to see it.'

My heart hammered in my chest. 'Do I have to?'

‘You don’t *have* to do anything. But you wanted my help, and this is part of the process.’

‘Fine,’ I huffed out.

‘I’ll be right here,’ he said and shot me his laser focused look.

I stood. ‘Do you want anything?’

He shook his head. ‘Nope. This is all about you—pretend I’m not even here.’

‘You’re literally in my head.’ I pointed to my ears.

He let out a chuckle. ‘Let your hair down.’

‘What? Why?’

‘It looks better down, and it’ll cover them.’

I pulled on my scrunchie and let my hair fall around my shoulders. ‘Is this okay?’

Titan nodded and his gaze travelled down my neck where the strands tickled my skin. ‘Yes, it’s good.’

‘Am I asking someone specific?’ I looked around the cafe. Other than the manager, the barista, two waiters, and three other people, the place was quite empty.

‘I’ll let you know.’

I gave him a curt nod. ‘Wish me luck.’

‘I don’t think you’ll need it, but good luck.’

With a deep breath, I gathered courage from somewhere deep inside of me and walked up to the counter. ‘Hi, can I get a chai latte, please? With almond milk.’

The assistant took my payment and called out my order to the barista.

‘Good going with the almond milk,’ Titan’s whisper broke through the light cafe chatter and the ambient music over the speakers.

I looked over my shoulder and he flashed me a wicked grin. I rolled my eyes in response and made it as dramatic as possible

so he'd see it from where he sat.

'Chai latte?' the barista called then placed the cup down in front of me. I'd seen him at the cafe, but we'd never spoken until now.

'With almond milk?'

'Yup,' he said. He had a kind smile. 'I remember your order.'

'Bingo. He's number one,' Titan said.

Too bad I couldn't shush him.

I spoke to the man in front of me instead. 'You do?'

'It's always almond milk, but you switch between a chai and a dirty chai.' The barista glanced upward and a small smile flashed across his face.

'Predictable I guess?' I placed the lid on the cup to give my hands something to do.

'Whatever you're doing, keep doing it. He seems to like it.' Titan sounded like he was enjoying this a little too much.

'Not at all,' the barista said. 'You seem sure of what you want. You know what you like.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that.' I reached up to touch my hair and tuck it behind my ear, remembered the earphones, then dropped my hand.

'Don't hesitate. Be sure in your answers,' Titan said, firmly.

I wanted to tell him his watching me was what made me nervous and unsure.

'I mean, yes. I know what I like.' My voice was a little louder than I'd anticipated.

The barista raised his eyebrows. 'Are you okay?'

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, chewing nervously on one end.

The barista's gaze dropped lower down on my face.

'That...also works.' Titan said.

I grabbed my cup and nodded at the man. ‘Thank you,’ I said before I hurried back to the table and left him no chance to respond.

Titan’s brows furrowed.

I sat in the seat I’d vacated not even ten minutes before, and with my cup set down on the table between us, I pushed my palms against my face.

‘That was—’

‘Terrible,’ I finished for Titan.

‘Not terrible. Not great, but not the worst,’ he said.

I lowered my hands to give him an incredulous look.

‘I can’t give you any feedback based on one encounter.’

I yanked out the earphones. ‘I’m not doing this again.’

‘You can’t give up after one encounter.’

‘Yes I can.’ I slunk lower in my seat hoping the ground would consume me.

‘Come with me,’ he said.



After a brief stop at Titan’s studio to deposit all our belongings, we took our takeaway cups and strolled down the street.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

‘Enjoy the journey.’ He looked straight ahead.

‘I can’t, not when I don’t know the destination.’

‘Do you ever...switch off?’ I didn’t need to see behind his sunglasses to know one brow was arched. I heard it in his tone.

I shook my head. ‘Never.’

‘I think the cafe wasn’t the best idea.’

‘Oh, you think?’ I replied, my tone laced with sarcasm.

He nudged me gently. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t realise it would be so overwhelming for you.’

We waited at a crossing, and I counted in my head until the little green man appeared. ‘I don’t like to feel unprepared.’

‘Which is what dating is.’ He took a sip of his coffee. ‘It’s all about the vibes. The feeling you get when you’re with someone.’

‘I realise this may come as a shock to you, but I am not a vibey person.’

He flashed me a cheeky smile. ‘Oh, come now, don’t be modest. All of this,’ he said, gesturing between us, ‘is what flirting is.’

I paused mid-step. ‘I am not flirting with you.’

He shrugged. ‘Toe-may-toe, toe-mah-toe.’

I laughed for the first time that day. He was always one step ahead of me. We walked a little further where we reached a beautiful, lush park. There were runners along the paths, children running away from parents on the wet grass, and a large pond right in the centre.

‘This place is beautiful.’

‘I like to come here and soak it all in. Plus, the ducks are adorable.’

I turned to face him as he looked out ahead. His relaxed shoulders and unclenched jaw told me this was his safe space.

I inhaled and exhaled a few times.

‘What’re you thinking?’ he asked. He’d pushed his sunglasses onto the top of his head, and his gaze softened as he waited for my response.

I looked up at him. ‘Sorry, this week was a nightmare. I think it’s spilling into my weekends and social meetings.’

He tipped his head in a silent gesture to continue.

I inhaled deeply, but didn’t say anything for a beat and started picking at the skin on the side of my thumb.

‘You can tell me anything. Or nothing. It’s entirely up to you.’

‘I’ve been wondering if taking on the management role was a good idea.’ I toed the ground with my boot. It was the first time I’d said this aloud to anyone. The fears of running my own department were culminating into self-doubt and criticism.

Titan shook his head. ‘I’ve worked with you. You’re one of the best managers out there.’

‘But not *the* best?’ I teased.

‘You’ll learn and grow.’ He smiled behind the rim of his cup.

I sighed. ‘I don’t want to disappoint Savi and my uncle. They’re both excited about me taking over. More than me.’ It didn’t help that with Savi’s difficult pregnancy, she came into the office less and less. But most days, we would at least have coffee and a vent session in the courtyard.

He levelled me with a look. ‘You think they would ever be anything but proud of you? They chose you for a reason, and it’s not nepotism. Well maybe not entirely.’

‘If this doesn’t work out, I’m going to blame you for peppering me up.’

He chuckled. ‘You’re welcome to, but if this does work out, dating and life coach has a nice ring to it.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Thank you for bringing me here.’ I needed it to clear my mind.

‘You’re always welcome. Ted and I come here sometimes to ground ourselves. It’s peaceful.’

Some ducks swam by and a child shrieked with delight as they tried to feed them some bread.

‘I’m going to relook at the plans I have for you.’

‘Today doesn’t count?’

‘Oh, dimples. It absolutely does. But we will adjust accordingly.’

‘Because I’m so bad at this?’

‘No, but there is room for improvement. Everyone has room for growth and change.’

‘I can’t wait for your next task.’ I beamed. Maybe this whole dating thing wouldn’t be so bad after all? How could it be when I had the best teacher.

The notifications on his phone went off incessantly. He peeked at his screen and his eyes went wide for a moment before he cleared his throat and locked it. He shook his head then looked at me again. ‘Um, yeah. We can chat next week.’

‘Are you okay? Do you need to leave?’ I enjoyed our little walk and talk.

‘No. We need to get your bag at the studio anyway.’ He placed a hand in his pocket and shuffled on his feet.

‘Come on, if you have work to do, I won’t keep you.’

‘Work. Yeah.’ He chuckled nervously.

‘Oh my God, do you have a date?’ The heat rose to my cheeks.

‘I don’t date, remember?’

Oh.

‘We can go, I have plans for the rest of my day anyway,’ I said.

Those plans involved me becoming one with my bed, and reading my latest historical romance. But, I wasn’t about to divulge those details to him.

We started our walk back to his studio and judging from the buzzing of his phone, I’d clearly chosen the right mentor.

Titan knew what he was doing.

Chapter 7

Act I, Scene VII: Night Out in London

Titan

‘**W**hat’s your idea of a perfect date?’ I shrugged my jacket on as I sat on the edge of the bed.

Hazel, the woman beside me, leaned up on her elbow, and drew her brows together. ‘A date?’

‘Not for us. It’s, uh, for a friend,’ I said, tripping over my words to explain myself.

She exhaled with relief and brought her hand up to her chest. ‘Oh, you could’ve led with that.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t know going on a date with me was such a terrifying ordeal.’ I grinned.

She swatted my arm playfully. ‘Not what I meant, and you know it.’

I did, but it was fun to watch her squirm. Our *arrangement* had served us both well for over a year. Neither of us wanted to change it.

I turned around to face her. ‘Spill.’

‘Ideal date?’ She laid back against her pillows, and stared up at the ceiling. ‘Is the date with someone I know? Or is it a blind date situation?’

‘Let’s say blind date.’

‘Easy. Somewhere in public, food and drinks are always a winner. The movies can be a little intimidating if it’s a complete stranger.’

‘Makes sense. We met at a party if I recall correctly,’ I said.

‘Yes, and I asked quite a few people about you before bringing you into my home.’ She laughed.

‘Wise choice.’

‘So, out in public and food. Oh, and extra points if it’s something involving an activity.’

I gave her a sly smile.

‘Wow, your mind is truly in the gutter.’ She shook her head. ‘There are many galleries or museums. Or, if they’re active like me, you could do rock climbing or something.’

I had a feeling Kalina would do really well at rock climbing. I’d seen her move a bride out of a red wine splash zone once. But she wouldn’t appreciate it as a test date.

‘Thank you,’ I said, then stood up. ‘Appreciate your advice, and I didn’t know you’re into activities.’

‘Because we don’t spend a whole lot of time talking.’ She shimmied further under her comforter. ‘Good luck with your *friend*.’

I rolled my eyes at her. ‘She really is a friend.’

‘Sure.’



I’d finally finished the mood board for the DB Diamond shoot, my edits were done, and this week had been a breeze compared to the last two. Scarlet and I had Friday night plans, but it was too early to head her way so I took a moment to breathe.

My phone rang, and without thinking, I answered before I checked the caller ID. ‘Hello.’

‘I wasn’t expecting you to pick up.’

I stiffened at the sound of my father’s voice on the other end. ‘Karl,’ I said and didn’t bother hiding the contempt in my voice.

He laughed. A deep, hoarse sound. ‘Are you ever going to call me *dad*?’

‘Are you ever going to act like one?’ I sat down on the edge of my desk, and let out a long exhale. This was not how I wanted to start my weekend. I should’ve known the peace was too good to be true.

‘You’re exactly like your mother. The same wit and cheek.’

‘You don’t get to talk about her like you cared.’

The line was silent for a few beats. ‘When are you going to forgive me?’

I scoffed. ‘You’ve never apologised. Throwing money at us doesn’t magically fix things.’

It was what he’d done with both Scarlet’s mother and mine.

‘I wanted to check on you.’ He tried sounding sincere and it fell flat.

I’d fallen for this side of my father before. It usually ended with me being the one to pick up the pieces.

‘We’re fine, and everything is good.’

‘Scarlet is meeting up with me soon, when I come to town, you should join.’ He spoke to someone in the background, already losing interest in this conversation.

Much like I was.

I bit my tongue. Arguing never resolved anything between us. ‘I’m quite busy with work, and Ted’s wedding is coming up—’

‘Be careful of the women.’ He interrupted. ‘Weddings bring out something wild in them.’

‘That’s a sexist thing to say.’

‘It’s the truth, son.’

I hated the link I had to this man.

‘Is there something else you wanted to say? I have somewhere to be.’

‘No, nothing else. Send Scarlet my love.’ I heard the grin in his voice. He knew he was getting to me.

And I always let him.

I hung up and tossed the phone on the desk. I pushed the heels of my hands into my eyes. If only I could erase the conversation from my mind. Every time I spoke to him it threw me off for days on end. Which wasn't fair to Scarlet, and I needed to get my shit together.

So much for a good week.

I flicked the lights off then locked up, before heading downstairs. I contemplated taking my bike but thought better of it. I wasn't in a good headspace to be riding.

A walk was what I needed. It gave me time to rationalise and compartmentalise my feelings towards Karl. So much so, I didn't realise I'd been outside the blue door for a few minutes. I shook myself from my reverie and rang the doorbell.

The sound of jangling keys came from the other end before the door swung open. My thoughts vanished as Kalina appeared on the other side wearing an all-black outfit.

'Who needs colour in their life now?' I asked, and my lips turned up.

She ran her palms down the front of her skirt, grazing the slit up her mid-thigh.

My gaze was glued to her fingers and the movements it made in the soft, shiny fabric.

'Scarlet chose it,' she hesitated.

I shook my head, to clear it of any more unruly thoughts. 'You look great. Black suits you.'

'Titan?' Scarlet called out. She popped up behind Kalina.

I was less impressed with her outfit. 'Are you going to wear a coat?'

'Yes, of course.' She rolled her eyes at me. 'I hope you don't mind; I invited Lina along. I couldn't have her staying in on a Friday night.'

Kalina looked between Scarlet and me. 'I understand if you want to spend quality sibling time together.'

‘You think you’re getting out of this? Scarlet and I need someone to keep us in check.’

‘He means he needs someone to make sure we’re not cheating at pool.’ Scarlet shook her head as if chastising me.

‘Me? I would never.’ I feigned innocence.

‘Let me get the coat you’re so worried about.’ Scarlet flicked her curls over her shoulder before heading down the passage to her bedroom.

‘I need to grab my bag,’ Kalina said. ‘You can come in.’

I followed her inside and stopped in the entryway beside her bedroom door.

There was a book on the shoe rack with a cover of a ship sailing over the ocean. The title, “Forever her pirate” piqued my interest.

Pink sticky tabs were inserted on random pages and I flipped through them to see what they’d highlighted. There was a rope, a bed, and a sharpened knife in one of the scenes and my eyes widened.

Kalina stepped out of her room, straightened the collar of her coat, and her gaze landed on the book in my hand.

Her face blanched. ‘Oh my God,’ she exclaimed and hurried over.

‘Dimples, you’re reading some deceptively saucy books.’ I held the book above my head and out of her reach. ‘I was getting to the good part, wait...’ I cleared my throat, held the book up, and read. ‘If he climbed onto the bed, she could offer to be on top... And if she was on top... She could easily stab him...’

‘It’s not what you think.’

‘How do you know what I’m thinking?’ I looked down at Kalina. Her pupils were wide and her full lips parted, letting out shallow breaths.

She crossed her arms over her chest, which only emphasised her rapid breaths. ‘I won’t let you make me feel bad about

what I like to read.’

I took a step back. ‘It wasn’t my intention.’

She tilted her head to the side and analysed me with keen interest.

‘Is this what you fantasise about?’ I asked. I couldn’t think about Kalina enjoying this, my body held on by a thread as it was, but I wanted to know what made her tick.

She shook her head, but her pink cheeks told me otherwise. ‘No.’

That was a lie.

‘Do you want me to continue?’ If she said yes, I’d cancel going out right then and there.

I’d need to figure out how to get Scarlet to disappear...

Her gaze darted between the book and me as if she were weighing the choice. Her chest moved with her shallow breaths, and her lips parted slightly. ‘I don’t know.’

At this moment, with her lips parted and her eyes wide, I didn’t care about the Agreement, or anything. I knew I wanted her. Logic and good decision making left my brain with every shallow breath she took.

‘You do. Say the words and I’ll keep going.’

‘I’m ready.’ Scarlet called out. I dropped the book on the table and Kalina stepped back.

Scarlet looked between us. ‘Everything okay? You both look a little ill.’

‘Nope, all good.’ Kalina nodded and grabbed her boots from the rack.

Scarlet shrugged. ‘Great. Let’s go.’



‘You’ve gotten really good.’ I leaned against the cue stick.

Scarlet took a shot. 'It's popular back home in Cape Town. Every night out included at least one game.' She pocketed the black ball.

The life of a student. I remember those days fondly.

I glared at some guys ogling her, when one of them walked over. I stepped between him and Scarlet and stared at him.

'Oh, sorry man. I didn't see you there.' He lifted his palms.

'Move along.' I tipped my head to the side.

When he was out of earshot, Scarlet narrowed her eyes at me. 'Why are you like this?'

'Like what?' Kalina asked as she returned from the bathroom.

'He's being intrusive and controlling,' Scarlet explained.

I racked up the balls for another game. 'You should focus on your studies.'

'Without any fun? Like you didn't whore your way around university.' Scarlet's face was quickly becoming her namesake.

'Hey, why don't you take a break, and I'll take over?' Kalina suggested.

She nodded then stalked off.

'What?' I shrugged at Kalina.

'Don't act innocent. How would you feel if your overprotective brother kept interfering with your dating life?'

'These guys are not looking to date.'

'Let her be a twenty-three-year-old.' Kalina grabbed Scarlet's abandoned cue stick and eyed it warily. It was the first time she'd spoken to me directly since the moment we'd shared earlier.

I'd thought about it all night.

'Let me get another one,' I said. I picked up one better suited to her height and swapped the sticks out.

‘You won’t always be around,’ she said when I returned.

‘It’s better to be safe than sorry.’

‘She knows how to take care of herself.’ Kalina looked up at me with a stern expression.

‘Are you scolding me?’

‘A little bit.’

It was adorable, but I tried to hide my smile.

‘It’s frustrating having someone make decisions on your behalf.’ She let out a breath, then leaned against the edge of the table.

I raked a hand through my hair. She made her point. ‘I hate acting like her dad, but he’s not really great to begin with so I always feel like I need to step in.’

Kalina reached out and placed her hand on my arm. The contact sent warmth through my body. ‘You’re a great brother. She knows you’ll do anything for her, and she also knows she can come to you if she needs to.’

I looked down at her hand, her nails were painted a maroon shade, and she rubbed her thumb in small up and down motions.

I wanted to reach out and touch more of her.

Have her touch more of me.

She cleared her throat and pulled her hand away before my thought could be actioned. ‘I think you need to give her some space, then you can apologise.’

‘Are you telling me what to do?’ I leaned against the side of the table.

‘You coach me in dating, and I coach you in being a great brother.’

‘Because you have so much experience in that department?’ I teased.

‘I’ll have you know I am an excellent surrogate sibling.’ She grinned until her dimples were on full display.

She knew how to get her way with me.

‘Now, can you teach me how to play? I don’t know what I’m doing.’ She laughed and it lit up her entire face.

‘Of course. I’ll be your Jedi Master.’

‘No.’

I laughed then talked her through the rules.

And that was how I’d taught her to beat me at my own game.

When we were done, and Kalina decided it was enough time for Scarlet to have cleared her head, we walked through the bar until we found her, sulking in a corner.

‘I’ll wait outside,’ Kalina said.

‘Thanks.’ When she was gone, I sat next to Scarlet.

‘I’m sorry about the way I reacted. I spoke to Karl earlier.’

Her head shot up. ‘Oh?’

‘Yeah. I thought I could ignore it, but seeing you and seeing men with you, it—’ I ran a palm over my face.

‘I know. But I’ve told you not everyone is like him.’

‘I’ve missed out on so many years with you. You’re still a baby in my head.’

She laughed while nudging my side. ‘I get it, but you need to know I’ve lived a life. Before coming here, before being around you. I’ve made some bad decisions but also some good ones.’

I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kissed her head. ‘I’m proud of you. You’re amazing.’

‘Eww don’t be gross,’ she said, but she leaned into my embrace.

‘I’m sorry.’

She nodded. ‘Thanks. You’re almost forgiven.’

I knew what would tip the scale in my favour. ‘Want ice-cream?’

‘You don’t have to ask me twice,’ she exclaimed then jumped out of her seat.

Seemed like I was off the hook.

We walked outside and met up with Kalina.

She lifted her gaze from her phone. ‘All good?’

‘Yup. We’re getting ice-cream,’ Scarlet sang and did a little twirl.

‘Yum.’ Kalina smiled.

‘Lactase?’ I asked, and quirked a brow at her.

‘Such a worry wart.’ Kalina reached into her bag and brought out the little plastic container. ‘We just ate pizza, and you didn’t ask me then.’

‘Now that you mention it, take extra.’

She let out a hearty laugh. ‘Not how it works.’

‘You like cheese, like an alarming amount for someone who is lactose intolerant.’

‘Cheese is life.’ Kalina popped one of the chewable tablets into her mouth.

‘Come on you two, let’s go,’ Scarlet called over her shoulder. She’d hurried ahead of us.

The market a few streets away bustled as we approached.

Live music came from inside the old warehouse, where vendors were arranged around the outside, tables and chairs in the middle, and the band closer toward the front.

I spotted the pastel blue and pink stand and placed a hand on Kalina’s waist as I guided her through the crowd. She moved closer to my side and I caught her scent; sweet and aromatic.

Scarlet stood in the queue as she’d rushed ahead and ogled the menu. ‘There’s so many flavours to choose from,’ she said.

Kalina looked like a kid in a candy store with her grin, and wide eyes surveying the tags ‘The rosewater and saffron sounds amazing.’

‘Cone?’ I asked.

She nodded enthusiastically.

‘Okay, one rosewater and saffron with a cone,’ I said to the assistant. ‘And one lemon cheesecake.’

‘Lemon?’ Kalina and Scarlet asked in unison.

‘Yes? Why are you both looking at me like that?’

‘Because that’s not a fun ice cream flavour,’ Scarlet said. ‘Can I have the double chocolate please, in a tub?’

‘You don’t have a sophisticated palate.’

Scarlet grimaced.

‘Would you like the lemon cheesecake in a cone or tub?’ the assistant asked.

‘A cone please.’

Kalina shook her head. ‘You can have any dairy dessert and that’s the one you choose?’

‘Wait and see. I’ll prove you both wrong.’

The music picked up and Scarlet turned to what was a makeshift dance floor. ‘Will you keep my ice cream safe? I’ll be right back,’ she asked Kalina.

‘Of course.’

Scarlet was gone before I paid.

‘Can I cover this? Since you got the pizza?’

I tapped my card. ‘No.’

Kalina huffed out a breath. ‘Thanks.’

I laughed. ‘Enjoy it. Want to sit?’ I tipped my head toward the seating area.

Kalina nodded.

We found an empty table in the middle while Scarlet had gotten swallowed up in the dancing crowd.

Kalina sat on the seat beside me and placed Scarlet’s tub in the middle of the table. ‘Hopefully, she’ll come back before

it's a mini milkshake.'

'Knowing her, I doubt it,' I said.

We ate our ice cream in comfortable silence for a little while, and watched the people dancing and the families enjoying a night out.

'Thanks for letting me hang out with the two of you tonight,' Kalina said. She gave her ice cream a lick. 'Is this what it feels like to have a kid?' She laughed as she looked over at Scarlet who'd made an appearance between a group of strangers.

'A fully grown teenager? Probably.'

'The closest I'll get to being a mum I guess,' she said nonchalantly before she swiped another lick of ice cream.

I tilted my head in silent question.

'Oh,' she said. Her eyes widened and she lifted her hand to her mouth as she swallowed. 'I don't want kids.'

I turned to face her. 'Interesting. You seem like such a mum.'

She took a deep breath before the words tumbled from her mouth. 'My mother never wanted kids and she's never been in my life because of it. I don't want anyone to ever feel like I did.' She continued to stare ahead, but her shoulders slumped.

'I'm sorry.' I didn't want to push her, but wanted her to know she could talk to me.

'It's okay. I've come to terms with it. I mean, it's not the only reason, but it's the biggest.'

I nodded in agreement. 'I've never really thought about it, but I don't see myself having kids either. Not when my longest relationship was a month long.'

'A record for you,' Kalina teased.

'It was over fifteen years ago.'

She laughed. 'What? Nothing longer than a month since then?'

I shook my head. 'Not necessary. I get what I need without it.'

Her face flushed red.

‘For what it’s worth, you’re the most caring person I know and not wanting kids doesn’t diminish that. You should do what is best for you.’

‘If I knew I’d be doing it.’ A choked laugh escaped her.

‘You’d never guess. You’re so put together you make others feel inadequate.’

She smiled at the compliment and those sweet half-moons in her cheeks made an appearance. ‘We’ll always have Scarlet, so neither of us need to feel like we’re missing out.’

And just like that, we’d silently agreed to co-parent my adult sister. Seeing Scarlet and Kalina’s relationship and friendship blossom over the past few months was great, even when they used it to gang up on me.

‘She misses her mom. It’s hard for her being so far away from her mom after it was just the two of them all these years,’ I said.

Kalina frowned. ‘I know. I’ve spoken to her a few times. She’s a wonderful woman.’

‘Oh, she’s the greatest. Practically a second mother to me. She was really supportive after my mom passed.’

Kalina raised her gaze to meet mine. ‘I’m so sorry.’

I nodded. ‘Thanks. It was over fifteen years ago, but having Scarlet and her mom around has been helpful.’

We stared out into the crowd and watched Scarlet laugh and dance with strangers.

I broke the silence. ‘Do you want to try the lemon cheesecake? I think you’d like it.’

Kalina eyed the ice cream suspiciously. ‘Fine, but don’t feel bad if I gag.’

I stifled a laugh at the responses popping up in my head. ‘I won’t. Promise.’

She wrapped her hand around mine and pulled the cone closer before giving it a small lick. I didn't expect the action to make me feel so...excited. I needed to clear my head.

'Oh,' she said, surprised. Tasting a little more.

I looked away; it was borderline perverted.

'You do have good taste.'

My gaze found hers again. 'Told you. I knew you'd like it.'

'Want to try this? It's delicious.' She held out her cone, the ice cream dripping onto her fingers.

I wanted to try the ice cream, but I wanted to try something else first. I took her hand in mine, like she'd done, and pulled it closer. With my gaze on hers, I put my lips against the spot where the cone met her fingers and sucked.

She inhaled sharply, but didn't move away.

The rich aromatic flavours swirled around my mouth. 'This really is good.'

Her face was bright red and she pursed her full lips.

I had no idea what was going through her head, but I wanted to know if she enjoyed it as much as I did.

'Hey it's all melted,' Scarlet said as she interrupted us.

A mixture of irritation and relief flooded through me.

Kalina cleared her throat and sat back.

Maybe I'd overstepped. Scarlet was ready to go home after she finished her now-liquid ice cream, and I needed to do something with all of this...energy.

Scarlet gave me a quick hug as we reached their house then bolted inside.

'Did you have a good time?' I asked Kalina.

She stood on the steps, digging her nail into the side of her finger, as she opened and closed her mouth. 'Yes.'

'Me too.'

‘Does tonight count as practice?’ She tilted her head to the side.

The things I wanted to practise with her were not part of our Agreement.

I shook my head. ‘It was a good way to get you to feel comfortable, but no. Not a lesson.’

She considered me for a moment then shook her head as if she were stopping herself from saying something.

‘Night, dimples.’ I nodded once.

She smiled until the divots deepened in her cheeks. ‘Night.’

As soon as she shut the door I scrolled through my contacts and texted one of the women I hadn’t seen in a while. She didn’t like to talk—which was what I needed tonight. I didn’t want to talk or think. I needed to get rid of these feelings. It wasn’t appropriate and it wasn’t what Kalina had signed up for. Literally.

As soon as she’d opened the door it was a frenzy of rough kisses, clothes being yanked off, and climaxes that came hard and fast for both of us.

I went through my usual routine; getting dressed, home, and showered.

Eventually my mind was quiet enough for me to fall asleep.

But my subconscious had other plans when I dreamt about Kalina. Her lips on mine and my hands on her body.

Chapter 8

Act I, Scene VIII: Cambio Clay, London

Kalina

I nstead of focusing on all my new responsibilities at work and planning Ted and Savi's fast-approaching wedding, my mind dedicated all its energy into the lessons with Titan.

After our night out together, I wanted to message him about the next step in his plans, but what if he decided I was a lost cause and he didn't know how to break it to me?

I replayed the night in my head countless times, and I wondered what would've happened if I'd reacted differently. Were his actions a test I'd failed? Should I have reciprocated or mirrored it?

Enough was enough.

I whipped my phone out and texted him.

Hi. What's next on the agenda? Or are we
done?

10:44

Hello...done? We've only had one session.
Barely, more of a consultation.

10:45

Exactly. You didn't say anything after the
coffee shop. Or Friday night

10:45

Friday night?

10:45

Pool, ice cream, crowds of people,
licking? Any of this ringing a bell?

10:46

Going to come back to the licking comment,
but that wasn't a session, dimples

10:46

I clearly wasn't getting any better at
this.

This is why I needed your help. I thought
it was you showing me how to be flirty

10:46

...

10:46

...

10:47

...

10:48

Titan, what are you doing?

10:48

Sorry. Yes, new session. Tonight at 7

10:48

He wanted to kill me; I was sure of it.

Tonight? Why aren't you giving me time to
prepare?

10:49

You need to be yourself. I'll pick you up

10:49

Not on your death bike. What must I wear?

10:49

Titan!

10:52

I will leave you out in the cold and not
open the door

10:58

We need to work on your pre-date etiquette for sure ha-ha. Relax, I was talking to a client. Wear something comfortable.

10:59

If I didn't ace this dating thing by the end of tonight, then he was going to find himself on the receiving end of a very bad Google review.



Titan arrived precisely at seven p.m.

And I wasn't ready when he showed up. I tugged on the hem of my dress as I yanked open the front door.

'I'll be done soon. I can't believe I'm late. I'm so sorry, I'm never late. I need to find my jacket. Although, seeing you now, I'm rethinking it.'

From the black leather jacket to his dark blue jeans and black boots; he looked like he'd stepped out of some biker magazine.

'Breathe, we're not in a rush.' He levelled me with a focused stare.

I couldn't meet his gaze and looked at the helmet in his hand instead. 'Didn't we say no to the bike?'

'I had to get here, but one day you're going to beg me for a ride.' His cheeky grin appeared.

'Never going to happen.'

His grin spread wider. 'Don't knock it till you've tried it, dimples.'

My stomach flipped and a heat travelled down my body. I cleared my throat and shook my head. I walked to my bedroom and grabbed my coat and bag from my bed. Titan always teased me about his bike and this was like any of those times.

‘I’m not sure about your cream-coloured dress for tonight,’ he called out from the entryway.

I rushed to my open door and whipped my head around the frame. ‘What do you mean? You didn’t say anything about a colour scheme. You said comfortable.’

His laughter shook his shoulders and chest. ‘It’s fine. We can make it work.’

‘Tell me now. I can change.’

‘No. I want you to feel as comfortable and confident as possible, and if that’s the dress you chose, then leave it on.’

I brushed a palm down the front of the soft knit fabric. ‘It’s like wearing a blanket,’ I said, to myself.

His gaze followed the movement. ‘Leave the dress on.’

I swallowed hard at his tone. ‘Okay.’

Something lingered in his gaze; was it fascination? Confusion?

‘Shall we?’ He swept his arm out in front of him.

‘If only you’d tell me where we’re going.’ I shrugged on my coat and pulled on my boots.

‘Not a chance.’ He held the door open with his arm. ‘Is Scarlet here?’

‘No, she went out with some friends.’ I followed his gaze down the passage.

He opened his mouth, but seemed to think better of it.

‘She’s safe. She messages me whenever they stop somewhere and when she’s on her way home.’ I buttoned my coat as the cold evening air seeped into all the open spaces around my body.

‘Okay.’

‘Okay? That’s it?’ It wasn’t like Titan to be so accepting.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘What do you want me to say?’

‘I thought there’d be more pushback.’

‘You made me rethink my reactions. After our chat on Friday.’ He put his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

‘You’re taking advice from *me*?’ I shut the door behind us.

‘Don’t get ahead of yourself.’ His tone was flat but his lips tugged up on one end.

‘You think I have good ideas,’ I sang, and skipped along the pavement.

‘You’re going the wrong way,’ he called out.

I backtracked towards him. ‘Wouldn’t be a problem if you told me where we’re going.’

‘Let me show you.’

He led the way as we walked to the tube.

I tried, and failed, to guess our destination. ‘Movies?’

‘No.’

‘Dinner?’

‘Kind of.’

‘I’m out of ideas.’

He shook his head. ‘Good. Enjoy the journey.’

‘You know I can’t.’

He smiled. ‘Do you want me to distract you?’

‘Sure.’

He pulled his phone from his pocket and showed me an email from Mae Dubois. I’d been to her stores, seen the campaigns, and her work was breathtaking.

‘This is so exciting.’ I handed the phone back.

‘It’s pretty exciting and I finally figured out what I want to do for the photo-shoot.’

‘Are you going to tell me?’

‘Uh... How do you feel about being photographed?’

I shook my head almost as soon as he’d asked. ‘Nope.’

‘You don’t even know what the idea is? Are you going to think about it?’

‘There’s nothing to think about. It would make me feel so uncomfortable, all the people, the lights. No.’ The thought of being in a room while everyone’s focus was on me made me shiver.

‘If it were just me?’

I chewed on my bottom lip. ‘Just you?’

He nodded. ‘Work for me and a lesson for you.’

‘Okay.’ We were friends? I could be professional. Besides, we hung out all the time now. It’d be so normal.

‘*Okay? That’s it?*’ he teased.

‘Don’t make me change my mind.’

We got off at our stop and walked about halfway up the street.

‘We’re here,’ he said.

We’d stopped outside a building with a bright pink neon sign that said *Cambio Clay*.

‘Clay modelling?’

‘Painting.’

‘Interesting.’ I peeked through the window at the people chatting to each other while they were bent over their table with brushes in hand. ‘You’re relaxed when you’re busy with something and this is a fun activity to give you a buffer between conversations.’

How’d he figure out something like this? ‘You got all that from the coffee shop lesson?’

‘I got all of that from being around you.’

How...sweet. ‘Oh, thank you.’

‘You’re welcome, now let’s get inspired before my fingers freeze and I can’t paint.’ He opened the door and ushered me inside where warmth washed over us.

It wasn't overly crowded or too noisy. The room was well-lit, and the organised shelves against the walls made me want to do a happy dance.

'Hi there, welcome to Cambio Clay. Do you have a reservation?' the hostess asked.

'Yes, it's under "dimples".' Titan couldn't contain his smile.

'I can't believe you,' I mumbled.

The hostess let out a little laugh. 'Right this way.'

I glared at Titan as she led us to a table near the back.

'You know you want to.' He reached out and brushed my cheek with his knuckle.

'No.' I pursed my lips to stop myself from smiling and revealing my dimples, but my stomach fluttered at his touch.

'It's still showing.'

'You are the worst,' I said through gritted teeth.

'Your waiter will be with you in a moment. Feel free to look around,' the hostess said then left.

'You're a menace in public.' I placed my coat over the back of my chair.

He pursed his lips. 'You haven't experienced me in private.'

'Exactly what I'm talking about.'

'I only do it to get a rise out of you.' His smile was saccharine.

Our waitress walked up to the table and introduced herself. 'Have either of you been here before?'

I shook my head.

'Nope,' Titan said.

'Let me walk you through it.' She showed us the shelves and explained the process to us, how we could choose an item, pick paint colours, and there would be menus on the table for us to order food and drinks. 'I'll come by the table once you've chosen something to take your order.'

She left us to mill around the infinite shelves.

‘I thought this was something you’d done before?’ I asked Titan.

‘No, I’m a clay painting virgin.’ The twinkle in his eye told me he held back with his reply.

‘Going to ignore that. I don’t know what to choose.’ The items ranged from small teacups to large platters.

‘Pick something for me, and I’ll do the same for you. Less pressure on the choosing and painting.’

‘Less pressure? It’s so much worse.’ I chewed the corner of my lip.

‘I’ll like anything you make.’

I chose a travel tumbler. ‘For your coffee. Better for the planet.’

Titan chose a serving dish. ‘You can think of me every time you use it.’

‘I’m going to paint this pink.’

‘I’ll love it even more,’ he gushed.

We walked to the next shelves to pick paint—I chose yellow and white instead of pink—before heading to our table.

‘What made you choose this place?’ I asked.

He hesitated for a moment before answering me. ‘I asked around, and this seemed like something you’d enjoy. It was this or an escape room.’

‘Good choice. Confined and locked spaces don’t sound like a good idea for a date.’

‘You’re making this far too easy.’ He smirked.

‘Your mind is filthy.’

He laughed and pulled out my seat at our table. ‘You don’t even want to know what it’s like up here.’ He tapped his temple.

I didn't say out loud how fascinated I was by it. Maybe being inside his head was what I needed to get better at this dating thing? It clearly worked for him.

We ordered a platter of snacks to share—after I'd proven to Titan I did indeed have my lactase on me—then started painting.

The waitress assured me the paint would wash out if I spilled any but was kind enough to offer me an apron.

I sketched sunflowers with a pencil before going in with the paint.

'Would this fall under date etiquette in the Agreement?' I asked.

'I'm still trying to find a baseline.' He picked up two different pots of green paint, mentally weighing the options before choosing the deeper shade. It was the one I'd have chosen. 'But, from the time we've spent together, I can't pinpoint what the issue is and why you need these lessons in the first place.'

'Makes two of us.'

He paused mid brushstroke. 'Tell me what a typical date looks like to you.'

I thought about it while he continued painting, giving me a moment where I wasn't being scrutinised by his gaze. 'It usually starts well. The guys seem interested initially, then it's downhill from there. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. Maybe I talk too much? Or ask the wrong questions. I rarely, if ever, get asked on a second date.'

He shook his head in disbelief. 'Can't be.'

'It's true. I've misread people's cues before too. I do it with you all the time.'

He paused. 'You do?'

'Yes, the cream cheese frosting, the melting ice cream. I don't know how to act around food apparently.'

He let out a laugh that shook his shoulders. 'You're fine.'

As if on cue, the snacks and drinks arrived, but I was too invested in the painting.

Titan dipped a strawberry in some chocolate and held it out to me.

I shook my head. I didn't want to recreate the same scenarios. 'No way.'

'Stop overthinking it. If anything, you can use it to your advantage.'

'Are you Lady and the Tramping me?' I leaned forward and wrapped my lips around the strawberry, intentionally brushing them against his fingers as I took a bite.

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat.

He said one thing, but did another. Maybe he was trying not to hurt my feelings.

'Your turn,' he said.

'What?'

'You try it now.' He rested his chin on his fist.

I set down the tumbler and wiped my hands on the front of the apron. I mirrored his actions; picking up a strawberry, dipping it in the chocolate, then leaned over the table to offer it to him.

His gaze didn't leave mine as he leaned forward and took a bite.

My gaze was glued to the way his lips curved at the edges, like he was trying not to smile. The way those lips brushed my fingers, and the feeling it sent down low in my belly.

'Happy?' I sat back.

'Extremely.'

I didn't look at him again as I tried my best to focus on my hands and the lines I painted. I had to redo them thrice.

When we'd finished, the waitress came around to explain what happened next. 'You'll leave your items to be glazed and fired, then we'll let you know when you can collect it.'

‘It’s so pretty,’ I said, and leaned over to get a better look at the monstera leaves Titan had painted. ‘You’re quite talented.’

‘You sound surprised?’

‘Not what I meant.’ I shook my head.

‘I know. I’m teasing you.’

Warmth crept into my cheeks. He knew how to rile me up and did it at every opportunity, but I didn’t hate it.

‘Would you like a photo with your work?’ the waitress asked.

Titan looked at me.

‘Yes.’ I admired the sunflowers on the side of the tumbler. The mixture of yellow and green was striking.

He handed his phone to her and she snapped a shot of us holding our pieces proudly.

‘You two are such a cute couple.’

‘I...uh...’

‘We’re...’ Titan stammered.

‘Not a couple,’ I finished.

‘Oh, so sorry.’

‘No need to apologise, it’s not the worst assumption,’ Titan said.

My face would remain red if he kept this up.

The waitress awkwardly stretched out the bill, moving from Titan to me and back to Titan. He grabbed it before she could swing it my way again.

‘I thought it was my turn?’

‘This was my idea.’ He reached for his card.

‘The Agreement was mine and you already pay for Scarlet’s half of the rent even though I told you it’s no’

‘Okay, next time.’ He smiled.

The Tube-ride and walk back to my house was silent, and our breaths came out in little puffs in front of us.

‘Thank you for tonight,’ I said as we reached the steps outside my door.

‘It’s my pleasure.’

I let him in to grab his helmet.

‘I had a really nice time.’ I fidgeted with my keys.

‘Me too.’

‘Do you think the lessons are working?’

Titan ran a hand through his hair before letting out an exhale. The movement had done nothing to disrupt his perfectly styled golden locks. They bounced back right back into place.

‘It’s that bad?’

‘Kalina, I told you; I don’t think you need my help. You’re accomplished, you’re pretty, and you’re fun to be around.’

My cheeks heated and I looked down at my boots. ‘Thank you. Still doesn’t explain why I’m single.’

‘I don’t have an answer either.’

‘Reassuring.’ I met his gaze.

‘I’m not giving up on it. Now get some sleep. There are wedding events this week and I still have some lessons planned.’

‘And the photo-shoot?’

‘I’ll tell you about it closer to the time so you don’t freak out in advance.’ He turned to leave.

‘I’m still going to freak out,’ I called after him.

‘Goodnight, dimples,’ he said over his shoulder.

‘Night, Titan.’

He didn’t need to know I did the complete opposite of going to bed, and got comfortable under the covers with a book instead. It was a new romance novel I’d been dying to finish,

but once Scarlet came home it took me no time at all to fall asleep.

The plot continued in my dreams, and was so vivid and intense, it felt real. I found myself in the role of the main character—light blue regency dress included.

Albert, the love interest, had kissed the main character in the chapter I'd been reading, and they were in a deserted meadow lying in the grass. Now, he was kissing me. His lips met the skin along my collarbone and down the front of the thin chiffon fabric. This was probably not how the book was progressing in real life, but I wasn't complaining as he pushed the hem of my dress up and kissed his way up my legs, between my thighs, then he licked me, long and slow, making me moan. My body responded to his touch, my breaths came out in shallow bursts as he savoured my skin, my warmth and my taste with his tongue. I squeezed his shoulder and he leaned up over me, gazing into my face.

'Albert...' I murmured. In my dream, and possibly out loud in my half-asleep state.

Only it wasn't Albert.

It was Titan.

I woke up with a start, my hair matted and my skin slick with sweat. I shook my head and tried slowing my racing heart.

I laid back against the sheets, unable to fall asleep again.

Chapter 9

Act II, Scene I: Sweet Nothings, London

Kalina

The hand-painted storefront of Sweet Nothings was white with green and purple finishes. A little bell rang out as Savi, Ted, and I stepped through the door. The scent of cinnamon and spun sugar enveloped us.

It was heavenly.

‘Argh, Lina, this place is lovely.’ Savi said, her arm draped over Ted’s forearm. She’d been feeling so down and out with her morning sickness, but didn’t hesitate when I told her cake tasting was next on my list.

Apparently, all this baby wanted was cake.

A woman, who I presumed was Maya, approached us.

‘Hi, welcome, sorry the appointment is so early. We wanted to give you our full attention before things got too chaotic. I’m Maya,’ she said as she shook our hands. ‘You must be Kalina.’

‘Yes, and this is the bride, Savi and the groom, Ted.’

‘Perfect, just the three of you?’

‘Yes.’

‘No,’ Ted replied at the same time. He spoke to Maya. ‘We’re waiting for someone.’

‘Here he is,’ Savi said after the bell tinkled above the door.

We turned as Titan walked in, wearing a forest green button-down shirt and dark blue jeans moulded to his thighs.

‘Oh.’ I’d forgotten he was joining us. Any other day would’ve been fine, but after my dream last night, my face flushed with heat at the thoughts my mind recalled. The way his lips had touched parts of my body no one else had. His whispers of encouragement.

He greeted me last, and bent close to my ear. ‘Careful dimples, your face is giving you away,’ he whispered.

No. He couldn’t possibly know what I was thinking?

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he said to everyone else. He was exactly on time for the appointment.

‘Please have a seat anywhere you’d like,’ Maya said with a sweep of her arm across the empty cafe. ‘I’ll be with you in five.’ She disappeared behind the counter and through an archway.

Savi and Ted fawned over the cakes on display while Titan stood beside me with his arms crossed over his chest. To anyone, it would seem like he was closing himself off, but I knew he found the position most comfortable.

‘Is everything okay?’ He tilted his head slightly.

‘Yes. Why?’ I pretended to be interested in the cakes on display, but it took me three tries to read the label of the vanilla bean dulce de leche cake.

‘You haven’t looked at me once.’

I looked at him then to prove a point. A terrible idea when a shiver spread through my body and landed in my core.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘No.’

‘Your face says otherwise.’

‘Stop looking at my face.’ I turned away.

‘Where else would I look?’ He laughed.

‘Lina,’ Maya called as she walked toward us, ‘we can start with the more traditional flavours you requested, then I’ll bring out the others so you can have a moment to savour everything and discuss amongst yourselves.’

‘Thanks, Maya, sounds great.’

She nodded once then went back through the archway.

Titan’s gaze raked over my face like he was running a diagnostic.

‘I’m fine.’ I spun on my heel and stalked to the table Savi and Ted had chosen.

Titan caught up in no time and sat beside me.

Maya returned, placed the slices in front of us, and gave us a rundown of each flavour. From the fresh and zesty lemon to the rich red velvet and the chocolate mocha.

I was ready to melt into my seat and never leave.

Titan’s arm rested over the back of my seat and his knee brushed my thigh beneath the table. It sent a jolt of electricity through my body and I flinched.

‘Lina, are you okay?’ Savi asked.

‘Mmm hmm. Yeah. Sorry Maya, you were saying?’

‘Although the cakes look quite vibrant, we can stick to the more traditional and classic decorations for the outside, as discussed,’ Maya said.

I nodded but my mind only thought about the closeness of Titan’s leg to mine.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ Maya said, excusing herself.

‘Where to start?’ Savi eyed the cakes with excitement. She dug into the chocolate slice.

We followed suit, and swiped a bite of each cake.

‘The chocolate, right? Hands down,’ I said.

‘I kind of prefer the lemon,’ Titan said with a shrug.

‘That’s blasphemy. Who doesn’t love chocolate?’ Savi exclaimed.

‘The lemon is sweet with a slight zing.’ He looked at me. ‘Kind of like you.’

‘Are you comparing me to a sour fruit?’ I asked.

‘I like the lemon one too,’ Ted said, as he tried to save his best friend.

‘I don’t trust either of you. Chocolate is always a win,’ Savi said.

‘The bride has spoken.’ Titan lifted his hands up in defeat.

Maya came out with three new slices, which gave me a chance to ignore Titan’s arm pressed against mine on the tabletop. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up and I watched the muscle beneath his skin flex as he shifted.

‘Sorry Maya, could I have a glass of water please?’

When I looked up, Titan’s mouth twitched at the corners, like he’d seen me checking him out.

‘Of course, I’ll get some for the table. The sugar can be overwhelming. The rundown for these are; vanilla creme brulee, rose petal, and a lavender with honey. Shout if you need me, I don’t want to hover too much.’

‘You’re amazing Maya, don’t worry about it,’ Savi said.

Savi and Ted tried bites of the next batch while I tried not to think about Titan’s hands on me.

‘The rose is lovely but I don’t think it’s for everyone,’ Ted said. He wrapped an arm around the back of Savi’s chair and leaned close to whisper something in her ear.

She giggled behind her hand.

It was always endearing to be in their company. The love they shared was so visible and easy between them.

It was why I wanted this Agreement to work. I wanted what they had.

Titan dipped his fork into the creme brulee slice, and I swiped a piece from the other end.

We both looked at each other as soon as the cake reached our mouths.

‘I take it back about the chocolate. This has to be the one.’

‘Agreed,’ Titan said with an enthusiastic nod.

‘The cake has two layers, so you can choose two flavours. But, if it were me, it’d only be this one.’ I stole another bite.

Savi and Ted tried the cake then sighed in unison.

‘A winner,’ Savi said.

Ted nodded in agreement.

‘I think I know which one it’s going to be?’ Maya said. She’d returned with the bottles of water for the table.

‘I *need* to know what’s in it,’ I all but begged her.

She laughed. ‘You’re not the first person to be obsessed with it. It’s a white butter cake with vanilla bean pastry creme between the layers and covered in a caramel buttercream.’

‘I would die for this cake,’ I said rather dramatically.

‘I think we know what the answer is then,’ Titan said. He reached up and swiped my bottom lip with his thumb before placing it between his lips. ‘Delicious choice,’ he said and winked.

Heat rushed from my abdomen and pooled between my thighs. This had to be the dream? It sent my mind and body into overdrive.

‘I’ll get the order sheet so we can finalise the details then,’ Maya said to Savi and Ted.

‘What on earth is going on with you two?’ Savi asked.

Maya had left the table and her tone broke me from my reverie.

‘What do you mean?’ I had to work on keeping my voice calm.

It was pointless when it came to Savi. She always knew how I felt.

‘You’ve been acting...weird.’ Savi narrowed her eyes at me.

‘Not sure what you mean.’ I grabbed a bottle of water and drank from it to give me something to do.

I was grateful when Maya returned. Their focus was redirected. At least, Savi and Ted’s were.

Titan leaned back in his seat and stared at me.

‘What?’

He tipped his head in Savi’s direction as if asking why I wasn’t telling her.

‘I think you can finish up here.’ I stood and pushed my seat back. ‘I have to get to work.’

‘I can take you.’ Titan offered.

‘No, it’s okay.’ The mere thought of being alone with him right now made me want to break out in a sweat. I couldn’t be around him.

‘Kalina,’ he said, his tone filled with warning.

‘Fine.’ There was no point in arguing with him.

‘Chat later.’ Savi called as we left the bakery.

I took quick steps to stay ahead of him.

It became apparent he didn’t need much energy or exertion to keep up.

‘Are you okay? You seem angry.’

‘I’m not angry. I have a lot on my mind,’ I said and focused in front of me.

‘Want to talk about it?’ I hated how easy it was for him to keep in step with me.

‘Not really.’ I sped up.

‘Okay, we can just walk then.’

The silence between us was not uncomfortable, but it was large. Spanning the entire walk and tube ride.

I was too embarrassed to tell Savi about the Agreement, but she was the only other person I could talk to. I’d really put myself in such a weird predicament.

As we stepped out of the Tube, a woman with beautiful brown skin and deep brown eyes stepped into our path.

‘Titan?’ she said, with a beatific smile.

‘Hazel,’ he replied. She reached out to hug him and the way their bodies fit flush against one another had my face heating.

‘Fancy seeing you out in the wild.’ She flicked her curls over her shoulder.

This was a woman who knew she was beautiful, and how to use it.

I wasn't paying much attention to what they were saying as I studied their interaction. The way she smiled at him and touched his arm. The way his hand grazed her waist when they'd hugged and hadn't let go.

'Hi, I'm Hazel.' She lifted her hand in a little wave as her attention now turned towards me.

I shook my head as I tried focusing and I picked the skin on my thumb. 'Lina,' I replied.

Titan's knuckles grazed mine, and it sent a warmth up my arm. The skin on my finger would thank him.

'How do you know each other? Do you work together?' I asked, directing my question at Hazel.

She looked at Titan then back to me. 'Yeah, work.' Her smirk, however, said something else.

'Kalina's a friend,' Titan explained, even though no one had asked.

'Oh.' Hazel exclaimed; her face lit up. '*Friend*. Yes, yes.'

'We should get going,' Titan said. He placed a hand on my back and gently ushered me towards the hotel.

'Nice to meet you, Lina.' Hazel called out.

I waved at her as I looked over my shoulder. 'You too.'

'Let's go.' He led me along the pavement.

'Why do you seem upset? She was nice.'

'Because she's a menace.'

'Like you.' I grinned.

'Ha-ha.'

I opened my mouth to say something then shut it again. I couldn't ask him if she was one of the women he saw. It wasn't part of the Agreement.

'What is it?'

I shook my head.

‘Out with it.’ Titan stopped halfway up the street, forcing me to pause as well.

‘Was she an ex-girlfriend?’ Seemed like a normal question.

He waited for a beat. ‘Not exactly...’

‘Oh.’

He laughed. ‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ I walked to keep my body moving, but I couldn’t walk away from the way Titan’s body near mine made me feel a little unhinged. I had no idea how to navigate this new feeling. Was it lust? It must be. This was literally how all the books described it. I couldn’t be blamed for it either. Titan was...Titan.

‘It’s not nothing, Kalina. You’ve looked at me this way since I got to the bakery.’

We stopped in front of the hotel and I considered telling him what I thought.

No. That was a terrible idea.

Five weeks. I could manage for another five weeks?

‘I have to go. We can talk another time.’ I gave him no chance to respond as I spun on my heel and hurried into the building.

Chapter 10

Act II, Scene II: TA Studio, Hackney

Titan

I had two days to pull a shoot together, and not one ounce of focus left in me.

I waited as the phone rang; one, two, three times before a confused voice crackled on the other end.

‘Hello?’

‘Aditi, it’s Titan. How are you?’

Kalina’s grandmother’s voice changed. ‘Titan. What a pleasant surprise. I’m well.’

‘Good to hear. I have a favour to ask.’

‘Anything for you,’ she said, with such sincerity it made my chest ache. I’d never known my grandparents, but she was the best one I’d ever met.

‘I don’t want you to put yourself out, so don’t agree to it yet.’ I flicked through the images on my desk. It was all the inspiration photos I’d pulled.

‘You can let me decide what I want to do. What do you need?’ Always to the point. I loved it.

‘I have a photo-shoot with Kalina, and I need two things. Jewellery and some alterations on a dress. I want it to fit her perfectly, and who could do a better job?’

‘Oh, easy enough. I can do that in thirty minutes.’ The pride and conviction in her voice was all I needed to hear.

‘Great. When should I come through? I need it for Thursday.’

‘Right now.’ It was a statement and confirmation all rolled into one.

‘Perfect, see you soon.’

‘Don’t rush. I want you here in one piece.’ She’d been as concerned about my bike as Kalina was.

‘I won’t.’

I hung up the call and grabbed everything I needed—the dress, some of the photos of the jewellery I’d pictured, and my helmet before I made the trek to Kalina’s childhood home.

I’d only been to Savi’s parents’ house once before. The night Aditi and Kalina had snuck Ted into the house, while the rest of their family were trying to set up a wedding between Savi and her betrothed.

It felt like years, and not months, had passed since then. Now, no one would blink an eye at mine, or Ted’s appearance, here.

Aditi’s house was right next door to Savi’s parents’. A terraced brick exterior with a long driveway, and large lavender bushes right beneath the windows.

I pulled up, and by the time I’d swung my leg over my bike, Aditi stood in the doorway.

‘I could hear you from the end of the road.’ Aditi had one hand on the doorknob and the other on her hip.

‘I tried not to rush like you asked.’ I bent low as I stopped in front of her but, before I could reach down to touch her feet—as a sign of respect and a form of greeting—she pulled me into a hug.

‘Come inside, I’m finishing up the spinach pakoras.’

Being fed by Aditi was one of my favourite pastimes. I followed her through the entryway, where photo frames filled the walls, and we headed towards the kitchen.

The heavy aroma of fresh garlic, ginger, chilli, and spices hit me. Everything Aditi made was fantastic.

‘It smells amazing.’

‘Are you hungry?’ She busied herself by the stove.

‘Always.’

She let out a husky laugh. ‘I can imagine. You’re a growing boy.’

I let out a laugh. ‘Can I help?’

She ushered me into a barstool. ‘No, you sit. Relax.’

I took in the yellow and blue kitchen with the farmhouse accents. It was warm and comforting. Maybe this is where Kalina’s love for colours stemmed from.

‘How are my granddaughters?’ she asked.

I leaned my arms on the countertop. ‘Kalina is busy, as always, and Savi is glowing and healthy.’

‘Good, I don’t see them as often these days.’ Aditi placed what looked like golden fritters on a plate.

I knew Kalina and Savi missed her, and wished they could see her. Between Kalina’s new management position and Savi juggling the inn, being pregnant, and the upcoming reception, they both needed the downtime. I made a mental note to chat to Ted about it.

‘Are you sure I can’t do anything?’ I got up, met her halfway across the kitchen, and took the dish from her hands.

‘Don’t you know how to relax?’

I laughed at the irony. I’d said those exact words to Kalina recently.

‘No, I don’t.’ I set the bowl on the table.

‘Tell me about this shoot.’ She put the kettle on.

‘It’s for my application to DB Diamonds.’

‘The fancy French company?’ she asked.

‘Yup, the founder, Mae, is extremely particular about the brand. She wants a photographer on retainer for the jewellery line but also for her foundation. She does a lot of social and community projects.’

Aditi raised her eyebrows and her green eyes went wide. Savi had the exact same expression when she was surprised. ‘Exciting. And scary.’

‘Exactly the words I’d use.’ She understood me. Much like her granddaughters. I wondered if it was a genetic predisposition.

Aditi set two mugs on the table, before sitting down. ‘I’ve seen your work. You need to focus on your strengths, then you’ll do well.’

Nothing was impossible in Aditi’s books.

She took a sip of her tea and pushed the plate towards me. ‘Eat.’

I did as I was told, and I didn’t regret it one bit. The pakora had a crispy exterior and a soft, fluffy middle. All those spices I’d inhaled earlier came through in one bite. The heat of the chilli was a little warmer than I was used to, and I took a sip of tea—which only made it worse.

‘You need more spice in your life, beta.’ Aditi smirked from behind her teacup.

‘It’s really good.’ I coughed. ‘But you’re right.’ I managed to say.

My mind automatically conjured up an image of Kalina, and I cleared my throat as if her grandmother could read my mind.

Aditi let out a laugh, as if she could see inside my head, then got up from the table. ‘Come, let’s see what I have to work with.’

I grabbed my bag and cup before I followed her into the lounge. It was a deep teal shade with dark accents throughout the room. Very cosy and warm with one wall covered in photo-frames.

I walked over and tried determining when and where the photos had been taken. There was one of two girls sitting on some grass as they smiled up at the camera. Unmistakingly Savi and Kalina as kids. Another was Kalina in high school—she looked almost the same, but with much shorter hair and a carefree smile—wearing a long, green evening dress as she stood in front of a school formal backdrop with her partner.

‘I’m hoping to add your photos here after the wedding,’ Aditi said from beside me. Her silent approach made me jump.

‘Mine?’

‘Yes, the photos you’re taking.’

It clicked then. Obviously she hadn’t meant photos of me. ‘Of course, yes. I think they’d make a great addition.’

‘Show me the dress. I’m worried you think too highly of me and I promised results but have no idea what I’m working with.’

‘Personally, I think you could do anything,’ I gushed at her as I retrieved the dress from my bag.

She took it and inspected it. ‘This is beautiful. How did you get the right size? I assume Kalina doesn’t know about it?’ She ran her hand over the sheer beaded fabric.

‘Scarlet. I asked her to snoop around while Kalina was at work.’

‘Really great choice, she’s going to love it. Tell me about the photo-shoot.’ She walked over to the mannequin in the corner of the room and draped the dress over it. She started measuring and adding pins. Watching her work was fascinating.

I stepped a little closer and showed her some of the inspirational images on my phone, as well as the jewellery I’d had in mind. ‘Kalina and Savi have spoken about your collection enough for me to remember it.’

The photo I’d paused on was of a bride I’d photographed a few years ago, her neck adorned with a really beautiful gold choker style necklace from her mother.

‘I have something almost exactly like this,’ Aditi said.

‘Would you be okay with me using it?’

Aditi looked at me and smiled. Creases formed around her green eyes, and they looked a little glossy. ‘Don’t tell them, but it was always meant for my girls. I want Savi and Kalina

to have it and use it. I'd be more than happy for you to use it now.'

The love and care in her words made my throat tighten. 'Thank you.'

'Okay, you eat some more and I'll finish up the alterations.' She shooed me away into the kitchen where I proceeded to burn my oesophagus, but it was worth it.

An hour later, I left Aditi's house with a perfectly tailored dress and a container of pakoras. I started up my bike while I dialled Kalina's number.

'Hello?' she answered. She always sounded confused when I called her. Like it was an accident.

'Hi, not happy to hear from me?'

'No,' she said. She shifted something on her end, sending rustling noises through the speaker. 'I'm surprised.'

'Where are you?' I wedged the phone between my ear and shoulder as I put my gloves on.

'At home. Where else would I be?'

I chuckled. 'On a date?'

'You're hilarious.'

'I've been putting in the work and I want to see the results,' I teased.

She didn't reply.

'I'm coming over. See you in about...' I looked down at my watch. 'An hour and ten minutes.'

'Did we have another lesson tonight?'

'No, but I have a treat for you.'

'Okay.'

Her excitement was infectious.

'See you soon.' I hung up and secured my helmet before pulling out of the driveway.



It was like Kalina had been waiting at the door, because it opened as soon as I pulled up outside. She stood in the doorway; wrapped in a long cardigan with her socked feet peeking out from the bottom.

‘Sorry to pull you from bed,’ I said as I walked toward her.

‘How did you know?’

‘You sounded sleepy on the phone.’ I came to a stop on the second step, and stood eye to eye with her. ‘From your grandmother.’ I held out the package.

‘Dadi? What were you doing with her?’

‘Our secret. For now.’

She narrowed her eyes at me then lifted the lid of the container and groaned.

I cleared my throat. I didn’t need to think about the sounds she made. It was enough we’d been spending so much time together, and she was so easy to be around. I needed to remember the Agreement.

Kalina wanted to date someone who could be what she wanted and needed.

‘Sorry, these are one of my favourites.’

‘No need to apologise.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Oh, come in. I think Scarlet’s in the shower, but I can make you some tea? Coffee?’

‘Coffee would be great, thanks.’ I shrugged my jacket off and hung it on one of the hooks before kicking off my boots and placing them on the rack. I set my helmet on top of the shoe rack, sad to see the pirate book missing from its spot.

She sidestepped and I walked through the doorway and waited for her to lead the way to the kitchen. She hugged the container to her chest as she padded down the passage, set it down on the counter, and put the kettle on.

I sat on one of the chairs at the dining table and Kalina leaned against the countertop.

‘Did you come all this way to bring me this?’ She tipped her head at the container.

‘No, I wanted to talk to you about the photo-shoot.’

She sighed. ‘I already said yes.’

‘But you didn’t sound convinced. Enthusiastic consent is the only kind I care about.’

She pursed her lips and a flush travelled into her cheeks.

I was enjoying this.

‘I... Never mind.’ She shook her head.

‘No, tell me.’ I leaned against the backrest, crossed my arms over my chest, and rested my foot on my knee. I wanted her to know I wasn’t going to budge until she told me why.

‘I don’t like the focus on me.’

I tilted my head. ‘Have you learnt nothing about our time together? I can tell when you’re lying. Spill.’

The kettle whistled, and she busied herself with making the drinks.

I grabbed the milk from the fridge then stood beside her.

‘You can be honest with me. I won’t judge or question it.’ I set the bottle on the counter.

She let out a long exhale. ‘I’m not comfortable seeing photos of myself. I see it in my family’s faces, my grandmother, and my father when he visits. All they see is my mother. I look exactly like her.’

Her lips turned down, and she looked at her feet.

‘That’s a lot for one person to feel, and I’m sorry.’ I took her hand and waited for her gaze to meet mine. ‘Do you know what I see when you’re with your family?’

She shook her head.

‘I see a grandmother who adores you, and despite how annoying your family can be, they light up when you are around.’

The same effect she had on me, but I didn’t need to tell her that right now.

She pursed her lips to one side. ‘You take photos of models for a living.’

‘I also take photos of brides and mothers-to-be too.’

‘I’m neither of those things.’ Her hand still rested in mine.

‘I want to take photos of you because I think you’re perfect for this.’

‘You don’t have to lie to make me feel better.’

‘Look at my face,’ I said. ‘Do I look like I’m lying?’

She laughed. ‘I don’t know. Your face is hard to read.’

‘On the other hand, your face gives everything away.’

She was doing it right now. She couldn’t look at me and her gaze dipped to my lips.

‘It does not.’ Her brows furrowed.

‘Wanna bet?’ I challenged.

‘Okay.’ She tried to visibly straighten her features. ‘What am I thinking right now?’

I analysed her face; from the way her lips were twitching at the corners to her rapid blinking, which really brought attention to those honey-coloured eyes, she was annoyed.

‘You want to strangle me.’ I flashed her a cheeky grin.

She let out a laugh. ‘A given at any time. And it doesn’t count as a point.’

‘I have no reason to lie to you. Everyone I photograph is beautiful. Including you. You were my first choice.’

Kalina leaned closer, the frown between her brows softened.

My heart rate quickened and I leaned towards her, curling my fingers around hers.

Scarlet walked in and Kalina pulled away.

‘Hey, I didn’t know you were coming over tonight.’ Scarlet nudged me with her hip.

‘I had something for Kalina.’

Scarlet had already begun rummaging through the container. ‘Oh my God. Yum. Is this from Dadi?’

‘Yes,’ I said through gritted teeth.

I needed my sister to disappear. I’d nearly made headway with Kalina.

‘Delicious. I need to send off an assignment, but then I’m ready to get my burn on.’ She trotted to her bedroom and shut the door behind her.

‘I’ll do the shoot if you don’t make it weird.’

‘Me? Weird? Absolutely ridiculous.’ I scoffed.

She handed the mug to me. ‘No weirdness. Take it or leave it.’

‘It’s going to be fun. I promise.’

Chapter 11

Act II, Scene III: TA Studio, Hackney

Kalina

You don't trust me, dimples?

12:35

Not really, no

12:35

I promise I won't do anything you don't want to do. You can set the pace; I'll only guide you a little

12:36

Easy for you to say. You do this all the time

12:36

Okay, let's try it on you, then you can try it on me. Deal?

12:36

Fine..

12:36

This entire conversation sounds a little suggestive don't you think? Do you want a safe word? ;)

12:36

What? That's *not* what this is

12:37

It's important for any consenting relationship, I believe

12:37

You are insufferable

12:37

And yet...

12:37

You keep coming back for more

12:37

--

12:37

Milkshake

12:37

What?

12:37

You would never actually ask for one so
it's strange enough to seem out of the
ordinary

12:37

Now I want a milkshake...

12:37

No.

12:37



Titan messaged me a day before the photo-shoot—in case I'd somehow forgotten. He confirmed the time, told me to bring the emerald green lehenga Scarlet had worn to the engagement party, and wouldn't give me any other information. I left straight from the office and showed up at his studio a minute before the requested time.

My brain glitched for a second when Titan opened the door to his studio dressed in a light blue shirt, dark blue jeans, and bare feet.

All the colours he wore lately—the greens and the blues—were so complimentary and brought out the gold in his hair.

‘Hi,’ he said, tilting his head to the side.

I shook my own to clear it. ‘Hi. Are you going to tell me what you have planned?’

He let me pass and I tried gathering my thoughts. This was actual work. His job.

‘No,’ he said, and took the dress bag from my arms.

‘I’m here now. Would it make a difference if I knew?’ I dropped my laptop bag and handbag at the door before kicking off my shoes.

‘Yes.’ He walked away.

I followed him into the studio which was set up with a black backdrop and a light grey velvet chaise-longue. The studio lights were placed in front of it, but turned off, and the late afternoon light shone through the windows casting shadows over the floor.

‘Okay, let’s get this over with.’

‘Not so fast, dimples. This is a proper photo-shoot.’ Titan smirked at me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. ‘Meaning?’

‘The full package.’

The intensity in his gaze and focused stare made my stomach flip.

He couldn’t possibly mean—

A knock sounded at the door and he gave me a minute to gather myself. I needed to get it together. This was a professional setting and he was being professional. There was no way he’d implied anything with his words.

He returned with a petite woman who had curls like Scarlet, only much darker.

‘Hi, you must be Lina? I’m Tara.’ She offered her hand to me.

I shook it and looked between her and Titan.

‘Tara here is an amazing make-up artist and hairstylist. I wanted to say thank you for doing this, and also didn’t want to put you out for helping me with my work,’ Titan explained before I could protest.

He knew me well.

‘Oh...thank you.’ This was fine. He did this with all his clients.

‘Perfect. Can I set up at the usual spot?’ Tara asked Titan.

He said they’d worked together, but my mind thought of the woman I’d met, Hazel, and the familiarity with her he now shared with Tara. Titan had this connection with everyone he came across. It was difficult to tell what they were to him.

He was like that with me too, and we were friends. But why was I even thinking about that?

‘Yeah, thanks. Do either of you want anything to drink?’

‘Some water please,’ Tara called out. She’d walked over to the corner of the room where a table was set up close to the large windows.

‘Anything for you, dimples?’ Titan flashed his smile at me.

It made my throat constrict. ‘Nope,’ I managed to mutter.

‘Okay.’ He walked away.

Tara called me over. ‘Would you like me to explain the process to you before we start? Or explain as I go along?’

‘Um, whatever you want to do.’

‘I want you to feel comfortable.’ She smiled. Her face exuded warmth and kindness.

‘You can tell me as you go along.’ I’d be too overwhelmed if she rattled all the steps off at once.

‘Great. Let’s get started then.’

She pulled my hair up and out of my face then tested some products on my skin.

‘Have you had your makeup professionally done before?’

I crossed and uncrossed my legs, then set them down and pushed my palms under my thighs. ‘Yes, once or twice. School formal and a wedding.’

‘Okay, so the look Titan wants isn’t too much. It’s all about enhancing your features, which are stunning by the way.’

My cheeks heated. ‘Thank you.’

‘I’ll be setting the base, a little bit of bronzer and highlighter, brown and gold tones for the eyes but a bold lip was his main request.’ She rummaged through her makeup kit and pulled out bottle after bottle and all kinds of brushes.

‘He said you’re a hairstylist as well?’

She chuckled. ‘Oh, don’t worry, we’re doing a little bit of waves and volume. And loose. He said it has to be down.’

She looked at me and I wasn’t sure what my face did, but it wasn’t good based on her reaction.

‘Oh no. I mean, he’s great. He’s thorough with his ideas and his vision. He knows exactly what he wants.’

I knew this about him. He never hesitated.

‘Are you okay?’ Titan asked as he stepped up behind us.

‘Yes.’ I nodded vigorously.

‘Great, I’ll let Tara work and I’m going to test the cameras. Don’t mind me.’

As soon as he walked away, Tara got right into it. She showed me every product as she used it and even gave me little tips and tricks.

‘There we go, all done,’ she said, thirty minutes later.

She lifted a mirror so I could see my reflection and I was speechless. My skin was clear and glowing, my hair fell so perfectly I was afraid to move or touch it, and my lips were a buttery smooth deep-red shade I absolutely adored.

‘I love it. What shade is this lipstick?’

‘Oh, it’s a fan favourite. It’s called, “kiss me fool”.’ She handed it to me. ‘Keep it, I have about three.’

‘No, I couldn’t.’

‘Please,’ she insisted. ‘It looks like it was made for you.’

‘Thank you.’ I looked at the black case in my palm.

‘You’re welcome. You’re such a pleasure to work with; you have amazing features,’ Tara gushed. If I’d known she was part of this deal, then I would have agreed immediately. She was delightful and an amazing confidence boost.

I stood as Titan walked over and he paused mid-step. ‘Wow.’

‘I know, right? She’s stunning. I’m glad you went with the enhancing rather than changing,’ Tara said. ‘Anyway, I’ll be off. It was lovely to meet you, Lina. I know you’re in good hands.’ She grabbed her things and left us in silence once the metal door slammed shut.

It broke Titan from his trance and he stepped closer. Each movement was tentative until he was right in front of me and his gaze roamed my face. ‘You look amazing.’

I was sure the blush Tara had applied went a shade darker. ‘Thank you.’

He cleared his throat. ‘Okay, you can change, over there,’ he said, and gestured to the door beside me. ‘The green lehenga first.’

‘First? Also, great pronunciation of lehenga.’

The corner of his mouth tilted on one end. ‘Dadi taught me well.’

‘And you won’t tell me why you were there. I hate surprises.’ I grabbed the dress bag.

‘You seem more than happy when it’s ice-cream or pizza.’

I smiled just thinking about it. ‘That’s different and you know it.’

‘Let me take the lead, okay?’ He pursed his lips and his eyebrows drew together, softening his features.

My stomach flipped. I needed to get it together. We were going to be in this space—alone—for who knew how long.

My brain decided it was the perfect moment to replay my dream of Titan. Images of his hands on my skin or his lips on mine popped into my mind unprovoked.

‘I’m going to change now.’ My voice was an octave higher than usual, but I gave him no chance to respond as I spun on my heel and rushed to the changing room. I took a moment to lean against the door and exhale.

‘Breathe Lina, you can do this. It’s fine,’ I whispered to myself.

Everything was going to be okay.

Until I remembered the top had a built-in bra and I couldn’t do the laces up the back on my own.

Well...no one could say I never tried. I opened the door and peaked around its edge. Titan looked at the screen on his camera and his eyebrows scrunched in concentration.

‘Would you mind?’ I asked.

He looked up at me and quirked a brow.

‘The back. I can’t do it on my own.’ I had one arm holding up the front, and I spun around so he could see the undone laces behind me.

‘Oh. Yeah.’ He strode effortlessly across the room. His knuckles brushed my spine and his fingers tugged on the strings.

My breath hitched and I wanted to lean into him. To feel his hands on me and have his body pushed up against mine.

‘Is everything okay?’ he asked.

The top was secure, and I dropped my arms to my sides. ‘Yes. Fine.’

‘Hey, you’ve always been great in front of the camera. Every single photo I have of you is like an editorial.’

I turned. ‘It doesn’t make me any less nervous...but, thank you.’

I couldn't admit to him it was more than the photoshoot. It was his proximity to me, how good he smelled, and the way his gaze caught mine. A fire rolled around inside my abdomen.

'I promise you'll have a good time.'

'Can you show me as you take them?'

'No. I don't want you to get inside your head about it and I want you to enjoy it. Besides, some of it will be on film and you're going to help me develop it when it's ready.'

I sighed. 'You're always giving me homework.'

'I like to think I keep you on your toes.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Sure.'

'One last thing,' he said, and held up a finger. He walked toward his desk and returned with a gold necklace in hand.

'Is that?' I asked and stepped closer. I recognised the patterns in the gold metal and the deep red rubies. 'How did you...?' I stammered.

'I told you Aditi adores me.'

'It's so beautiful,' I said and reached out to touch it.

The intricate details looked like flowers in bloom.

'She was so excited for you to wear this.' He came to stand behind me and gathered my hair over one shoulder. His fingers grazed my neck and collarbone as he lowered the necklace onto my skin.

I swallowed hard to push away the feeling growing low in my belly.

'This was her wedding jewellery,' I said, and tears pricked my eyes.

It was beautiful and special, and even though her marriage wasn't the love match she'd hoped for, my grandmother was so proud of the family she'd created and raised.

When I turned, his gaze roamed down from my head to the hem of my skirt. 'Absolutely perfect.'

'You say that to everyone, I'm sure.'

He scoffed. ‘You’re never going to believe a word I say, are you?’

‘No.’ I shook my head.

‘Okay, then I’ll have to show you.’ His expression was filled with silent challenge.

‘Tell me what you want me to do?’ I whispered.

He opened his mouth to say something, seemed to think better of it, then closed it.

I licked my lips, tasting the lipstick.

His gaze lingered there for a moment, then he shook his head as if he were answering a question. ‘Come with me.’

I followed him to the chaise.

‘Would you mind sitting down?’

I sat and leaned against the backrest. ‘Like this?’

‘Lift your legs onto the seat in front of you.’

I did as he asked.

He leaned back and lifted his camera to snap a few shots. He looked down at the screen, then walked over and crouched down beside me. ‘Could you straighten your right leg and bend your left?’

I moved my legs into a staggered position. ‘Like this?’

He lifted his hand and hovered over my knee. ‘May I?’

‘Yes,’ I said on an exhale.

His hand was firm as he curled it around my knee and pulled upward. ‘Better angle.’

My body reacted to every touch and look.

He was none the wiser as he walked back to his spot and clicked away.

‘Let me try some with the film camera. It’s going to be a bit of a trial-and-error situation.’

‘Here to help,’ I piped up.

‘You’ve been an amazing subject so far.’ He turned off the lights and the sun cast a gold glow across the room.

I turned to face the window to catch a glimpse of the sunset.

‘Don’t move.’

The shutter went off, but I tried to remain as still as possible.

‘There’s one more thing I want to try.’ He walked toward me then wrapped his hand around both of my wrists. He lifted them in one svelte swoop until they hit the backrest behind my head and his throat worked.

I wanted his hands wrapped around more of me.

‘Hold onto the backrest if it’s uncomfortable.’ His face hovered above mine and our chests nearly touched.

I wanted to lean forward. To press my lips against his.

He let go and walked back to his spot before the thought had crossed my mind.

Why was I acting like a cat in heat?

The camera clicked. ‘Kalina, you can smile.’

I’d forgotten how. ‘Sorry.’

‘Let’s do the next look. You seem like you want to jump out of your skin.’

He had no idea.

He strolled over to his desk and pulled a dress bag off the back of his chair. When he handed it to me, I was surprised by the weight of it.

‘Sorry, let me.’ He took it from my arm and carried it to the changing room. ‘Do you need help with your top?’

‘No, I think I’ve got it,’ I replied and hurried into the room before he saw my entire body going red at the thought of him undressing me. Even though I struggled to undo the knot and get it over my head it was better than him being around me while my body was acting this way.

Maybe I was coming down with something.

I unzipped the bag and gasped so loudly I was sure he'd heard.

Inside was a gold-coloured soft tulle dress. It had intricate glass beads all over, and when I pulled it from the bag I realised it was completely sheer.

'Everything okay?' he called from the other side.

'Yeah!' Panic raced through me.

I rummaged through the bag, looking for other items that accompanied it, and found a smaller piece of golden fabric. It was a strappy—very skimpy—bodysuit.

Great.

When I put it on, I was surprised at the comfort and how soft the tulle was. There were no mirrors to check my appearance, so I did up the row of golden pearl buttons at my waist and tugged on the deep vee of the neckline. It resembled more of a dressing gown than it did a dress.

I inhaled before opening the door. 'Titan, I'm not sure about this one.'

When I looked up, his gaze was frozen on me. 'Wow.'

'You don't think it's a little...' I pulled at the opening at my legs, but it swished aside as I strode toward him.

'It's exactly what I'd imagined.' His gaze dipped down the front of the dress then back up to my face.

I hoped the now dimmed studio didn't give way to the look on my face 'Really?'

'Yes.' He chewed on his lower lip.

It made me want to do the same.

No. We were not going to think about his lips.

'It fits like a dream.' I lifted the skirt then dropped it, letting it pool around me.

'Well, it's yours. Aditi altered it for you.'

I whipped my head up.

He was so close I breathed in that clean scent of his. Like the air before it rained.

‘Thank you,’ I whispered. ‘You didn’t have to.’

‘I wanted to.’

‘It’s too much.’ I shook my head.

He took a step closer. ‘Are you okay? Do you still want to do this?’

I nodded.

He smirked. ‘Enthusiastic consent, dimples.’

‘Yes,’ I breathed.

‘Good. Lie down.’

I shook my head. ‘What?’

He laughed. ‘On the floor. It’s clean, I promise.’ He led me closer to the backdrop. ‘I have a shot in mind but it requires some interesting positions.’

He was not helping the cause.

I took his offered hand and sat.

‘Could you put your arms over your head?’ There was a twinkle in his eye.

I laid down and circled them above me. ‘Like this?’

‘Perfect, yes.’ He leaned over me, camera in hand, and snapped away.

I tried focusing on the camera and not on his body towering over me. Or the way his muscles flexed in his forearms every time he moved.

‘Could you put your hand under your chin?’ He squatted beside me. ‘Turn to me.’

‘Like this?’

‘Perfect.’ He took a few shots.

‘We can take the necklace off.’

‘Sure.’ He helped me to a seated position and reached behind my neck to untie it.

His fingers brushed my skin and hair and sent shivers down my spine.

He set the necklace on his desk and returned with an antique pair of gold Jhumka earrings.

‘These were one of my favourite pieces of Dadi’s.’ I put them in my ears and secured the backing. ‘She would wear them for special occasions, and I’d sit on her bed while she got ready.’

‘They complement the dress.’

‘You schemed too close to the sun.’

He laughed. ‘Can I try something?’

‘You wanted to take the lead.’

He offered his hand and pulled me up. I shifted unsteadily and knocked into his chest.

‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ he said.

He walked me over to the window where the city lights twinkled below.

‘This dress looks amazing in this light,’ he said. He tipped his chin towards the earrings. ‘She chose to add those by the way.’

I’d been toying with them as they dangled against my neck. ‘She has great taste.’

‘You make them look lovely.’

‘I think it’s the other way around.’

‘Take the compliment, Kalina,’ he challenged.

‘Okay. So demanding.’

‘Because you never believe me.’

I scoffed. ‘What do you mean?’

He snapped a photo. ‘You didn’t believe me when I said I couldn’t understand why you weren’t dating anyone. You didn’t believe me when I said you were perfect for this photo-shoot, and...’ He paused and took a photo. ‘You likely won’t believe it even if I show this to you.’

He walked toward me and turned the camera.

The photo seemed natural and it was beautiful. The lighting hit the right spots and it was as though I was looking at the images posted on his website, of professional models and blushing brides. Only now, it was me.

‘Oh.’

‘Oh is right. That’s a wrap.’

‘We’re done?’ I was a little disappointed.

‘Yes. See? It wasn’t so bad.’

‘Wait,’ I exclaimed and walked over to take the camera from his hand. I lifted it to face him.

‘Seriously?’ he asked and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘Yes, seriously. You never get to be in front of the camera.’

‘For good reason.’

‘Oh stop. You’re handsome.’

He smirked at me. ‘Tell me more...’

‘No. Stand over there please.’ I pointed to the middle of the floor.

‘You’re hot when you’re bossy.’

My stomach did the flippy thing again, but I tried acting casual about it.

‘Now cross your arms over your chest.’

I took a few shots and looked down at the screen. ‘Ooh, I think I’ve found my calling.’

‘Okay, I’m done.’

‘No, you look good. Come and see,’ I protested as he tried to walk away.

He stood in front of me and leaned over to look at the screen as I flicked through the photos.

‘Not bad, dimples. The student’s become the master.’

He lifted his hand to cover mine as he clicked through the photos.

The combination of his hand, his scent, and the way my body heated made me lightheaded.

Before I knew it, the words tumbled out of my mouth. ‘Since I’ve mastered photography, maybe you could teach me something else.’

His gaze shot up. ‘What are you—’

‘Teach me how you do it,’ I whispered.

His eyes darkened. ‘Do what?’

‘I want to know all of your tricks. I want to know why women throw themselves at you. I want to know what it is that makes me want to do the same thing right now.’ I swallowed the lump in my throat.

‘Kalina...’ He hesitated.

My blood ran cold.

He shook his head. ‘I don’t think this is a good idea.’

Had I misread things so terribly? The touches and the compliments clouded my judgement. Even more than usual.

I nearly dropped the camera, but his quick reflexes held on as I took a step back. ‘Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I thought...you know what? Never mind.’

‘Kalina—’ I didn’t have to look up at him to hear the plea in his voice.

I shook my head. ‘Please don’t say anything.’

‘Kalina, please...’

I needed to get out of there.

I picked up the skirt of my dress, hurried to the door, and grabbed my shoes and handbag before I bolted for the stairs.

Five levels would be quicker than the lifts at this rate.

I was out of breath after running down the staircase. I didn't look back as I reached the lobby and pushed the doors until they slammed open. I called a taxi, and hoped to put some distance between myself and this embarrassing incident.

I leaned my head against the backrest once I was safely inside and shut my eyes, counting the minutes until I was home.

With any luck, I could disappear from the face of the earth and not talk to Titan ever again.

Wishful thinking.

Chapter 12

Act II, Scene IV: Padua Heights, Finsbury Park

Titan

Kalina disappeared in a flash of gold.

I turned her down like an idiot. What was I thinking?

Groaning, I rubbed a palm over my face. I couldn't leave things this way? It wasn't fair to her, but she never gave me a chance to explain myself. To tell her she deserved more than a practice fuck.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and thought about what I could say.

Kalina... |

21:10

No, she'd panic.

Kalina, I'm sorry. Can we talk? |

21:11

That made it seem like she was at fault. Nothing was going to work over text. I stared at my screen for ages as I tried figuring out my next move.

I could call her. I dialled her number and as soon as it rang, an echo came from the changing room.

'Shit.' I dropped the call and hurried over to it. She wasn't going to miss the lehenga, or the clothes she'd come in, but she'd need her phone.

And I needed to see her. I needed to make this right.

I turned all the lights off, yanked on my boots, grabbed my jacket and helmet at the door, and rushed out. I had no idea what I was going to say when I showed up, but it would come to me.

All the traffic lights were red, the people on the road were manic, and it was pissing with rain. What would usually take twenty-odd minutes took closer to thirty-five.

When I finally pulled up outside the house, the front door was ajar, and my heart sped up. I sprinted across the pavement, skipped all three steps, and shoved the door, a little harder than intended, and it bounded off the skirting with a loud bang.

A small scream sounded from Kalina's room followed by some cursing.

'Kalina?' I dropped my helmet and rushed toward her open bedroom door.

She appeared in the doorway, the gold dress fluttering around her. 'Titan? What are you—'

'The door was open, are you okay?' I reached out to cup her arms, and scanned her face for any sign saying otherwise.

'Shit.' She shook her head. 'It didn't swing shut when I came in.'

'How long have you been home?' It couldn't have been too long if she was still dressed.

I looked down the passage. Nothing seemed off.

'A few minutes.'

My gaze was still fixed on the darkness at the end of the house 'Is Scarlet here?'

She shook her head and I released my breath.

'Give me one second.' I'd hoped she'd forgive me as I didn't comply with her no shoes rule and stomped down the passage and turned all the lights on in the kitchen, lounge, and Scarlet's room. Everything seemed okay.

They were okay.

I undid my jacket and dropped it beside my helmet near the door. I took in Kalina's appearance fully. From her pink cheeks to the rise and fall of her chest. Her hair fell down the front of her shoulders and over the bodice of the dress. She

looked like a fairy and under the dim entryway lights, her eyes shone a honey colour.

Okay, but remember why you came here.

‘I’m glad you’re okay but, we’re probably going to have to talk about security and safety,’ I said. ‘But first, we need to talk about what happened.’

Her cheeks deepened to a crimson shade. ‘We really don’t need to. I wasn’t thinking straight. Maybe I’m dehydrated. The studio lights were warm. You don’t need to respond to what I said.’

I turned to shut the front door then stepped toward her. ‘You don’t want me to explain why?’

‘No, I think you made it clear you don’t think of me that way.’

I groaned and brushed my hand through my hair in frustration. ‘Really? That’s what you think?’

She crossed her arms over her chest. She was not backing down. ‘Titan, you don’t have to be on when we’re alone. Can we forget this happened?’

‘I’m not going to forget it, and I’m not going to leave until you understand I hesitated because you deserve more.’ I took another step toward her. ‘You deserve everything and not a practice session.’

I took another step and she backed up into the wall and yelped. Her hand tightened against her chest and a small humming sound started.

‘Shit,’ she cursed and her eyes went wide. I looked down at her clasped hand at the bright pink peeking through her fingers.

Every sane and rational thought I’d had on the way over disappeared. I smiled as she opened her hand and fiddled with the buttons on what I could now see was a bullet vibrator.

She looked about ready to disappear into the floor as she squeezed her eyes shut.

‘You couldn’t even wait for a response...’ I was trying to hide my elation. ‘How worked up were you, Kalina?’

She scoffed. ‘I was not *worked* up. I came to the realisation that this had less complications.’

I clutched my chest. ‘Ouch.’

‘I don’t want to talk about this. You said you didn’t want to —’

I closed the distance between us. ‘I didn’t say I didn’t want to. I said you deserve more.’

Her throat worked as she swallowed hard. ‘What if this was all I wanted right now? I didn’t ask to date you.’

‘Things would never be the same if I kissed you. Really kissed you. Or tasted you.’

I wouldn’t want to stop.

‘You’re right. We shouldn’t.’ Her voice shook.

‘But...you do like your rules. What was it you said to me?’ I lifted her chin and she let out a small gasp before I tilted her head back. ‘Teach me, Titan.’ I whispered.

It was too late now, and there was no going back on what I’d said.

Not when she stood there looking at me like that. Her breaths ragged and her pupils blown. I brushed my thumb over her parted lips. She inhaled and I stroked a featherlight touch from her collarbone down her arm hanging beside her. I took the vibrator from her palm and silenced her protests with a look.

‘Tell me, Kalina, if I hadn’t shown up,’ I said and leaned down beside her ear. ‘How would you have made yourself come?’

Her sweet floral scent seemed to emanate from the spot behind her ear. I wanted to place my lips there.

‘I...’ Her exhales came out in shallow gasps.

‘Let me guess...’ My knuckles grazed the opening of her dress and I leaned back to meet her gaze. ‘Like this?’

I turned it on to the lowest setting, and ran it up her thigh.

She bit down on her full bottom lip.

I stopped midway and ran my hand back down.

She protested, 'Keep going.'

I pulled my hand away from her completely.

She sighed and said, 'Think of it as a lesson. It doesn't need to mean anything else.'

I shook my head. 'You said you want more than this.'

She levelled me with a look. 'I'm telling you what I want right now.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' she pleaded.

'What's off limits?'

'No kissing. I don't need your help in that department.' She pressed her red lips together and tempted me more than ever.

I laughed. 'Deal. You'll tell me if you want me to stop, okay? At any point.'

She swallowed hard and nodded slowly.

'Enthusiastic. You have to say it.'

'Yes,' she breathed.

'Good.'

I traced the device along her waist and between her breasts.

A shiver ran through her.

'No kissing?' I leaned down and placed my lips on her neck. 'How unfortunate.'

She let out a soft moan when I replaced the kiss with the vibrator. Massaging her neck gently before moving down to her collarbone.

'Kissing is too intimate,' she sighed.

‘Did you just Pretty Woman me?’ I laughed and ran the device down her waist to her thighs again.

She gasped. ‘Impressed you knew, but yes.’

‘More intimate than what I plan to do with my fingers?’ I reached down and undid the four small buttons at her waist. ‘This dress was such a great investment.’ I pulled it apart and took in the sight of her without the obstruction of the beaded fabric. The bodysuit clung to every single delicious inch of her. I wrapped my hand around her waist and squeezed.

‘Do you want me to touch you?’ She bit down on her bottom lip.

I had to hold back from pressing my lips against hers. I wondered if she’d taste like cherries.

‘No.’ I shook my head. The thought of her touching me right now made me want to explode. ‘Let me take away some of the frustration I caused.’

Her laugh was quickly swallowed by a breathy moan as I ran the vibrator up between her thighs, and turned it on when I reached the thin fabric of the bodysuit.

Fuck.

I wanted her.

Denying it was pointless. It was a pressing need, but I wanted to find out what made her tick. What she liked and how she liked it.

‘Slow?’ I asked, pushing the little device forward. I placed my other hand beside her head, using the wall as leverage. ‘Or fast?’ I increased the speed once.

‘Yes...’ She moaned.

‘Both?’ I slipped the fabric aside with my thumb. She was so wet already.

She leaned her head back. ‘Mmm hmm.’

‘Do you like this?’ I asked, using the vibrator to circle her clit. ‘Being teased?’

‘I...do...’ Her words were drawn out now.

I groaned and leaned my forehead against hers. ‘That made you so wet.’

Her moans increased and she reached out to wrap her hand around my arm, pulling the vibrator forward. Showing me what she wanted.

I was aching hard now.

I pulled my hand away slowly before turning it off.

‘What are you...’ she panted but I put the vibrator in the pocket of my jeans.

‘As much as I would have loved to watch you come, I’d much rather you did it on my tongue.’

Her eyes went wide, her skin had a slight sheen to it, and I wanted to see how far the pink flush travelled.

‘You heard me, dimples.’ I knelt down in front of her, pulling her dress apart so I could admire her body again.

She had the curves and angles I worked hard to recreate in the studio with light and shadows. Like fucking art.

‘Kalina, you’re so sexy.’ My eyes roamed to her ample breasts. I itched to reach out and touch them and my impulses won when I cupped her through the thin fabric.

She sucked in her breath.

I continued the trail down to the dip in her waist until I reached her hip and squeezed. She let out a small laugh.

‘Ticklish.’

‘Noted,’ I replied with a grin.

I stroked my thumb between her thighs, marking my next target, and she sighed. I reached for her knee, and pulled it over my shoulder until her body shifted against the wall.

The softest, sweetest moan escaped her.

‘There it is,’ I said.

‘What?’ she replied, blinking rapidly.

‘The sounds I knew you’d make. I’ve dreamt about this Kalina, and it cannot even compare to the real thing.’

I kissed the inside of her thigh.

‘You...have?’ she stammered.

‘Dreamt about your sighs and your moans.’

She moaned as I kissed higher up.

‘I’ve dreamt about tasting you.’ I tugged the fabric aside.

Then my mouth was on her.

‘Better than I imagined,’ I said against her skin.

She let out a soft cry.

Slow and gentle strokes made her moan, but fast and hard licks made her tremble. Her hands found purchase in my hair and pulled me closer.

‘Don’t. Stop,’ she bit out.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it,’ I murmured. I thrust a finger inside of her, curling it.

‘Slower...’ she sighed.

‘Like this?’

‘Mmm hmm...yes...’

I snuck a look up at her.

Her eyes closed, her skin flushed pink, and her lips parted. She was stunning.

And I was ruined.

‘That’s it,’ I said, encouragingly. She was getting close.

‘I’m...’ she gasped.

‘I’ve got you.’

She curled her leg and pulled me closer as she came. My name dragged on her lips as her breath shuddered.

She released the back of my neck, much to my dismay.

I placed a kiss on her stomach before I stood. With my arm around her waist, I held onto her and rested my forehead against hers as she caught her breath.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes...’ Her voice was soft and breathy.

‘You were so good.’

She held back a smile and the little hollows in her cheeks appeared.

‘I...need a minute.’ She wobbled on her feet, and without a second thought, I scooped her up into my arms.

‘Take all the time you need,’ I said and walked over to her bed before sitting on the edge.

We sat in silence as her breathing stabilised.

She didn’t move from the spot on my lap, and toyed with the buttons on my shirt.

‘Thank you.’

I chuckled. ‘Why are you thanking me? I should be thanking you.’

‘Wow. I’ve never...’ she drifted off.

‘Never what?’

She smacked her lips together.

‘I think we’re too far gone for modesty.’

She laughed. ‘No one’s ever gone down on me before.’

I shook my head. ‘What?’

‘I don’t have as much experience with sex as you do. Hence my request.’

I tilted her chin up until she met my gaze. ‘Was it good?’

She nodded.

I smiled. ‘Then I’m happy.’

‘What about you?’

‘Not today. One thing at a time.’ I brushed her hair away from her face.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Rest up—and hydrate—You’re going to need it.’

‘What do you have planned?’ Her eyes widened.

I laughed. ‘Wouldn’t you like to know.’

‘Most lesson plans are available beforehand.’ She hopped off my lap. ‘Be right back.’

She padded out of the room and the bathroom door shut a few seconds later.

The scent and taste of her was all over me and I still wanted more.

I was so fucking screwed.

Scarlet’s voice came from outside and I made it out of Kalina’s doorway as she stepped out of her room.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Saw your bike outside. What are you doing here?’

I tried not to think about Kalina and what we’d been doing. ‘Just finished with Kalina.’ I couldn’t help myself.

‘Oh, the photo-shoot.’

‘Yeah, that.’

Kalina walked out of the bathroom and planted a smile on her face. ‘You’re home.’

‘I am...why do you sound disappointed?’ Scarlet let out a laugh. ‘You look beautiful by the way.’

‘Thank you.’ Kalina lifted the skirt of the dress and swished it around. ‘And no, not disappointed. I wasn’t expecting you until later.’

‘Finished up early. Lucky me.’

‘Yeah,’ I added, dryly. The one time I was counting on Scarlet being out late.

‘I’m going to put the kettle on, are you staying?’ Scarlet asked.

Both of their gazes landed on me.

‘Not tonight. I have some work to do.’

‘Cool cool, see ya.’ Scarlet carried on down the passage.

Kalina checked she was out of earshot before she looked at me. ‘You’re not staying?’ She fidgeted with her hands.

‘With my sister down the hallway? A terrible idea.’

She pursed her lips. ‘Fair.’

I smiled. ‘Besides, this was the baseline.’

‘And?’ She tilted her head to the side.

‘No notes.’ I winked at her before I turned to leave.

I spent the rest of the night replaying our encounter.

Remembering every sound and every touch.

It was like scratching an itch and now, I wanted more.

Chapter 13

Act II, Scene V: Padua Heights, Finsbury Park

Kalina

I spent the entire day cleaning.
All I thought about was Titan.

His hands.

His mouth.

The way he'd looked at me as I'd unravelled at his touch.
And the way it wasn't enough for me.

I wanted more.

But there was no way I was going to tell him.

'Lina, are you okay?' Scarlet asked as she walked out of her bedroom.

I shook my head and looked up at her. 'Hmm?'

'You've been scrubbing the same mug for ages'

I looked down at the sparkling piece in my hand. 'Oh.'

'Everything alright?'

'Yeah. Perfect. Fine.' My voice went up an octave.

'Okay...I have an afternoon class. I'll see you later?'

I nodded.

Once the front door shut, I exhaled.

It wasn't like she could read my mind.

Not like her brother.

I set the crockery on the rack and was about to sink into the soft couch when my phone rang.

It was the hotel operation team's number.

'Hello?'

'Lina, so sorry to disturb you. I know it's your day off, but the bride only wants to deal with you. She's been holed up in the suite upstairs,' the operations manager said, hurriedly.

'Slow down. I'll be there in thirty-five minutes.' I sighed internally.

'Thank you. I owe you one.' The desperation in his voice was clear.

I set the cup down, a little sad I couldn't spend the rest of the day watching cheesy rom-coms, and walked to my room where I pulled my grey shift dress off the hanger.

Within ten minutes I was dressed and out the door.



'If I'd known you were going to be here, I would've picked you up.'

I almost walked into the mirrored lift doors at the sound of Titan's voice in the lobby of Hotel Verona.

He was wearing all black again, and this time, it sent a warm feeling down my throat all the way to my lower belly. The sleeves of his jumper were pushed up his arms, revealing the muscles in his forearms.

Arms that were wrapped around me not even twenty-four hours ago.

'I wasn't meant to be here,' I said, trying to keep my face as neutral as possible.

Even after all these months, it was still weird to see him here.

He leaned forward to push the lift button.

'Oh yeah, that's how lifts work.'

His lips twitched as he held back a grin.

When the lift arrived, he held his arm out to keep the door ajar and tipped his head to the side. ‘After you.’

We were alone.

For twelve floors.

‘How are you?’

‘That’s the question you’re asking me?’ My gaze met his reflection in the mirrored interior.

‘I want to know.’ He quirked an eyebrow.

My real answer made my cheeks flush—which I was sure he’d noticed—and I had no other response because it would’ve been a lie.

‘So...good?’ he teased.

I inhaled deeply. I had no idea how to be around him right now.

‘You have my laptop,’ I said instead.

‘I also have your vibrator.’

‘Oh my God!’

He smirked.

I couldn’t look at him anymore.

‘I left your laptop in your office, but I think I’ll hold onto your little toy for now.’

He took a step closer and placed his hand on my hip.

‘What are you doing? I’m at work, Titan.’ I protested, but it sent tingles down my spine.

‘Kalina, I didn’t know you were into that.’ His laugh shook his chest. ‘Relax, your zip is only halfway up.’

‘Oh.’ I reached behind my back and his hand brushed mine.

‘All done,’ he whispered.

‘Thank you.’ My tone matched his.

He cleared his throat and took a step back. ‘I’m shocked you’d think I’d have my way with you in the lift outside your

office.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean—.’

‘With only three floors left? Not nearly enough time.’

I opened then closed my mouth.

He smirked. ‘I enjoy watching you squirm.’

‘That’s all you’re getting right now.’

‘Really? What a pity.’ He tutted.

I groaned and he let out a laugh.

When the doors opened to the ballroom floor, we were hit with a flurry of staff, chattering guests, and the overpowering scent of fresh lilies.

My phone vibrated wildly in my hand causing me to drop it, but Titan caught it before it hit the floor.

‘Thank you.’

‘Who is so desperate to see you? Not that I can blame them.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Probably the ops manager.’

Lina, are you here?

16:35

The Maid of Honour said she needs you.

16:35

Bridal Suite. Bring a sewing kit.

16:35

I looked up at him, and he was trying not to smile. ‘I have to go.’

‘Do what you do best,’ He winked at me.

Trying not to cause too much of a panic, I hurriedly made my way to the service lifts, I knew they’d be faster, then sprinted down the passage to the suite. I was breathless when I arrived outside the room but gathered myself enough to knock on the door.

It was yanked open and I was greeted by chaos.

The bride's mother screamed profanities into her phone, two of the bridesmaids whispered frantically, and the Maid of Honour comforted the bride in hushed tones. The bride sniffed into what appeared to have once been a white handkerchief, now stained with black and pink streaks.

'Oh, thank God.' The Maid of Honour ushered me inside and used a somewhat calm but erratic tone to tell me what had happened.

The bride turned around to show me the extent of the rip in the back seam of her wedding dress.

'Stella, I need you to breathe. Everything is going to be fine. Believe it or not, this is not the first time something like this has happened.' I kept my voice soft and soothing.

Stella, the bride, mumbled something incoherent in response.

I crouched down, assessed the damage and was relieved to find it wasn't bad.

'It looks like the seam ripped and not the actual silk. Everything is going to work out, I promise. You'll be walking downstairs and saying "I do" in less than thirty minutes.'

'Really?' Stella asked between hiccupped sobs.

'Really. Now the makeup artist is going to touch up your face while I stitch your dress, and your Maid of Honour'—I looked up at the woman beside us—'is going to get you *one* shot from the mini bar.'

'I thought you said no drinking before the ceremony?' Stella said, looking at my reflection in the full-length mirror in front of her.

'Sometimes we have to bend the rules a little,' I said with a small smile. Something I was learning to do myself.

Once everyone was given their respective duties, I got to work, ensuring the fabric would stay together until the end of the night and hopefully even further.

'There. All done. Your husband is going to need a pair of shears to get this off.'

The bridal party giggled, and Stella, now touched up, breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Where did you learn to do that?’ she asked, then spun around in front of the mirror to inspect the dress. Not a stitch in sight and no one outside of this room would ever know what’d happened.

‘My grandmother is the best dressmaker I’ve ever known. I’ve grown up around these kinds of things.’

‘Thank you so much,’ she said, giving my hand a squeeze before I left the room.

I took rapid breaths in the hallway before I made my way downstairs. The panic was over.

I found the operations manager outside the ceremony venue. ‘I’m so sorry, Lina. She was threatening everyone, and I wouldn’t have called unless it was an emergency.’

‘It’s okay. Breathe. I wasn’t doing anything tonight.’ It sounded a lot sadder out loud than it had in my head.

‘Thank you.’ He pulled me into a hug, which I reciprocated because hugging him was comforting.

‘Thanks again. Go home now. I owe you another day off.’

‘I’m going to hold you to it.’

We parted ways, but I didn’t leave just yet.

I found my usual spot in the back of the ceremony venue, where I could see everything but not be seen. Blending in and becoming a little invisible—the way I liked it.

It always surprised me that this kind of work stressed the living hell out of people, but soothed me. The structure and organisation behind every last detail was absolutely satisfying.

Once the ceremony started, I gave myself ten minutes to listen to the vows and to see *that* look. The one the couple shared when they were announced officially married. That look alone was probably what made me choose this every day. I loved that I got to witness love in such an unadulterated form.

Save for the groom's grandfather, who got lost on his way to the venue and ended up at a different wedding, the reception started off without a hitch.

I finally left and walked down to the foyer and out the doors, breathing in the cool night air.

My ponytail pulled at my scalp and I released it, easing the tension and letting my hair tumble down my back.

I stuffed the hair tie into the pocket of my coat and dug my hands inside for warmth.

'There you are,' Titan said. He walked towards me with the stride of someone who was entirely at ease with themselves.

'Are you tracking me?'

'What?' he asked, letting out a chuckle.

'You're always popping up.'

He grinned. 'Stealthy, you say?'

'You make me tired,' I replied.

'You haven't recovered from last night?'

My eyes widened at his bold question.

'It's only the two of us out here. You can be honest.'

I considered lying, but I had no reason to. 'It was the best sleep I've had in ages.'

'Good.'

I peeked at his black watch.

'I should probably head back home or I'll be up all night.'

'I don't see a problem there.' He smiled cheekily. It was the same smile I'd seen him flash at countless women.

It was working on me now.

No. Focus.

'I should go. Get home, drink some chamomile, and sleep. That sort of thing,' I rambled.

His focused stare made me nervous. ‘Chamomile? Doesn’t sound like a good time.’

‘You should try it, it’s very soothing.’ My voice went up at least two octaves.

He laughed lightly. ‘Sure, Kalina. I’ll definitely do that next time I’m up, frustrated, and can’t sleep.’

My name dragged out on his lips and my stomach dipped.

‘Do you know how to be serious?’

‘You don’t take me seriously.’ His gaze lingered on my lips. ‘Are you cold?’

‘No. A little but it’s okay—’

He stepped forward, wrapped his arms around me, and enveloped me in his warmth. ‘I have about five minutes before I need to check on the team upstairs.’

I didn’t object; he smelled so good. Like an early morning hike through a forest.

‘You’re the perfect height for a chin rest.’

‘I tell Savi the same thing.’

His laughter sent vibrations through my body. ‘Your colleague is standing in the lobby. Is this weird?’

‘We keep our private lives pretty private but...’ I pulled away from his embrace. ‘I really should go.’

‘Okay. Sleep well, dimples.’ He flicked his finger over my cheek as he said it.

I didn’t suppress my smile this time. ‘Night Titan.’

We parted ways and I welcomed the comfort of home; slipping out of the dress and into an oversized T-shirt and leggings.

I considered a snack and some calming tea, which reminded me about my conversation with Titan. I second-guessed myself as I held the box of tea in hand. I wasn’t the witty and flirty one, that was all him.

‘Fuck it.’ I snapped a photo of the box and sent it to him with the caption, “*don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.*”

Snacks won in the end, and I dove under my comforter with my biscuits and book. I’d left the custom-made bookmark from Savi—headless shots of half-naked men that never failed to amuse me—where’d I’d left off. The quote along the bottom said, “The only thing that matters when you’re reading.”

In this particular historical romance, the duke and the main character were arguing in a storm and about to confess their feelings for one another. Things were about to get really steamy in the barn when my phone lit up beside me.

‘Better not be work,’ I said as I unlocked it. I nearly dropped my phone on my face when Titan’s message flashed across my screen. I’d thought he’d be too busy to respond while I was still awake.

I’ll add it to my shopping list...If you try my methods

21:35

And what is that?

21:36

Some of last night’s activities, with or without me

21:36

Now I really dropped my phone, nearly giving myself a concussion. The duke would have to wait. But then, I second-guessed myself. I could go with my usual reaction to his antics, by ignoring him, or...I could play into it.

The latter ended up winning.

What makes you think I don’t?

21:37

You wouldn’t need the tea

21:37

Well, if I had my other...tools, I wouldn't
need the tea

21:37

Say the word and I'll bring it back

21:38

You are incorrigible

21:38

You enjoy it

21:38

He wasn't wrong.

Enjoy your nighttime methods. Think of me

21:39

Enjoy your tea...Oh, I will

21:39

Chapter 14

Act II, Scene VI: The Layla Montague Inn

Titan

Ted and Savi received the furniture for the inn, and I jumped at the opportunity to help as soon as Ted asked.

I knew Kalina would be there.

It'd been a few days since I'd seen her at the hotel, and she was the only thing on my mind. I'd meant it when I'd told her once anything happened between us, I would want more.

'The flooring is done, the electrician is coming later this week, then it's all the painting and finishing touches,' Ted explained.

We walked through the bedrooms, measured the spaces, and tried to determine the best layouts.

Savi strode into the room, enveloped in an oversized fleece hoodie. She wrapped her arms around Ted. 'Hi.'

'My love, you should be resting.' Ted placed his palm on her belly and leaned down to kiss her.

The kiss gravitated toward something more, so I cleared my throat.

'Sorry, can't seem to stay away from each other.' Ted grinned.

'I'm well aware of the two of you.' I laughed. 'No need to apologise, but please remember I'm in the room this time.'

'Nothing you haven't already seen before,' Savi said and winked.

I let out a laugh while redness crept up Ted's neck and into his face.

'I like this setup.' Savi tipped her head at the current layout of the room. It'd taken Ted and I three tries.

‘We can do this for the double room, then switch it around for the suites. They run a little wider,’ Ted said, gesturing wildly with excitement.

Savi nodded in agreement with her husband. ‘Great, I’ll leave you to it. Lina’s on her way, and we have a few wedding things to chat about.’

I tried acting casual at the mere mention of her name, but I wasn’t doing a good job of it judging by the way Ted looked at me.

‘How *is* Kalina?’ Ted asked once Savi left the room.

‘What do you mean?’ I looked up and acted really interested in the trim.

‘You’ve been spending a lot of time together.’

I nodded. ‘She’s good. Did a photo-shoot with her last week.’

‘She seems...happy.’ His brow furrowed.

‘Why do you seem worried?’

‘Savi says I worry too much, but I feel like I didn’t worry enough, and now I’m making up for it.’

‘Worry enough?’ I tilted my head.

‘Jesse.’

I had to admit, I’d forgotten about Ted’s rat of a brother for a moment. It wasn’t difficult to do when Kalina had taken up most of my thoughts.

‘She’s capable, and I don’t think it’s an issue anymore. Or at least not as much as it used to be.’ *Was Jesse the catalyst for the Agreement?* Maybe. But Ted didn’t know about it, and I didn’t want to jeopardise her trust.

Ted nodded, but I could tell this weighed on him.

‘He’s trying to make things right between us, but I don’t know if I’m ready.’

I quirked my eyebrow. ‘That’s...out of character.’

‘I know. Savi won’t hear him out at all, but he’s my brother.’ Ted’s shoulders sagged.

As much as I'd wanted to tell him he should ignore Jesse for the rest of time; I knew my approach to family issues was not a healthy one.

'Do you want things to be okay between the two of you?'

Ted exhaled. 'I don't know.'

'You don't have to decide tonight, but if that's what you want, know Savi and I will support you. I'm sure she'd have some stipulations in place, but she would never ask you to cut him out of your life, and Kalina would understand.'

Ted nodded in agreement. 'You're right.'

'I know.' I clapped him on the back.

I still didn't know the details about what had happened between Jesse and Kalina, but it wasn't my place.

'Come on, let's finish up the rooms before my wife comes back to find us wasting time.'

We completed the task within two hours, and descended the stairs to find Kalina and Savi crowded together in front of a laptop at one of the cafe tables in the dining room.

'Are you done? Can we eat now?' Savi looked panic stricken.

'My love, why were you waiting for us?' Ted rushed to her side and cupped her face.

Kalina laughed. 'She wasn't. I made her a snack—she's ravenous.'

Ted wrapped his arms around his wife and placed a loving kiss on her head. 'Let's feed you and our little darling, shall we?'

Kalina looked up at me, and the way she bit down on her lip made *me* ravenous in a different way.

'You can catch Ted up on the wedding details. I'll get the food,' she said to Savi.

'I can help,' I offered.

To anyone else it would go unnoticed, but the quick flush of her cheeks and rush of her breath told me everything I needed to know.

‘Thanks.’

When she stood, it took me a moment to compose myself.

Dressed in a fitted, black cropped top and flared yoga pants that hugged her perfectly, she wasn’t playing fair.

I followed her to the kitchen, and my gaze raked over her body hungrily. She stepped through the saloon doors, turned around, and collided into me.

I reached out and grabbed her arms. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes. Why are you walking on my heels?’

‘Because you’re torturing me’

She shook her head and chuckled. ‘What?’

I let go of her arms then rubbed my palms over my face. ‘This look,’ I said and gestured to her outfit. ‘It’s... distracting.’

She laughed. ‘Sorry. I had a Pilates class and didn’t have time to change.’

I groaned at the image. ‘You’re killing me.’

‘Come on,’ she said and playfully tapped my arm. ‘Help me with dinner like you so graciously offered.’

‘I can’t be the only one thinking about the other night?’

She paused in front of the large kitchen island.

‘I...’ she stammered. ‘Of course I’m thinking about it. But what are we meant to do?’ She kept her gaze down as she unpacked each of the bags.

I reached across and dragged one of the bags towards me, forcing her to look up. ‘Well, I don’t want things to be weird between us.’

‘It’s not weird.’ She opened the lids of each container, looked inside, then put them down in a neat line.

‘You can’t even look at me.’ I crossed my arms over my chest.

She looked up, to disprove my point. ‘Because you’re looking at me like you want to do it again.’

I shrugged. ‘I do.’

Her cheeks flushed and she busied herself with the food again.

‘Me too,’ she whispered.

I walked around the obstructive island until we faced each other.

Her throat worked and she stepped back, hitting the countertop.

‘Why don’t we?’ I sounded a little too eager. Even to my own ears.

More of Kalina? More time to explore her body and what turned her on?

‘It’s a bad idea.’

‘What if,’ I started, placed my hands on the edge of the counter beside her hips, and leaned in. ‘You gave us rules? You love rules.’

She considered my suggestion for a moment. ‘We’d have to go through what we’ve already covered.’

‘Well...we have flirting and charm,’ I said, and leaned closer. ‘You’re extremely charming, but you don’t always notice the flirting.’

‘Is this you being flirty?’ She crossed her arms over her chest.

I looked down to admire what it did to her breasts.

‘It’s me being my usual self with you.’

‘Eyes up here.’ She gestured to her face.

I grinned. ‘You flirt and you don’t realise it.’

‘Okay, we’ll circle back. What else?’

I thought about the Agreement and her various requests. 'Date etiquette.'

'You haven't given me the go-ahead to go on a date.'

We'd done a lot of talking, a few practice dates, but she was right. No actual dates. 'This week then.'

'Then there's conversations and topics of interest, which I think is actually where things go awry.'

'The coffee shop wasn't an accurate measuring tool. I'll need to think about it a little more.'

'You're doing an awful lot of thinking and not enough action.'

I laughed. 'Are you not happy with your service?'

'I'm going to have to find another mentor...'

A flicker of jealousy rippled through me at the mere thought of her practising like this with someone else.

'You don't have to help me with the last point. Being around you gives me great insight into assholes.'

I placed a palm on my chest. 'You wound me.'

She smiled. 'Kidding. But I have an idea...'

I quirked a brow at her. 'Continue.'

'We can add these as lessons.'

'Sex?'

Her eyes widened then she peeked around my shoulder. 'Yes, sex.' She looked at me again. 'Like I said, you have a way about you. It's very...charismatic.'

A smile tugged on my lips. 'If you wanted to have sex with me, all you had to do was ask.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Right place, right time.'

'Sure...'

'Are you saying no?'

I shook my head. ‘Of course not. I told you I want to do it again, and more.’

‘I think the rules would still be the same? Practice, sufficient heads up, and no kissing.’

The mention of kissing had me looking at her lips. ‘You sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you hungry?’ I asked. My question was two-fold.

She swallowed then shook her head.

‘Then I know where we can start.’



I lied to Ted and Savi and told them we had a secret wedding errand to run. Savi looked like she wanted to question it, but I ushered Kalina out the door before either of them could get a proper look at her face.

‘I wouldn’t have said anything.’ She shrugged on her coat as we stepped outside.

‘Your face would’ve.’

‘You’re the only one who notices it.’

She was mostly right, but I wasn’t going to take the risk.

We passed my bike, and continued down the street toward the Tube.

‘I could meet you wherever we’re going. You don’t have to walk with me.’

‘I like our walks. It’s actually where I find out the most information about you.’ I focused on taking smaller steps so she wouldn’t need to hurry to keep up.

She placed her hands in her pockets. ‘I do a lot of my thinking while I walk, so it makes sense it slips out when you’re around.’

I loved hearing what was going on inside her head.

‘This is why I think it’s the environment you’re in for dates that’s the issue, and not you as a person.’

‘Both of those things can be true.’

‘After tonight, you’ll understand what I mean.’

She paused mid-step. ‘What do you mean? Are we jumping right into it? Tonight?’

I laughed. ‘No. We need to finish our lesson from the other night first.’

Her eyes widened.

‘The photos. We’re going to develop them.’

‘Oh.’

‘I know I told you it’s what I’ve been thinking about. But it’s not *all* I’ve been thinking about.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t be sorry. I like knowing what’s going on inside your head. And the fact you’re thinking about sex with me.’ I wiggled my eyebrows

She laughed then swatted my arm. ‘Stop.’

‘Do you want me to tell you about some of my bad dates to make you feel better?’

She whipped her head to face me. ‘You go on dates?’

‘Well...dated. It was a long time ago.’

‘Tell me.’ She looked up at me with eager eyes and took a step closer.

I laughed. ‘Okay, don’t act so excited. I used to date in high school and the early days of university.’

‘Oh, that’s how you met Ted right?’

Her excitement made her inch closer and closer to me and I wanted to pull her body against mine. Instead, I nodded. ‘Yeah, he was doing a business degree, and I was studying architecture.’

‘Scarlet wanted to follow in her big brother’s footsteps. So cute.’ Kalina pouted her lips and her eyes went wide.

‘Cute doesn’t feel right when you’re talking about me.’

‘But you are. Cute, I mean.’ Her cheeks tinged a light pink.

‘I’m holding onto that admission for later. So, one date brought her mother along.’

‘No.’ Kalina’s hand flew up to cover her gasp. ‘Seriously?’

I laughed. ‘Yes. To be fair, her mom was visiting at the time and she wanted to take her out. A really lovely woman actually.’

Our train arrived and I used it as an excuse to touch Kalina again as we wove through the people.

‘Titan, no.’ Her laughter bubbled up and rang out of her like little bells. ‘What did you do?’

‘I took them out to dinner.’ I shrugged.

She considered what I’d said and her gaze met mine. ‘You’re so lovely.’

‘Why do you always sound surprised?’

‘I know I shouldn’t, you’ve been nothing but wonderful to me, but you have a certain reputation that precedes you.’

‘Tell me what you think of me. Now that you’ve gotten to know me?’

‘Well...’ She looked out of the window thoughtfully. After a few beats, she looked back at me. ‘You’re kind and care about the people close to you, but you don’t like to show it.’

‘Okay, interesting.’ I nodded. ‘What else?’

‘You don’t believe in love, in a romantic sense, but you love those you choose to keep in your life. In an almost protective way.’

‘You’re not wrong.’

She hesitated.

‘You can ask me anything, dimples.’

‘You really don’t believe you’ll find a love like, say, Savi and Ted? An all encompassing, soulmate kind of love?’ She considered me with a tilt of her head.

I shook my head. ‘I don’t think it’s meant for everyone.’

‘Maybe I’m not meant to have a date for the wedding. It’s three weeks away.’

‘You could always go with me.’ I flashed her my most charming grin.

She nodded slowly. ‘That would really annoy Jesse.’

Jesse. It always came back to him. While I’d love nothing more than to annoy him, I wanted to be her date because I wanted to spend the day with her. I shook the thoughts from my head, and plastered a grin on my face. ‘At least you know you’ll have a good time.’

‘We can add it to the Agreement then.’ She spoke about it as if it were something she added to her daily to-do list. She turned to look at the people chatting around us, her shoulders relaxed, and an easy smile across her face, with those little dips in her cheeks.

Had I realised how much this weighed on her, I’d have suggested it sooner.

Our stop came up and we moved through the throng of people, worked our way up the stairs, and down the street to my studio. We were enveloped in darkness when we walked through the door.

‘Have you ever fallen down the stairs?’ Kalina asked, and her gaze lingered on the wrought iron staircase leading up to the loft.

I turned on the dimmers. ‘Almost.’

‘You’re surrounded by hazards.’ She slipped off her sneakers then lined them up next to the shoe rack before unbuttoning her coat and shrugging it off.

It took everything in me not to reach out to touch her, but I drank her in; thinking back to the night when I’d had my hands and lips all over her.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked, lifting her hair up into a high ponytail.

‘Yeah.’ I shrugged my jacket off and hung it up beside her coat. ‘Let’s go.’

I led the way down the passage beside the kitchen to the door with the *do not enter* sign on it.

‘Give me your hand,’ I said.

Kalina hesitantly put her hand in mine. ‘Are you going to murder me?’

I opened the door and we stepped into the small space before I shut it and bathed us in complete darkness.

Our bodies were nearly flush and her sweet scent rushed up to greet me.

‘I’d be the nicest murderer if I told you.’

I couldn’t see her face, but I could hear the eye roll she undoubtedly threw my way. ‘What happens now?’

I pulled aside the dark, heavy curtain and stepped forward.

‘Now we have a little fun.’

Chapter 15

Act II, Scene VII: TA Studios, Hackney

Kalina

We stepped into complete darkness, and my hand was nestled inside Titan's firm grip.

'You can tell me if you're not okay in here. It can get a little claustrophobic for some.'

'I'm okay. Trying not to fall on my face.'

'I've got you.' He gave my hand a squeeze and led me further into the room. He placed my hand on a wooden tabletop and walked away. 'Wait here.'

He let go and movement and rustling sounded behind me before the room was bathed in red light. I blinked until my eyes adjusted and took in the long workbench. It held various contraptions on top of it.

'Are you okay?' He'd returned to my side.

'Claustrophobic for some? How many women have you brought in here?'

'Am I sensing some jealousy?'

'I want to know if this is one of your moves.'

He held back a smile. 'No.'

He was showing me the ropes, and I read into things again. The little voice in my head needed to be put in her place.

'For the sake of your sanity,' he said. He walked toward the right side of the room and returned with a light-coloured piece of fabric in his hand. 'You're the first person I've brought in here other than Scarlet.'

'Oh.'

'Now turn around.'

‘What?’ I didn’t move.

‘Do you trust me?’

‘No,’ I said, but I did as instructed.

He let out a laugh before he slipped his arms over my head. ‘You’re so stubborn.’

The light-coloured fabric turned out to be an apron he tied at my lower back.

It sent tiny shivers down my spine.

He held out a pair of latex gloves. ‘Here, put these on.’

‘Why don’t you have to wear this?’ I snapped the gloves in place.

‘Because I do this all the time.’

I rolled my eyes, even though I was certain he wouldn’t see it. ‘What do we do now?’

‘Step over here, to the enlarger,’ he said and motioned to a giant microscope looking machine.

‘What if I mess it up?’ I stepped forward tentatively.

‘I’m right here, I’ll guide you.’ He stood behind me. ‘You see the image below? You’re going to look through this lens to make sure it’s in focus.’ He pointed at the side. ‘This is the focus finder.’

I leaned over it and looked through the lens. ‘It’s really blurry.’

‘Give me your hand,’ he said gently.

I held out my right hand and he took it in his own. His touch sent tingles down my arm.

‘This is the aperture dial,’ he said and moved his thumb over mine. ‘You see the focus changing?’

‘Mmm hmm.’ The photo cleared; it was the seated one from the photo-shoot.

‘Keep moving it until you think it’s right.’ He took a step back and let me adjust it on my own.

‘I think it’s right.’ Seeing the photo from the other side was so fascinating.

‘Now, take this and place it under here,’ he said as he handed a sheet of photo paper to me. ‘It’s called an easel.’

‘This is nerve wracking. I’m worried about what comes next.’

‘I’ll explain as we go along. It’s a lot of steps.’

‘Okay, as long as there’s no surprises or jump scares.’

‘Some of the steps are quick but nothing requires instant action.’

I nodded, feeling ease wash over me as he remained close.

‘Set the timer to ten seconds, here at the bottom, and keep your hands away from the image.’

He helped me set the clock and we watched the numbers countdown all the way to zero before he switched the machine off.

‘Are we done? That’s it?’ I asked.

He laughed until his shoulders shook. ‘Not even close.’

I pouted.

‘Come on, this is probably the fun part. Grab the paper—carefully—and follow me.’

We moved over to where a set of three trays sat on the countertop. He explained each tray, its contents, and the timing of each step. ‘Once it’s done, you can hang it.’

‘Sounds ominous.’

‘Shooting, hanging. It doesn’t sound great.’ He chuckled.

‘You could tell people you have a secret government job. Makes it sound like espionage.’ I lifted the paper and saw the image come to life. ‘I think it’s a little too light,’ I said with a frown.

‘Did you think you would get it right on the first try?’ He took it from my hands and hung it above the table.

‘Yes,’ I replied without hesitation.

We stared at each other for a moment. ‘You can do anything, but this skill requires more than one try.’

I shook my head. ‘If I could do anything, I’d have a boyfriend.’

He gave me an unimpressed look. ‘Really?’

‘What?’

‘You’re impatient.’

‘I don’t even know what I’m meant to be doing, because you won’t tell me.’ I wanted to cross my arms and stomp my foot.

He took a step closer and wrapped an arm around me.

I sucked in my breath.

‘If you listened to me, you’d know.’

‘What?’ My heart raced and I couldn’t think of a single thing he’d ever said to me.

His gaze bore into mine and he tugged on the knot at my back.

‘Be yourself. You overthink when you’re out in public or on an actual date, but when you’re relaxed...’ He slipped the apron from my shoulders and dropped it onto the floor. ‘You have an air about you. It’s alluring. Use it.’

I was transfixed by his gaze. The way it both calmed and unnerved me.

He didn’t break eye contact as he slipped the gloves from my hands, and dropped them beside the fabric.

‘What do you want, Kalina?’

I reached down between us, his hardness pushed against the zipper of his jeans and he sucked in his breath. He said this was a safe space, and he was a safe person to me. I wanted to feel powerful. I wanted control.

‘I want to do what you did to me.’

He shut his eyes as he inhaled sharply. ‘God...’

‘Why not?’

He laughed in response, but when his eyelids flicked open, his gaze was so intense it made me take a step back.

‘Not so fast.’ He reached out, grabbed my hips, and pulled me close.

I felt him against my thigh.

‘I didn’t say no. Tell me exactly what you want to do.’

My face heated at his unnerving confidence. ‘I can’t...’

‘You can. It’s only the two of us here.’

Butterflies erupted in my stomach but I took a deep breath. ‘I want to make you feel good. The way you made me feel.’ I reached for the buckle on his belt. ‘I want to touch you.’

‘Can I do the same?’ He reached out and stroked between my thighs. It was like a fire ignited inside of me and I moaned.

‘No. I won’t be able to focus on you.’

He chuckled. ‘I see no problem.’

I grabbed his wrist to stop his strokes then took a deep breath. ‘I’ve had some bad experiences before. When I’ve gone down on guys.’

He cupped my face and stroked my cheek with his thumb. ‘You don’t have to do this.’

‘I want to. I know it will make you feel good, which will make me feel good.’ I undid the button on his jeans and tugged the zipper down.

His breath quickened, and a low groan sounded in his throat.

‘Tell me how you like it?’

‘I can’t even think straight right now.’ He closed his eyes.

I took a moment to relish in it, seeing him come undone, before I teased his waistband down and pulled along the elastic of his dark briefs. When I grasped him in my hand he sucked in his breath and leaned back against the bench.

‘Good?’ I asked.

‘Amazing,’ he breathed, and he gripped the wooden edge with one hand.

I teased and stroked him with slow movements, and he groaned with pleasure.

I kneeled in front of him.

‘Kalina...’ he breathed. The end of his sentence trickled off as I teased his tip into my mouth.

The sound he made was somewhere between a moan and a whimper, and it sent an exhilarating thrill through me. His reactions encouraged me to continue. I stroked him with one hand and sucked along the length. The combination seemed to drive him wild.

‘Oh fuck, Kalina.’ He twisted his hand around my ponytail and groaned.

The sound sent a jolt down into my core.

‘You’re so good,’ he mumbled.

I continued as he rocked his hips gently, and his fingers massaged my scalp.

‘Wait,’ he breathed.

I pulled back and he reached for me, lifted me off the ground, then set me down on the worktop.

‘What are you—’ My words were cut off as he curled his fingers into the waistband of my pants and underwear and tugged them down in one fluid motion.

‘I want to make you come first.’

‘What if we...’ I wrapped my leg around him and urged him closer. I wanted to feel him.

‘After,’ he promised.

His hand squeezed a path up my thigh until his finger reached the wetness between them. I bit down on my lip to stifle a moan.

‘I love how ready you are.’ He circled his finger.

‘I liked tasting you,’ I whispered and stroked him again.

‘You were so good. I have no complaints.’

I couldn’t hold back my smile.

‘But I kept thinking about feeling you again. Touching you like this.’ He thrust a finger inside.

‘So...good.’ I sighed.

I matched my strokes with his slow rhythm.

Our lips nearly touched, and our breaths came out in hurried pants.

‘You’re getting close.’

‘Yes...’ I sighed and shifted closer. I wanted him, wanted to feel him inside of me.

He quickened his pace then leaned back. ‘I want to watch you come this time.’

‘I want to have sex with you.’

He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth and chuckled. This turned into a shuddering groan as I mirrored his movement, circling my thumb over his tip.

‘Kalina,’ he moaned.

‘Yes...’

‘Come with me.’ It took one circle of his thumb to shatter me.

My climax rolled through me like a wave. Slow at first, then building and crashing over and over again.

His orgasm shattered through him, my name on his lips as he came on my thigh.

We caught our breaths in silence with our foreheads touching.

‘Be glad you don’t use a blue light in here,’ I said, breaking through the quiet.

His laughter shook his entire body. ‘My God, you’re funny.’

‘Thank you.’

He brushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear and his gaze darted from my eyes to my lips. His hand curled around my neck and he guided me toward him.

I wanted to kiss him too. Really kiss him.

A loud knock sounded at the door to the darkroom.

‘Titan?’ Scarlet called out.

‘Shit,’ we both cursed under our breaths.

I pushed away from him, nearly falling off the workbench, but he caught me then set me down on the floor.

He did up his jeans. ‘Yeah, be right there.’

My eyes widened with panic.

He shook his head, reached behind me, and grabbed a cloth to clean my thigh. Such a simple move, but it had my core tightening again.

I took it from him and wiped my hand as he walked towards the curtain. I’d never gotten dressed as fast as I did at that moment.

With one last look he pushed the heavy curtain aside and stepped into the little space between the door and fabric.

‘I tried calling, but you weren’t answering your phone.’

‘I left it in the kitchen,’ he said.

‘My friends and I were working on an assignment and I wanted some caffeine, thought you’d like to join me.’

‘Not tonight, I still have some things I want to finish up here.’

‘No problem. Is Kalina with you? I thought I saw her bag...’

I held my breath for a second. It wasn’t like Scarlet would *know* what we were doing here. ‘Hey, Scar,’ I called out and tried keeping the nervous energy from my voice.

‘Hey, see you at home,’ she replied.

There was some incoherent mumbling on their end before the sound of receding footsteps was followed by the studio door

slamming shut.

The curtain rustled and the look on Titan's face—along with the way he strode toward me in large quick steps—made my stomach flip.

He stopped in front of me, a look of pure determination on his features. 'Where were we?'

I swallowed hard. I wanted more, my heart raced at the thought of him showing me what else I'd missed. What I could still learn.

Then I panicked.

Maybe this was going too fast?

'I think I should go. It's getting quite late.' My heart raced in my chest.

He nodded. 'Will I see you tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow? Yeah.' My voice went up an octave, but a buffer between us, coupled with some sleep, would help me figure out what was going on inside my head.

I don't know why he made me so nervous, even after I'd been on my knees in front of him not even twenty minutes ago.

I cleared my throat and straightened my top and waistband. 'Great. Night, see you tomorrow.'

He closed the space between us and cupped my face like he'd been doing when we were interrupted. 'You can stop at any point, but I want you to know this was amazing and any guy who told you otherwise was a complete fucker.'

I nodded. 'Thank you.'

He laughed. 'Was it good for you?'

I was thankful he couldn't see the redness in my face. 'Yes.'

'Then you don't have to thank me.'

'I should go.' If I stayed any longer, I wouldn't be able to work through my thoughts.

His brows furrowed. 'I can take you home.'

I shook my head. 'No, that's fine. You're already home.'

I hurried out of the room and he hovered around me as I grabbed my belongings. I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came. I patted his arm because I didn't know how else to greet him after what happened between us.

The entire evening played out in my head, but the walking and ride on the tube gave me the time to process and compartmentalise my jumbled thoughts.

This was Titan. We were friends, helping each other out.

He knew how to flirt, date, and have a really good time.

And I needed all the help I could get.

This was okay.

I repeated the mantra to myself until I fell asleep.

Chapter 16

Act II, Scene VIII: Padua Heights, Finsbury Park

Titan

With less than three weeks left until the wedding, I was meant to be focusing on spending time with Ted, checking in on how the inn renovations were going, and ensuring he was ready for the three-day long celebration of love, commitment, and tradition.

Instead, I focused on Kalina and all the fun celebrations we'd have together.

Last night was burned into my mind. I couldn't sleep all night or focus during the day.

I had a taste, literally, and now I wanted more.

What about after the wedding? When we'd, presumably, spend more time together? Kalina was amazing and wonderful. She would meet someone—and even start a relationship—by the time the wedding rolled around.

Would I go back to my usual meetups—which had been on a bit of a hiatus this past week—and we'd go about our days as if nothing had happened?

But, how could I sit in the same room as her, and watch her with someone else, while thinking about the way she felt and the sounds she made?

All these thoughts had me staring at my blank screen for the last hour.

'This is ridiculous,' I said aloud. I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent Kalina a message.

Hey dimples, are we still on for tonight?

One time. We needed one time together and that would be it.

I shook my head at the nagging thoughts creeping in.

One time wouldn't be enough.

She read the message almost immediately but didn't reply.

I gave her a few minutes while I packed up and closed the studio. Nothing.

I called and she declined, but still no message.

Did she want me to show up unannounced again?

The thought that it was something that excited her, excited me.

If she wanted to play this game, I would take the bait.

But if something was wrong and this wasn't a game, I could stop by her place on my way home—even though it wasn't in the same direction—it would set my mind at ease.

I hopped on my bike and sped to Kalina's house. She was usually home after six if there were no late events.

I rang the doorbell but there was no answer, so I tried her phone again. A faint ringing sound came from the other side.

I knocked on the door loudly. 'Kalina, are you okay?'

A few seconds later the latch clicked and Kalina peeked out from behind the door, wrapped in a blanket.

'Hey, is everything okay?' My panic had already set in.

'Yeah...' came her soft reply.

'Can I come in?'

'Sure.' She stepped aside and let me into the darkened house.

'What's going on?'

She looked like she was about to fall over and her eyes welled up. 'Nothing.'

'Kalina, you're the worst liar in the world and you're not even trying right now.'

Her lip trembled before a sob escaped her.

I stepped forward and wrapped her in my arms. She melted into the hug and nuzzled her face into my chest.

‘Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘It’s not you. I’m having a horrible day,’ she mumbled into the front of my jacket.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

She shook her head.

I leaned back and gently lifted her chin until our gazes met. ‘You can tell me anything.’

I could see the wheels turning in her head. She hesitated and worried about my reaction.

‘I’m not leaving until I know you’re okay.’

She let out a long exhale. ‘I got my period and I wasn’t meant to for another three days. It’s a really bad first day, I’ll be okay. I need to get through my to-do list then I can rest. Don’t worry.’ She tried to smile but failed miserably as fresh tears sprung from her eyes.

‘What do you need to do?’

She shook her head. ‘It’s fine. I can do it.’

I levelled her with a stern look.

‘You don’t need to take care of me. I’ll be okay.’

‘I don’t need to, but I want to.’

She pulled the blanket around her tightly. ‘I’ve been doing this for over eighteen years.’

‘And now I’m here and you don’t need to do it alone.’ I stood my ground. ‘Can you let me take care of you?’

‘I can do it myself.’

She was so fucking stubborn. ‘I want to,’ I said again.

She groaned.

I kicked off my boots then bent down and scooped her into my arms. She protested briefly then rested her head against my

chest. I walked into the bathroom and set her down on the edge of the bathtub. ‘Bath or shower?’

She shrugged.

‘Bath it is.’ I ran the bath and accidentally added too much bubble bath.

‘That’s way too much.’

‘You can be enveloped in them. I’ll be right back, okay?’

She nodded.

In her bedroom, her sheets were balled up on the floor. I’d come back for those. I shook off my heavy jacket and left it on the seat before I grabbed her dressing gown and the largest, fluffiest towel I could find.

I put them on the rail in the bathroom and lit a few of her candles.

‘Have you taken something for the pain?’

‘No.’

‘Kalina.’ I kept my tone neutral.

‘I’d need to eat, and I couldn’t really move.’ She started crying.

I rubbed small circles on her back. ‘Sorry. I can leave if you want to be alone? I won’t push it.’

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘You’re being so nice to me, and I like having you around.’ She swiped at her face with the sleeve of her hoodie.

I crouched down in front of her ‘You really think I’m the worst person in the world?’

‘I don’t mean it in that way,’ she said.

I smiled, and tried putting her at ease. ‘You get comfortable. I’ll be in the kitchen.’

‘Could you...never mind.’ She shook her head.

‘Ask me. I’ll make it happen.’

She fidgeted with her sleeve and refused to look at me.
'Could you sit with me?'

'Is that what you want?'

She nodded.

'Then of course I'll do it.'

'Thank you.'

'Give me a few minutes, okay?' I walked out, leaving the door slightly ajar, before collecting the crumpled pile of sheets on the floor.

A toss in the washing machine with some hydrogen peroxide—which I was not at all surprised Kalina had on hand—and I was back in her bedroom with a fresh set of sheets.

One of the things I enjoyed was the fact that all the items in the house were exactly where I would've put them. Kalina was as logical and methodical in her spaces as I was.

Her scent was embedded in the comforter, and I had to push myself to focus on the task at hand.

Three weeks.

Her bed was made, food ordered, and I had one more task before I'd join her. I scrolled down my contact list and dialled the number I'd been looking for.

'Titan,' Kalina's grandmother said.

'Aditi, how are you?'

'Keeping out of trouble. What about you, beta?'

'Barely.' I leaned against the kitchen counter.

'That's good.'

I pictured her smile.

'Are you well though?'

'Okay, you know, the usual aches and pains.'

I straightened. 'Usual?'

‘Nothing to worry about. I’m on my way to ninety, it comes with the territory. To what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘I need your chai recipe please.’

Her husky laugh filled my earpiece. ‘Is this for my Gulab?’

I had yet to add Aditi’s adorable nickname for Kalina to my repertoire.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Are you taking care of her?’

‘Of course.’

‘Excellent. Let me find my glasses...’

I listened to the rustling on the other end before she returned, read off the ingredients—with very little specification as to the amounts—then recited the method by heart.

Somehow it tasted the same every single time I’d had it. It was like magic.

‘Have a good evening, Aditi.’

‘You too. Send my love to my baby.’

We hung up and I peeked down the passage to check before I prepared all the ingredients and thankfully Kalina had everything on hand.

I added a little extra ginger to the recipe and let it simmer on the stovetop.

I knocked on the door and waited for her reply.

‘Come in.’

I stepped into the steamed-up space to find her immersed beneath the mountain of bubbles. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun, and her cheeks were flushed pink.

‘Are you okay?’ I took a step inside. ‘You look a little out of it.’

‘Yes, this is me when I’m relaxed.’ She laughed.

‘Good.’

‘This is the perfect temperature.’ She slunk a little lower down.

‘I had a feeling you’d like it close to the flames of hell. Glad to know I was right.’

‘It’s like getting a new layer of skin.’

I laughed and took a tentative step closer. ‘You could exfoliate.’

‘I do.’

There was a small pause as she swirled some bubbles around.

I sat and rested my back against the side of the tub. ‘Do you want to tell me about the rest of your day?’

‘It was horrible. I think I freaked out the operations team. I should probably let them know I’m okay.’

‘Good idea. You freaked me out too.’

‘Sorry...’

‘Don’t be. I’m glad you’re okay.’

She waited a beat and swirled some bubbles into a pile above her. ‘Sorry we didn’t...you know. Tonight.’

‘Believe it or not, I’m not here for the sex...mostly.’

She laughed.

‘Although, it’s a really great incentive to this deal. I was genuinely concerned. You have a bad habit of leaving doors unlocked.’

‘Between that and the interruptions.’ She sighed dramatically.

‘We have some time now. Tell me what you want to learn.’

Her eyes widened. ‘How do you talk about sex so casually?’

I shrugged. ‘Easy. Open communication is key.’

‘Not when it comes to this.’ She tapped her fingers on the water’s surface.

‘Gives me time to figure out what I could teach you.’

‘Well, it’s my birthday in less than a week. You have time to plan something.’

‘A lesson for your birthday?’

She stammered. ‘No, we could do...things.’

‘What kinds of things do you imagine me teaching you? Because it sounds like you have high expectations.’

‘Acrobatics, probably.’

I let out a laugh that echoed in the small space and she joined in.

‘But on a serious note, you have more experience than me.’ She slunk lower and her voice was tinged with sadness.

‘Want to tell me about it?’

She stared at the ceiling then looked at me. ‘My only experience was Jesse. He, uh... We were together and he got what he wanted from me when he found the information about the acquisition of Prince Towers. He ended things over text the next day.’

I shoved my hands under my thighs to stop myself from cracking my knuckles. This was why Ted was so upset about the situation.

‘Like I said, all fuckers.’ I wanted to erase every single bad encounter she’d had with men. It wasn’t fair to her and having experienced it for myself, I could say with confidence they were idiots.

That elicited a small smile from her.

‘You knew exactly what you were doing yesterday.’

She hid half her face beneath the water, before coming up. ‘You can’t say things like that in public.’

I chuckled. ‘You get so shy. It’s adorable.’

‘Was it good?’ she asked.

‘If it wasn’t apparent, yes. It was really good.’ I’d thought about it all night. And again this morning. I was thinking about it right now, and my jeans were uncomfortably tight.

‘Good.’

The enthusiasm and spontaneity were as attractive as the act itself. ‘When you enjoy yourself, it makes everything better for everyone.’

‘What do you like?’

Her question threw me off. Even now she was still concerned about me and my feelings when this was all about her.

‘I enjoy watching you enjoy yourself. I like to see you come undone and lose yourself in the moment,’ I said, using every last fibre to resist turning around and looking at her.

‘You have a magical way of making me feel better.’

I could say the same thing about her.

‘Then we’re on the right track. How are you feeling now?’

‘Good. Thank you.’ She offered me a small smile, enough to make her dimples appear.

‘Anything I can do to turn that answer into *extremely amazing*?’

‘I usually watch terribly cheesy movies when I need a pick-me-up, but I couldn’t ask that of you.’

‘Yes, you can.’

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. ‘Really? I thought there’d be more resistance.’

‘I have a feeling you might not make it through an entire movie.’

‘To prove you wrong, and maybe watch you suffer a little, I’m going to force myself to stay awake.’

‘Want to make this interesting? How about a bet?’ I smirked at her.

‘Okay, if I win, you have to join me for a romcom movie marathon.’

‘Deal.’

‘Twenty-four hours.’

Spending an entire day with her wasn't the punishment she thought it was.

'If you win? What do you want?' She sat up, pushing water and bubbles over the edge and onto the tiled floor.

'You're not going to like my answer.'

She let out an exhale. 'One thing about me, I keep to my word.'

'Okay. If I win...' I thought about it, but only one thing came to mind. 'You'll let me take you out on my bike.'

'I knew that would be your request.'

I winked at her. 'You know me well.'

'Can't you choose something else?'

'I could...but then you'd never get to experience the smooth ride that is the Triumph Bonneville T100.'

'I could live with that.' She gave a noncommittal shrug.'

Kalina loved facts. That was the key here. 'It's got improved handling and excellent brakes.'

She let out a big sigh. 'Fine.'

'I promise you'll be safe.'

'I never doubted it.'

The doorbell rang.

'I'll get it, but shout if you need me.'

'You don't have to stay.'

'I'm not going anywhere, as long as you want me here.'

She nodded.

'Besides, I want to win the bet.' I flashed her my best grin.

She flicked water at me as I walked out.

I grabbed the takeout, tipped the delivery driver, then headed to the kitchen to check on the chai.

It was perfect.

I laid all the items out on a tray before I checked the washing machine, then tossed the clean sheets into the dryer.

Kalina walked into the kitchen, now clad in leggings, an oversized hoodie, and fluffy socks. Her eyes darted between the teapot on the stove and the tray on the dining table.

‘What’s this?’ she asked.

‘You need to eat.’

Her lip quivered and her eyes watered.

‘Hey what’s wrong?’ I strode up to her and wrapped her in my arms.

She sniffled. ‘You’re so wonderful.’

‘I thought I was horrible? The *worst*.’ I imitated her and a small laugh escaped against my chest.

‘You’ve been bumped up to a decent level.’

‘I’ll take it.’

‘You really didn’t have to change my sheets.’

‘You’re not feeling well and I’d be a horrible and insecure man if I didn’t support you through this emotionally and physically taxing time.’

‘Why does it sound like you memorised that from a pamphlet?’ She looked up at me.

‘I think I actually did. My mom wanted to ensure I was well equipped with the knowledge of reproduction.’

‘I would’ve loved a pamphlet. Dadi gave me a lecture about not settling for the first boy I slept with and, in short, told me to sow my wild oats.’

I laughed. ‘Sounds exactly like something she would say. Speaking of, she sends her love by the way.’

‘What do you mean?’ Confusion laced her voice.

I tipped my head toward the steaming mugs on the countertop.

‘You did not.’ Kalina walked over and inhaled the steam.
‘She gave you the recipe? She’s never given it to anyone.’

‘We have a special bond.’ I stepped beside her.

‘She must like you a lot.’

She was one of my favourite people in Kalina’s family.
‘You’re lucky she’s out of my league.’

Kalina swatted my arm playfully. ‘Stop.’

I grabbed the teapot. ‘Come on, I have a bet to win.’

‘You’re really going to watch this movie with me?’

‘I never back down from a challenge, dimples.’

‘Oh, it’s so on.’ Kalina grabbed the mugs and I picked up the tray.

‘Lead the way.’

I followed to her bedroom and before I’d even set the tray down, she was under the covers and patted the spot beside her.

I sat up against the headboard and left a rather large space between us considering what we’d done the night before.

‘You’re not going to sit like that through the entire movie, are you?’

‘Yes?’ I crossed my arms over my chest.

‘Get comfortable. It’s nearly three hours long.’

‘What on earth are we watching?’

‘You’ll see,’ she said, grabbed her laptop, and turned the screen away from my view.

I lifted my legs onto the bed, and stretched it out over the comforter.

‘Have you ever watched this?’ she asked, the excitement bursting out of her as she turned the screen toward me.

I was met by the movie title page on the streaming site. ‘I can confidently say I’ve not.’

‘I think you’ll like it.’ She placed it between us and hit play.

It started with a heartbreaking scene of the mother who'd died after childbirth.

Kalina paused it and sat up. 'I'm so sorry. Do you want to watch something else?'

I shook my head. 'No, don't worry about it.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Years of therapy have made it bearable.'

Kalina's lips turned downward. 'Want to tell me about her?'

'What do you want to know?' I brushed some of her hair away from her face.

'What was she like? Like you?'

I smiled. 'She was really funny. And she loved pranks and jokes.'

'You two were close?'

'Very. It was me and her for most of my life.' My chest ached.

'I'm sorry.'

I shook my head. 'Some days are easier than others.'

And most of those days involved Kalina.

'Let's watch something else.' She exited the screen.

'No way. I want to see what's going to happen.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.' I opened it again and hit play.

Her feet inched closer to me until she buried them beneath my legs.

'Don't wiggle,' I chuckled.

'Are you ticklish?' She had a sly grin on her face.

'No.'

'You are.' She wriggled her feet playfully and I shifted.

She laughed and pulled her legs toward her. A pang of disappointment flickered in my chest at the loss of contact.

She grabbed one of the containers and opened it up. ‘You got dumplings?’

‘And soup. It’s good for healing.’

She took a bite of one of the chicken dumplings and did a little dance.

‘What was that?’

‘What was what?’

‘The little dance?’ I reached over and took a dumpling from the container.

‘Oh, I’m happy.’

God, she was adorable.

All I wanted to do right now was kiss her.

Instead, I grabbed the dumpling she’d grasped between her chopsticks, and she shot me a death stare before she grabbed another one and held it out of my reach.

We passed the containers between each other with such ease, like this was a normal and frequent occurrence.

‘This is so unrealistic.’

‘Unrealistic?’ Kalina had moved on from the dumplings to the soup.

‘What? He couldn’t see that his best friend was in love with him?’ I pointed to the second song and dance number on the screen.

‘Because he was too busy falling in love with the new girl with her beautiful hair and shiny green eyes.’ Kalina chomped on some chicken angrily.

‘You have wonderful hair. And beautiful brown eyes.’

She rolled them at me then pointed her spoon at the screen accusatorially. ‘That’s all he cares about.’

‘I’m sure there’s more to it. Maybe his friend is not his type.’

‘They literally do everything together? She plays basketball with him, knows his family, his secrets.’

‘Yeah, a great friend. Not necessarily a great lover.’

‘Great love is based on good friendship. They just said that.’ She scowled, referring to the scene in the movie where the love interest admitted his basis for love was friendship.

‘You can love your friends and not be *in love* with them.’

‘All I know is I wouldn’t trust a guy who was only into me for my looks. He thought he loved the new girl as soon as she walked in. Meanwhile his best friend is right there, showing up and he doesn’t even notice.’

‘He does.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I can see it,’ I said and bit into another dumpling.

‘Then why wouldn’t he tell her how he feels?’

‘It’s not always easy to tell someone how you feel. Maybe he was scared.’

She huffed. ‘He’s still not forgiven.’

‘You cut people off so easily.’

‘Maybe they should think about that before they do something stupid,’ Kalina replied with a cheeky smile.

‘Remind me to never get on your bad side.’

‘You’re in the clear for now.’

I handed her some water and her pain meds. ‘Here, you’ve eaten enough to medicate.’

She took them, set the glass down on the table beside her, and slunk down under the covers. ‘Thank you.’

I had to admit, while the choreographed song and dance sequences were super cheesy, I found myself invested in the rest of the story.

Even when Kalina fell asleep after the halfway mark, I would never admit to her that I sat through the entire movie until the

end. I'd already won the bet, and I didn't need her to use this as leverage.

I would never admit to myself that she made me question everything I'd thought about love and friendship, and I didn't want to think about how I could never go back to the way things were.

Chapter 17

Act II, Scene IX: The Feast, Stradford

Kalina

Savi and I met for lunch after what'd felt like months when, in reality, it'd only been a week or two. Between juggling her professional life and the sickness she'd been experiencing with her pregnancy; our plans had been pushed and postponed long enough.

I didn't want to be scrutinised too closely either.

'How are you?' I asked and leaned forward to offer her some of my hummus.

'She's more active but it's become soothing in a way? Like I know when she's awake.' She broke a piece of flatbread from the basket between us, and scooped up some dip before popping it into her mouth. 'I've been moving my meetings to one day in the week so I don't have to come into the hotel every day. It's quite exhausting.'

I figured if we kept stuffing our faces, I wouldn't have to look at her, and she wouldn't read my expressions.

'But I want to hear about you.' She steeped her fingers under her chin.

So much for my plan.

'Me?' I took a sip of my tea. A buffer if there ever was one.

'Yes, you. You and Titan, more specifically.'

I choked on the liquid and grabbed one of the napkins. 'Wrong pipe,' I explained. My face heated, and I tried thinking of neutral things, but my brain replayed him kneeling down in front of me. Why, brain? Why now?

'What about him?' I replied coolly.

‘Oh, come off it,’ she scoffed. ‘You two are hiding something.’ She pointed an accusatory finger at me. ‘There has to be more? I’ve seen the way you look at each other. It’s all secret gazes and yearning.’

I laughed. ‘Nothing is happening between us.’

‘The two of you hang out to do wedding things? Come on, Lina, you could do this with your eyes closed.’

I wrapped the flatbread around some lamb and drizzled it with tzatziki. ‘We’re friends. Friends hang out.’

‘Mmm hmm.’

I could tell her part of the truth to curb some of her curiosity. It wouldn’t be a lie, not entirely at least, and she’d be less suspicious.

‘Titan’s been guiding me to find a date for the wedding.’

‘Okay,’ she said and set her food down. ‘Let me get this straight, he’s teaching you how to date?’

‘Kind of?’

‘The man who’s notorious for his non-dating persona?’

‘Precisely. He’s very patient and kind.’

She harrumphed. ‘I thought there was something more going on between you two. This baby must be messing with my senses.’

The little wrap in my hand got shoved straight into my mouth. I shook my head, chewed, and swallowed. ‘Nope. Nothing else is going on between us.’

‘How is the search for a date going?’

‘It’s a little slow. But I’m hopeful.’

‘You could go with him. He *is* going to be there.’ She gave me a sly smile before taking a sip of her sparkling water.

Were they secretly talking?

‘We have an understanding. That’s it.’

‘Okay.’

‘Okay?’ It wasn’t like Savi to back down.

‘Yeah. You said there’s nothing happening between the two of you, and while I don’t believe you, you know you can talk to me if you need to. No judgement and no pressure.’

‘Not that I need to, but yes. I won’t keep things from you,’ I lied to her face. Again.

With Jesse, I’d kept our tryst a secret, worried about what Savi would say if she found out, and I ended up hurt and used.

But things weren’t like that with Titan. He wasn’t Jesse.

I drank more tea for my tight throat, and not because I’d swallowed my bite before I’d chewed it enough.

‘You don’t have to keep things from me because you think I don’t have the capacity for it.’ She reached across the table and put one hand over mine. ‘There’s always room for you.’

I nodded even though I wanted to cry. Savi was like a sister to me, and the best older sister anyone could ever ask for. And I was the worst sibling, with my lying and sneaking. It was no wonder she was so worried about me.

We continued eating our lunch in a comfortable silence, and I tried not to spill every single detail about what was happening with Titan, even though I really wanted to.

I hadn’t begun to fully understand it myself, and I didn’t need to have any more confusing ideas put in my head.

The Agreement would be over soon, and Titan wouldn’t have to think about me and my dating problems as much.

We could go back to the way things were.

Chapter 18

Act II, Scene X: La Nova, London

Titan

When I'd started this business six years ago, there were days and nights of no sleep, constant stress, and the fear of failing.

This was somehow a thousand times worse.

I hadn't seen Kalina since the night I went over. It'd been five days.

Five nights of disturbed sleep.

Five nights of torturous dreams. Of holding her. Kissing her. Touching her.

Five nights of manic thoughts that revolved around her all while trying to work on an on location shoot out of town.

This was not what I'd planned.

It wasn't part of the Agreement.

But I wanted more. More than a piece of paper.

I needed to tell her how I felt, even though I barely understood it myself, and I needed to do it tonight. Before anything else happened between us.

I checked my watch then pulled my phone from my pocket to message her.

Hi, are you still up for going out
tonight?

17:35

Hi, yes please. I finally feel human.
I'll be ready by 6.30?

17:35

Perfect

17:36

Where are we going?

17:38

It's still a surprise

17:38

--

17:39

Dress code?

17:39

Always asking the important questions.

Dress for comfort

17:39

Always giving the worst answers.

17:40

My cheeks ached from smiling.

This idea came to me last week, and Kalina's birthday seemed like the perfect opportunity to use it.

My phone rang and the name flashing across my screen surprised me.

'Hazel?' I answered. We rarely called one another, and my heart raced. 'Is everything okay?'

'Hey. I could ask you the same thing. You've been quiet lately.'

Out of all the women I'd met, she was the one who spent our time together analysing me. She said it was an occupational hazard as a psych student.

'Oh. Yeah, I'm caught up in wedding celebrations. For Ted.'

'I figured that was it. Well, that and a combination of a certain someone.'

I sat up in my chair. 'Someone—'

'The girl I met on the Tube. She's cute.' She was smirking; I heard it in her voice.

‘Kalina? We’re friends.’ A straight lie.

There was a pause followed by a sigh. ‘Titan, can I give you some advice?’

‘You’re going to do it whether I say yes or no.’

She laughed. ‘You’re not wrong. But you’re stubborn and also a man.’

‘Oh...kay?’

‘There’s more than friendship there.’

I exhaled. ‘I’d like it to be.’

‘Oh my God. I knew it,’ she shrieked into the receiver, and I had to pull my phone away from my ear.

‘Calm down, she doesn’t know it yet.’

‘Oh, my sweet sweet boy.’ Something tinkled on the other end. Her earrings maybe? She was chastising me with a shake of her head. ‘That girl is smitten with you.’

My heart wanted to go for it, but my head said calm down.

‘I’ll have to see what happens.’ I inhaled. It was what I needed to hear and the last person I expected it from.

‘So, this isn’t a meetup call?’ I asked.

‘Let’s be real—you needed them more than I did. I had a lot of fun, but you wanted the...connection with no strings attached. Do you remember what you told me?’

‘Something really profound,’ I said.

‘You wish. No, you said that you wanted the physical side of things because it was easier. That without the feelings, it was like a business deal.’

‘I still stand by it.’

‘Do you? I saw you that night and something tells me you want to be exclusive. You only had eyes for her and now can have both. Why not go for it?’

‘When did you get so wise?’ I teased.

She laughed. ‘Hey, I was always filled with this knowledge. You were never ready to receive it.’

‘Thanks, Hazel.’

‘So...are you going to tell her?’

‘I was planning to.’ I couldn’t help the smile that played on my lips. It felt good to say it to someone out loud. I toyed with the small black velvet bag on my desk.

‘Oh, I’m so excited. She’s a lucky girl.’ It wasn’t a statement laced with resentment or jealousy. It was one with genuine happiness.

‘Let me tell her before you get too excited.’

‘Trust me. It’s going to be fine.’

‘You seem awfully happy for someone who won’t be benefiting from my company in the future.’

She let out a full belly laugh. ‘Please, did you think you were the only one seeing more than one person? I have a rotating roster too. Professionally and unprofessionally.’

I had to laugh too. ‘You were always my favourite.’

‘You too.’

We said our goodbyes then hung up.

My decision felt right.

I grabbed my things, placed the little bag in my pocket and rushed out the door.



I waited outside the dark blue door for a full minute before knocking.

Kalina yanked it open and stood on the threshold looking like a ray of sunshine.

She was dressed in a pale-yellow dress and dark yellow cardigan. Her hair fell loosely around her shoulders, and a

white bow peeked out from the back of her head.

She was absolutely beautiful.

Her phone was wedged between her ear and shoulder and she waved her hand to usher me inside.

‘Yes, papa, I got the gift. Thank you.’ She held up two fingers and I nodded.

‘I’ll see you at the wedding. Yes, love you.’ She hung up and took a breath before looking up from her screen. ‘Sorry, hi.’

‘Hi. Are you ready or do you need some time?’

‘I’m ready.’ She held her arms out to her sides and did a twirl. The bottom half of her dress was sheer layers of mesh that flared out when she spun and revealed the matching short shorts underneath. ‘Is this fine for your mystery adventure?’

‘Perfect.’ I bit down on my lip to stop myself from kissing her right there.

‘Great, I had no second option.’ She picked her small sling bag off the side table. ‘Wait, one more thing.’

In a blur of yellow, she ran down the passage and returned with a container in her hand. ‘For you.’

‘It’s *your* birthday.’ I shook my head in disbelief.

‘Yes, and *I* love giving gifts too.’

I took it from her outstretched hand and inside lay four perfect bite sized cinnamon rolls.

‘You’re amazing.’

‘Thank you.’ She lifted the edges of her dress as she did a little curtsy. ‘We can eat on the way?’

‘Sure.’ I shut the door behind us.

‘Are we walking?’

‘For a little bit.’

‘I knew it.’ She lifted her foot up in front of us, emphasising the white sneakers she was wearing. ‘I was thinking cute on top and running away from a felony on the bottom.’

I let out a laugh that radiated through my entire body. She peeled away at my nerves until there was nothing but pure adoration left.

She reached over and took one of the little buns from the container and lifted it up towards my lips.

My gaze remained on hers as I slipped the cinnamon roll into my mouth. ‘Delicious.’

She dropped her gaze but even in the dim streetlights, I could see the flush on her cheeks. It was the reaction I needed to push me forward with my decision.

We walked for a while, up the street and along the winding pavement into the next.

‘Is everything okay?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ I couldn’t tell her I’d been rehearsing all the ways to tell her how I feel. ‘It’s been a long day. But, I’m happy to be here with you.’

‘I’m happy to be here too.’ She looked up at me. ‘Even if this *is* the part where you murder me.’

A laugh shook through me. ‘You’re really intent on me murdering you.’

‘You have the means and motive.’

We got to the Tube and Kalina studied the Northern Line route as we waited.

‘Is it food?’ she asked.

I took another cinnamon roll and popped it into my mouth. ‘There is food, if that’s your indirect way of asking if we’re eating.’

‘But is it the main activity?’

‘No.’

‘Mmm...’ She continued looking at the map.

The train arrived at our stop, and the wheels in her head were still turning.

‘Is it something I’ve done before?’

I shook my head. ‘Not as far as I know.’

‘You’re really bad at these games.’

‘You are impatient.’

My phone buzzed and I wanted to ignore it, to focus on being here with Kalina. But curiosity won in the end.

I read the body of the email.

‘Interesting.’

‘What?’ Kalina turned to me.

‘Look,’ I said, holding my phone out.

Her gaze darted across the screen.

‘Mae’s inviting you to the launch of her new jewellery line?’ Kalina’s eyes widened.

‘Yeah?’ I looked at the screen again.

‘Exciting. Do you think it’s like an informal interview type thing?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe all the candidates are invited?’

‘I think she wants to sus you out. How cool.’

‘Terrifying is more like it.’

‘Oh, come on. You get to meet her before the actual interview? This is great. You can figure her out. Maybe even flirt a little.’ She wiggled her eyebrows at me.

‘I don’t think that’s her style.’

‘Let’s brainstorm tonight and figure out your approach.’

‘The sexiest plans I’ve ever heard.’

‘You’re helping me, it’s only fair if I help you too.’ Her gaze softened and she placed a comforting hand on my arm.

‘Thank you.’

‘Now, open the attachment.’ She moved forward and her scent enveloped my senses.

‘Here, let me.’ She took my phone, scrolled down, and clicked on the attachment.

‘Okay so blah blah blah, welcome and stuff. Thursday the twenty-first, which is a week from now and before any wedding events.’

‘You’d make an amazing personal assistant.’

‘You couldn’t afford me.’ Her face bent low, but I caught the glimpse of a half-moon in her right cheek. ‘The Hall of Origins at the Obsidian Tower. Super fancy, some more details about parking and stuff. Very boring.’

‘Lovely summary.’

‘I know, right? It says the dress code is black tie and you can bring a plus one. How thoughtful. Are you going to take Scarlet?’

Our gazes met. ‘I’d like to take you, actually.’

‘Oh.’ Her eyes dropped to the screen again.

‘You don’t have to feel obligated.’

A moment went by where she didn’t say anything and her head remained bowed over the phone. I wanted to read her expressions, to know what was going on inside her head.

‘No, I want to. This is so important to you. Thank you for including me.’

‘But?’

She looked up at me. ‘What am I going to wear?’

I chuckled. ‘Of course that’s what you’re thinking about. You definitely have something hidden away you can wear.’

‘Of course I do, I’m not an animal. But it has to be perfect.’

‘We can go through all your options then decide. If you want to buy something else, you can let me know.’

‘A shopping montage?’ she squealed.

‘A what?’

‘We really need to watch more romance movies. Actually, speaking of...who won the bet? You were gone when I woke up and I don’t know if it’s memories from watching the movie way too many times, or if I actually made it to the end.’

I gave her my best winning grin. ‘You barely made it past the halfway mark.’

‘Dammit.’

‘Maybe next time.’ My tone was filled with a promise I hoped she understood. I wanted more nights like those.

‘Why didn’t you cash in on your prize tonight then?’

We were at our stop and I pocketed my phone. ‘I like keeping things exciting.’

She groaned. ‘The anticipation will kill me.’

‘You’re the one who reminded me.’

‘You would’ve brought it up eventually.’

I shrugged. ‘True.’

I read the names of the streets, recalling the address of the venue, when a nondescript building lay ahead. Nothing about the exterior gave way to what was inside.

‘Um...this is starting to feel like a murder scene.’

‘Do you trust me?’ I asked. It was a question I’d asked her many times before.

She swallowed. ‘Yes.’

I wrapped my arm around her and we pushed through the doors. ‘I would never put you in a dangerous situation.’

We entered a foyer, which was clean, but sparse. An archway led down a long, dark passage with light at the end.

‘Wow, Dadi will not be pleased to find my body here.’ Kalina said, nearly inaudibly.

‘I promise nothing bad will happen to you.’

She pushed her body against mine, and I had no complaints.

As we got closer to the end of the passage, there was a din of chatter and soft music.

We took in the sights ahead as we stepped into the archway. A warehouse with large windows all around, blue fibre optic shapes hung from the ceiling, and uplighting in a multitude of colours shone on the exposed brick walls.

It created an underwater atmosphere—as if it were made by aliens—and all around were people milling about, talking to one another, and dancing as they wore glowing headphones. The colours ranged from red, to blue, and green.

‘What is this?’ Kalina looked up in awe.

A woman walked over to us. ‘Hi, welcome to La Nova. Do you have tickets or are you purchasing from us?’

‘I have them,’ I said and scrolled through my phone until I got to the confirmation email.

She scanned the code. ‘Thank you, I’ll be right back.’

Once she walked away, I looked over at Kalina. ‘Surprise, silent disco.’

‘Wow.’ Her gaze was transfixed on the ceiling and the gently swaying light structures.

The woman returned with two pairs of headphones. ‘These are the dials for the channels, there are three DJs, so three options. The volume is on the right. If you need anything you can come over here,’ she gestured to the table in the far-left corner. ‘And one of us can assist. Have fun.’

I took them and placed one on Kalina’s head.

‘Good?’ I lifted my thumb.

She nodded.

I placed mine on and the sounds around us dulled to a faint ambient noise. I took her hand in mine and led her through the clusters of people. She entwined our fingers, sending a euphoric rush through my chest.

When I turned to check on her, she was fidgeting with the dial on the left. Every time she twisted it, the lights on the

headphones changed. She settled on the blue.

‘What?’ she mouthed at me then smiled.

I shook my head. ‘Nothing.’

She pointed to her ear then gave me a thumbs up.

I twisted until I found the blue channel; an electric pop song started playing and I adjusted the volume.

Kalina nodded excitedly and shrugged off her cardigan.

I tipped my head to the empty bench beside the window and she deposited it there. I stripped off my jacket and sweater and followed suit.

Her dress highlighted every single part of her body I’d come to enjoy. From the straps on her shoulders that crossed in the back, to the way the neckline dipped low, and the mesh panels along her waist giving me a peek underneath. I wanted to peel it off her body and touch, kiss, and taste every single part of her skin.

Kalina pointed to the middle of the room, interrupting my inappropriate thoughts, as she took my hand in hers, and led me through the crowded space. She lifted our arms above her head and spun underneath our linked hands. Her amber eyes and dimpled cheeks were all it took to break me.

Her joy was infectious, and she smiled at me before she closed her eyes and let the music move her. She coaxed me into finally joining and between touching her and giving in to the music, I lost track of the songs. It was the two of us, beneath the blue hued light, and no one to interrupt us.

I reached up to cup her face, but her hand went straight to her headphones as she lifted one end.

I mirrored her movement.

‘I need something to drink.’ She leaned close.

Her scent was intoxicating. I wanted to bury my face in her neck and hear her sighs.

‘Let’s go.’

We dropped the headphones around our necks and walked outside.

The veranda was strung with fairy lights and a long bar with awning sat at the furthest end.

‘This is so fun. Thank you.’

‘Are you done?’ I quirked an eyebrow at her.

She shook her head furiously. ‘Not even close.’

‘Good.’

‘I’m having a great time.’

‘Before I forget.’ I reached into my pocket for the small black velvet bag.

Her eyes widened. ‘You didn’t have to. You’re already taking me out.’

‘I wanted to. Happy birthday.’ I held out the bag.

‘What is it?’ she asked rhetorically as she peered inside before pouring the contents into her palm. A silver spiralled ring fell out. The metal beads shifted as she inspected it.

Her eyes widened with recognition.

‘Oh my God. I love it. Thank you.’ She threw her arms around my neck, and leapt off the ground in the process.

I laughed as she landed straight into my chest, and nearly knocked the wind from me. ‘You’re welcome.’

She hadn’t seen the little card inside; a message on one side and a morse code decoder on the other, but her excitement was enough for me.

She didn’t move, and I didn’t want to let go. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her in place.

She fit so perfectly in that space, her sweet scent right below my face, and warmth seeping through my T-shirt.

After a few minutes, she sank down to the ground and pulled away to look up at me. It was only then I realised she had tears in her eyes.

‘What’s wrong?’ I cupped her face.

‘I really appreciate it.’

‘You’re so easy to please.’ I swiped at her cheeks.

She slipped the ring on her index finger, using her thumb to spin the beads. ‘It’s perfect.’

‘You have such beautiful hands,’ I said. I brushed my thumb over the side of her fingers, where she’d often chew the skin until it was raw. ‘Thought it would help.’

She glowed under the fairy lights. Her eyes shone golden, and her lips were pink and full.

Everything about her drew me in.

I wanted to tell her and opened my mouth, but she let out a frustrated groan.

She used the back of her hands to swipe at her face. ‘Gosh, I’m such a mess. Let me freshen up.’

‘Of course. I’ll get the drinks.’

She held onto the bag and I took it from her hand, stashing it in my pocket. She’d get to see it later.

Watching her walk away left a knot in my stomach. It had to be now, if I waited any longer, then it would only get harder. I pulled out my phone to check my notifications when a call came through and I accidentally swiped the answer button instead of rejecting it.

‘I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me.’ My father’s voice made my blood run cold.

I lifted the phone to my ear. ‘Karl.’

‘You sound busy.’

‘I am,’ I ground out.

‘We didn’t end off on the best terms the last time we spoke.’

‘Is this your way of saying sorry?’ That would be a first.

He laughed. ‘I guess yes, I want to work on things between us. Scarlet won’t talk to me. I figured it had something to do

with you.'

I exhaled, long and hard. 'She's a grown woman. I can't make her do anything more than you can.'

'I think we need to get together and have some quality family time.'

The thought made my head throb.

'Sure,' I agreed. I wanted this conversation to end and Kalina was walking towards me. 'We can. I need to go.'

'Of course,' he said, then chuckled. 'I didn't expect you to be home. Enjoy yourself, don't settle.'

My chest heated and the words left my mouth before I'd even had a chance to think about them. 'I'm actually seeing someone.'

'Oh? What's she like?'

'Not your type,' I bit out.

'Sounds too good for you then,' my father said with a laugh. 'As much as you try, you're every bit like your old man.' He sounded proud.

'I'm not like you.'

'Screwing with women? We're more alike than you think. Send Scarlet my love.'

He hung up.

Fucking hell.

Now, the excitement was gone and replaced with a gnawing feeling in my gut.

I didn't want to ruin the night for Kalina, so I plastered a smile on my face and ordered our drinks.

'Thank you,' she said, taking the bottle from my hand and lifting it to her lips.

Her neck was exposed and highlighted by the lights above us. There was no part of her I didn't want to explore right now. But it would be out of frustration and anger and not for the right reasons.

Further proving my father's point.

We stepped up to the railing and I set my bottle down on the ledge below us.

She put her headphones on, unaware of the thoughts currently circulating in my head.

'Oh, this is a good song. Wanna go back inside?' she yelled.

I laughed. 'Sure.'

I needed to switch my thoughts off.

I could tell Kalina tomorrow night at the dinner Savi and Ted were hosting.

Tonight was about her, celebrating this occasion, and forgetting what Karl had said.

The latter being really difficult to do, but I focused instead on the way Kalina let the music work through her. Like it was part of her.

By the end of the night, she was still dancing and twirling along the pavement, all the way up the street to her house.

She walked up the three small steps and paused in front of the door. In a flash, she spun around and leaned down to hug me.

'Thank you. Tonight was fun.'

'You're welcome.'

When she pulled away, her gaze lingered on mine then dipped down my face.

I'd wanted this.

I'd been thinking about kissing her all night, but now, Karl's words hung in the air above me.

We're more alike than you think.

'I'll see you tomorrow?' I said, instead of kissing her, instead of touching her, instead of telling her everything. It could wait. Tonight needed to end on a good note.

I wanted her to remember this night for what it was.

She let go of my shoulders then nodded.

‘Night.’

‘Goodnight, Titan.’

I strode toward my bike, before I could change my mind. Before I pulled away, I turned around one last time and she stood on the threshold, twirling the beads on her finger.

Chapter 19

Act II, Scene XI: Basilic, London

Kalina

How could a night be both perfect and confusing?

I twirled the beads on the ring Titan had gifted me. It was a thoughtful and beautiful gift, and it meant so much.

He'd been paying attention.

Did friends buy each other jewellery?

I wanted to be around him all the time.

I wanted him to kiss me last night.

I wanted more.

Did he want more too?

'Lina, shouldn't you be on your way home already?' the supervisor asked.

He broke me from my thoughts, but maybe it was a good thing. I needed a break from the relentless replays of last night. Of how we'd danced together then...nothing. It was like Titan had shut down.

'Yes, I'm nearly done.' I sent out my last email then grabbed my things and rushed home.

It only took me getting to the Tube to obsess again.

Titan invited me out.

He took me to a place I could enjoy without being overwhelmed and dysregulated, and, if I was correct in my thinking, it seemed like he'd wanted to kiss me.

I wanted to kiss him too. I'd been wanting to ever since the night he'd come over and taken care of me.

But maybe I'd misread things.

Like I always did.

Tonight was the night. Tonight, I'd talk to him and figure out if this was one-sided. If it was, I'd stop it in its tracks. Savi and Ted were going to be together forever. I couldn't add another person to the list of reasons being in a room with Ted's friends and family was uncomfortable.

I mentally rotated the three outfits I'd planned for tonight and as soon as I reached the front door, I knew which one it would be. With a toss of my bag on the hook in the entryway, I rushed inside and headed straight for the bathroom.

I needed to shave my legs.

Being careful not to nick my skin, I did the entire front and back. My wax therapist would have to forgive me, but I didn't want to risk anything tonight.

I had fifteen minutes and I was a woman possessed as I flitted between my wardrobe—hauling out the emerald green dress—the dresser, and the bathroom.

The black lace and mesh bodysuit I'd bought and never worn would finally have its time to shine tonight. Hopefully.

If there was ever a night for beautiful and confidence-boosting lingerie, tonight was it. After slathering glow oil all over my skin, I pulled on the bodysuit and shimmied into the dress.

With its lace-up back, boned waist and flared skirt, it fit perfectly every single time. And the things it did for my cleavage were sinful.

The sleeves ended at the wrist and the hem fell above the knee. With a pair of sheer black stockings, black platform heels, and dusty rose lipstick, I was ready.

I took a turn in front of the full-length mirror; the skirt twirled around and the velvet fabric had an almost glimmery sheen to it.

One thing was certain about tonight; Titan wouldn't be able to look away. No matter how hard he tried.

I finished the look off with the silver ring.

‘Lina, oh my gosh,’ Scarlet exclaimed as she appeared in the doorway.

She was dressed in a dark blue ankle length silk dress with a pair of killer silver heels.

‘I could say the same about you.’

‘I know, right?’ She flicked her leg out and lifted the hem so I’d get a good look at the straps running up her calves. ‘Perks of having a caring brother.’

My stomach did a flip at the mere suggestion of Titan.

‘He has great taste.’

‘For sure.’ She smirked. ‘He’s so thoughtful.’

‘Yeah.’

She did the one arched eyebrow thing and I gathered my things so I wouldn’t have to look her in the eye.

‘Shall we?’

‘Let’s go.’ Scarlet did a little shoulder shimmy.



This dinner was the first of many pre-wedding celebrations, and was being held at Basilic. A tall glass building, Basilic was the type of place requiring a reservation months in advance, unless of course you knew someone. Between the Montagues and the Rays, there were enough people to go around.

We hurried from the car as rain came down in a constant shower and were instantly in awe of the interior. The streetlights shone through the glass walls of the lobby and bounced off the crystal chandeliers.

The water droplets looked like glitter.

The host showed us where the coatroom was then gestured to the grand staircase. ‘And the restaurant is on the next floor.’

Scarlet shrugged off her coat and handed it to me. ‘Would you mind? I need to find the ladies.’

She was gone in a flash, and I walked toward the door on my left. I reached for the door handle, but it swung open and Titan stood on the other side.

He was dressed in a dark grey suit that fit him like a glove. His white shirt underneath had two undone buttons, giving me a full view of his neck.

I wanted to bury my face in it.

‘Kalina,’ he breathed. His gaze raked down my body then back to my face. It lingered on my lips.

‘Hi.’ Really brain? That’s the best you could do?

His lips twitched at the corners. ‘Hi.’

The intensity and focus in his gaze had me staring at the spot between our feet.

So much for my bold plans. All it took was one look from him to turn me into a puddle.

‘I actually wanted to talk to you. Could we—’

His words were cut off by Savi’s voice. ‘Hello hello. We’re here. I hope we’re not too late.’

She was a vision in an off-white strappy dress that highlighted her chest and waist, while skimming over her bump, which had popped since I’d last seen her.

‘Nope, right on time,’ I said, and pulled her into a hug.

Ted joined us and before I could respond to Titan, Savi took the coat from my arms and placed it in his.

‘Would you mind? Lina and I need to chat.’

‘Sure, of course.’ Titan sighed, but if Savi saw it, she didn’t say anything.

Titan came to stand behind me. ‘Let me.’

His fingers on my shoulders as they curled beneath the collar of my coat sent shivers down my spine.

‘Thank you.’

Savi hooked her arm through mine. ‘We’ll meet you upstairs.’

As soon as we were out of earshot, she looked at me. ‘Is everything okay? Looks like we stumbled into something back there.’

‘Everything’s perfect.’ I gave her hand a squeeze. My tone, however, said otherwise.

‘Come on, you can take one night off from wedding duties. Let’s have some fun.’

I couldn’t tell Savi there were next to no wedding duties Titan and I’d been working on. I’d been doing this for years and could plan it with my eyes closed.

‘Sure. Anything for the bride.’ I offered her my best wedding planner smile.

We reached the top of the staircase, and both our breaths hitched at the view. The entire restaurant was surrounded by glass walls, overlooking the city skyline.

Jesse and Lexie were seated at the table. Lexie blew kisses our way, and Jesse spoke loudly to one of my uncles about his latest acquisition for the Montague Group.

A voice I’d once enjoyed now made my skin crawl. I shivered at the thought of being intimate with him. Of sharing something so amazing with someone who couldn’t even be bothered to stick around to ask me how I was feeling.

‘Ignore them. He’s been extra irritating lately.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He wants to make things right with Ted and he’s playing nice so he can go back to working with his mom and Ted.’

I snickered. ‘Is Ted allowing that?’

Savi chuckled. ‘No way. He’s making him sweat.’

‘Thank you. I needed to hear that today.’

Savi nodded.

We greeted her parents, Ted's mother, and some of our aunts and uncles.

'My Gulab and Ladoo,' Dadi said to us. She pulled us into a group hug.

'Where are your handsome men?'

'Our?' I asked.

'She means Titan,' Savi said and nudged me in my ribs.

'Dadi...' I groaned.

'Snatch him up before I do.' With that, Dadi walked away to greet some relatives.

'She's been so persistent lately,' I said.

Savi only raised her perfectly threaded eyebrows. 'Mmm... and I wonder why.'

'What do you mean?' I narrowed my gaze at her.

'Nothing.' She pursed her lips as if to keep them shut.

'Hello, you gorgeous bride.' Scarlet leaned down to air kiss both of Savi's cheeks.

'Thank you for coming.' Savi beamed.

'Of course. Thank you for having me. Are there any cute guys coming tonight? Ones who aren't related to either of you. No offence, your cousins are boring.'

Savi and I both laughed.

'Yeah, they're not really great at dating.'

'Runs in the family,' I mumbled.

'Hey, you're going to be fine.' Savi squeezed my hand reassuringly. She looked down at the ring on my finger and gave the beads a little spin.

'Anyway,' I crossed my arms over my chest so she couldn't inspect it. 'No one but family and two of Ted's uni friends are coming tonight. I checked the RSVP list this afternoon.'

'Well...' Savi started, but there was a cheeky glint in her eyes.

‘What do you mean well? What did you do?’

It was at that moment Titan walked over, his long strides eating up the distance of the room until he was in front of me.

‘Sorry ladies, I need to borrow Kalina for a moment.’ He didn’t wait for their response as he placed a hand on my lower back and ushered me away from Savi and Scarlet.

‘Is everything okay? Is something wrong with the fish? I knew it would be the fish.’ I took a deep steadying breath as we came to a stop.

‘What? No.’ He shook his head, and his bright green gaze met mine. ‘The thing I wanted to talk to you about earlier...’ He ran his hand through his hair. I’d never seen him so flustered. ‘I...’ He stopped and took a deep breath. It wasn’t like him to not find the words.

I reached out and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. ‘Go ahead,’ I said.

He opened his mouth to speak. ‘I wanted to tell you. Well, I actually wanted to tell you last night, I—’

His words cut off as three men popped up behind him.

‘T,’ one of them exclaimed as they patted his back.

‘It’s been ages,’ the other said, with a polite nod.

‘Yeah, too long,’ Titan ground out. He greeted each of them in turn, taking their hands and giving them the half hug men did with each other.

They stared expectedly at me then at Titan.

‘Sorry. This is Kalina,’ Titan said.

I gave them my best smile.

‘These are some of our friends from uni,’ Titan waved his hand across them.

‘Nick, Rowan, and...’ I didn’t know who the third guy was because he hadn’t RSVP’d.

He took a step closer and offered his outstretched hand to me. ‘Charlie, lovely to finally meet Savi’s pretty cousin.’

When he smiled, his light brown eyes narrowed. A genuine and warm look if I'd ever seen one.

My cheeks burned, and I reached out to shake his hand. 'Wonderful to meet you too, Charlie.'

'Hey, don't hog her.' One of the other guys said and took my hand. 'I'm Nick.'

'You didn't say she was this beautiful.' Charlie's statement was directed at Titan.

Titan cleared his throat. 'Must you be a menace?'

'Mr. Romance; always one step ahead of us,' Nick said.

Charlie grinned at me. 'Can't waste any time with the three of you around.'

I laughed and wanted to fan my face. He was cute. From his scruffy beard sprinkling his strong jaw, to the way his brown hair looked like he'd rolled out of bed, thrown on a suit, and walked into this room.

'It's lovely to finally meet you. Titan's told us so much about you,' the other friend said.

Titan shut his eyes and inhaled deeply.

'You have?' I exclaimed. I couldn't believe I'd come up in conversation with his friends when, before this very moment, I wasn't aware they'd existed.

'Also, Rowan, that's the meaning of my name.' I placed my hand on my chest as I spoke to the quiet friend.

'Courage and wisdom,' Charlie said, his lips curled into a grin.

A flush crept into my cheeks and seeped down my neck.

'I see your hand is empty. Can I get you a drink?' Charlie asked, and offered his arm to me.

I looked over at Titan, his eyebrows furrowed and his lips downturned.

'One second,' I said to Charlie. 'Wait you were saying something?'

He shook his head. 'It's nothing.'

'Are you sure? It sounded important.'

'Yes. Go.' He tipped his head toward Charlie.

I gave him one last look and searched his eyes for a clue into his thoughts. It came up blank.

'Okay.'

I wrapped my hand around Charlie's outstretched arm and he led me to the bar.

'I love this name,' he said, looking at the sign for the signature drinks of the evening. A fizzy pink one aptly named *Much a Woo About Nothing* caught his eye.

'Thanks, I did a deep dive into puns for this.'

He ordered two and leaned an elbow on the bar top. 'Rumour has it you're partly behind Ted and Savi's illicit affair.'

'Something my aunt and uncle weren't too pleased about.' I stopped myself before I revealed too much about the entire incident.

Titan's voice popped into my head.

If you meet someone, listen to what they're saying and don't tell them too much off the bat. Get a feel of their personality first.

Even though he'd never said these words to me in person, they were little nuggets of information he'd text me after a lesson.

I hadn't been expecting it and shook my head to get him out.

Charlie's laugh was light, like little bells. 'Oh, it sounds like there's a story there.'

'Long enough to fill the pages of a book.'

He grinned. 'I'd read that story.'

'You like reading?' I couldn't contain my excitement. Titan's advice would have to wait for another time.

'Yes, mostly sci-fi and mystery.' His cheeks reddened.

‘Sounds fun. Not something I’d read, but reading is good regardless.’

‘What do you like to read?’ His gaze was so intense, I needed to inspect my nails. I’d chosen to go with a dark green colour because it reminded me of the soft knit jumper Titan wore.

I cleared my throat. ‘Romance.’

A sheepish smile spread across his face. ‘See, I didn’t want to say it because I wanted to look really cool in front of you, but I love romance novels.’

That certainly took me by surprise. Romantic or not, you didn’t find a lot of men reading romance novels and openly admitting to it. There was such a stigma around it, but seeing him get excited about it was endearing.

‘Romance novels are cool to me.’

He did a little air pump, and I laughed. He was adorable.

‘I know this is really sudden, and we only met like ten minutes ago, but I’d love to take you out.’

The bartender put our drinks in front of us and I took a sip to stall even though I had no reason to say no. I could go out with him, and I didn’t need to feel guilty.

I looked over Charlie’s shoulder to where Titan spoke to Ted and the rest of their friends. He wasn’t looking at us, but his relaxed shoulders and soft smile made it clear he was at ease.

This was what I’d wanted. Titan had held up his end of the Agreement and he was the one who’d encouraged me. I didn’t need his permission.

And, as much as I’d come here tonight with the intention of leaving with him, saying yes to Charlie was for the best.

‘When did you have in mind?’ I replied.

Chapter 20

Act II, Scene XII: Basilic, London

Titan

I should have spoken to Kalina last night.

I should have kissed her on the dance floor under the blue lights.

I shouldn't have let Karl's voice play in my head like a broken record.

As she stood at the bar and looked up at Charlie, nodding at something he said, my chest ached.

Her dimple deepened in one cheek as her lips curved into a small smile.

'Is this family made of beautiful women?' Nick said.

Not him as well.

It wasn't Kalina he was looking at. His gaze followed Scarlet as she walked our way.

'That's my sister,' I grumbled.

Rowan cleared his throat and Nick coughed profusely.

'Come on, let's get you a drink for your throat,' Rowan said to Nick.

They both disappeared as Scarlet came to a stop.

'Hello hello,' she said with a megawatt grin. 'Who's the guy with Lina?'

Kalina laughed nervously, and she spun the beads on her ring.

'That's Charlie.'

'The co-founder of SLY?' Scarlet's eyebrows shot up.

'The very same,' I said.

‘How did that happen?’ Scarlet crossed her arms and watched them.

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

Which wasn’t a lie. I don’t know how I let the moment slip from my fingers, and now Kalina and Charlie walked toward us, the event’s signature pink drinks in both of their hands, and a flush on Kalina’s face to match.

‘This must be Scarlet,’ Charlie said, and extended a hand toward her. ‘You have almost the exact same face.’

Obviously hadn’t occurred to Nick.

‘And hair,’ Kalina added.

‘Titan, we should catch up this week. And Lina.’ He lifted Kalina’s hand and kissed her knuckles. ‘Lovely to meet you. I’ll save you a seat.’

‘Thank you.’ Kalina’s cheeks were still tinged pink.

She sipped on her drink and watched him walk away.

‘He’s cute.’ Scarlet exclaimed.

‘He is,’ Kalina murmured. Her eyebrows knitted together and her lips pulled into a thin line.

Savi and Ted sidled up to us before I could say anything. Talking to Kalina alone proved harder by the minute.

‘So...’ Savi started, ‘we see you’ve met Charlie.’

‘You knew he was coming?’ Kalina’s surprise mirrored my own.

Savi smirked. ‘He called Ted, but he wasn’t sure he’d make it. Luckily, he managed to finish some projects in time.’

Ted shook his head with an amused smile on his face. ‘Charlie is a wild card; we never know when we’re going to see him.’

Kalina’s eyes were hazy as she processed the information.

Scarlet got dragged away by Savi’s mother, leaving Ted, Savi, Kalina, and me alone.

‘Charlie is the romantic one.’ Savi wiggled her eyebrows at Kalina. ‘He wanted to meet you. Asked if you were single.’

‘I wish I’d known he was coming.’ Kalina spun the beads on her ring at an alarming rate.

I wanted to reach out to grasp her fingers and caress her palm until the tension in her shoulders eased.

Instead, I flexed my hand then stuck them in my pockets.

‘I thought you’d get too in your head if you knew. I’m sorry.’

Kalina stopped her anxious movements, and she shook her head. ‘It’s okay. I think I’m fine.’ She took slow breaths, but the little wrinkle between her brows didn’t budge.

‘He’s harmless. Promise.’ Ted reassured her.

‘His parents are amazing, Ted told me all the guys would visit them during the holidays. And he was in a six-year relationship, so you know he’s not afraid of commitment.’

Savi looked over at me for a brief moment, but it was so quick I wasn’t sure if I imagined it.

‘Why did it end?’ Kalina asked.

‘He wanted to get married, and she didn’t.’ The way Savi spoke about Charlie was like she was his PR agent.

‘Come on, Lina. Give him a chance.’ She was getting close to begging Kalina at this point.

‘He asked me out and I’m considering it.’

‘Titan, would you please tell Kalina Charlie is perfect for her?’

Kalina turned to me, chewed her lower lip, met my gaze, then straightened her features.

Savi was right.

Karl was right.

Charlie had the perfect family. His parents were as amazing as Savi’d said. They’d practically taken all of us in during the festive season. He was the co-founder of a billion-dollar cyber

security company, and he really was the most romantic one of us all.

Kalina deserved it all. She deserved the best.

‘Charlie is perfect for you,’ I said.

What had happened between us was nothing more than a test run. An agreement to help her find the perfect person.

I shook my head, as if to rid myself of the thoughts I’d had earlier.

Nothing could happen here.

Charlie and Kalina would be happy together.

This is the way things were meant to be and Kalina and I would remain friends.

I excused myself and walked away before I looked at her face and changed my mind. I wasn’t going to get in the way of Kalina and her greatest shot at happiness.

Chapter 21

Act II, Scene XIII: Date in London

Kalina

The dinner for Ted and Savi was as perfect as it could be.

Family and friends gathered together to celebrate their love, all they'd overcome, and their beautiful future.

I tried my best to be excited and happy, but I couldn't stop thinking about Titan. After all these weeks together, I'd thought I could read him. I'd thought after tonight, something more would happen between us.

But he'd agreed with Savi.

Because all we had was part of the Agreement. Something I came up with. Something I asked him to do. And he'd held up his end of the bargain, he'd found me a date for the wedding.

Then why did I feel like I always did after a breakup? Why was my heart in my throat now?

Charlie was only in town until the wedding—which gave us less than two weeks to find a day where we were both available. We picked a day, time, and agreed on a movie.

Movie dates were a great first date choice. Dark room, not too much talking, and a chance to get cosy.

I sat at my dressing table and applied the third shade of lipstick within ten minutes. It didn't feel right. I groaned and wiped off the dusty pink shade, then tried again.

Easy, with no expectations. What this date was meant to be. There would be no awkward lull in the conversation or personal questions I wasn't sure how to answer.

Everything would be fine.

'Lina, why does it look like your cupboard exploded?' Scarlet popped up in my doorway, her eyes wide as she took in

the destruction of my bedroom. Clothes covered every surface—from my bed, to the floor, and the ottoman behind me. ‘And why do you look like you’re having an existential crisis?’

‘Because I am?’

She hurried into my room; concern causing her brows to furrow. ‘Hey, talk to me, what’s wrong?’

‘I have a date. With Charlie,’ I added the explanation as if I’d been seeing anyone else.

‘Oh.’ She scrunched up her nose then shook her head.

‘Oh? Scarlet, what do you mean.’ I was ready to rip my hair out.

‘No,’ she said and lifted her hands up in front of her. To defend herself? To defend me? Who knew. ‘Charlie is sweet and really cute. I’m...surprised is all. I thought...’

‘What?’ I nearly grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake.

‘Nothing.’ She shook her head. ‘It’s great. He’s great. You’re great.’

‘If you say great one more time...’

She took a step back. ‘Breathe. You look amazing, if it’s any consolation.’

‘Thank you. I’m having a little bit of a crisis.’ I looked down at the green knitted dress. It was the seventh outfit I’d tried on.

‘You should wear the brownish-red lipstick. It makes your eyes pop.’ She pushed some clothes toward the edge of my bed then sat.

I reapplied the second lipstick I’d tried on and turned to face her. ‘This one?’

‘Perfect.’

‘Are you sure?’ I lifted a hand to fidget with my hair,

‘Yes. Stop worrying.’

The doorbell rang and I grabbed my phone. ‘He’s early.’

‘I’ll get it,’ Scarlet said and rushed to the door.

I flattened the front of my dress, where the slit had gotten all twisted. The sound of laughter came from the entryway, followed by a voice I'd recognise in my sleep.

A voice that didn't belong to Charlie.

'Titan?' I walked out of my bedroom.

There he stood. All tall and windswept in his leather jacket and dark jeans. His frame crowded the doorway and his gaze raked down my body before it settled on my eyes. 'Hi.'

'What are you doing here?' I swallowed. My throat had gone dry all of a sudden.

'I didn't think there'd be a problem with me visiting my sister.' He quirked a brow at me.

I mentally facepalmed myself. Of course he wasn't here to see me. My heart rate needed to slow down.

'Titan's been promising to take me out for weeks, but I think his age has gotten to him, and now his idea of a fun time is ordering in. He's been too busy for me lately.' Scarlet rolled her eyes playfully.

My gaze met his, and I was thankful Scarlet couldn't read minds. Judging by the look on Titan's face, we'd had the same thought of our time spent together. The late nights out. The way he'd made me come against the wall on my left. Or the way we'd spent the night dancing under the UV lights and almost kissed.

I wiped my clammy hands down the front of my dress. His presence before Charlie arrived was not on my list, and it threw me off.

Titan stepped inside, walked towards me, and stopped short. 'You have plans tonight?'

'She has a date with Charlie,' Scarlet replied as she shut the door.

Titan's jaw clenched. 'Oh.'

I wanted to ask why that was the response from both of them, but Scarlet intervened.

‘Maybe we should go out tonight. Let me grab my jacket.’

She left us alone, and we stood with nothing but silence between us.

‘I—’

‘Are you—’

We paused.

‘Go ahead.’ He gestured with his hand.

‘I wanted to call you about tonight.’

He ran his free hand through his dark blonde hair. ‘You don’t have to tell me about every date you go on.’

I stumbled over my thoughts for a moment. His response was blunt and cold and his tone was a lot firmer than I was used to.

‘I wasn’t asking for permission. I...never mind.’ It was pointless. I’d read into his reactions at dinner and even before then. It was best if I left things the way they were.

A knock on the open door made me jump.

Charlie stood outside, braving the chill in a tan coat, with a bouquet of light pink roses in hand.

I sidestepped Titan and walked towards him.

‘Lina...’ He leaned forward to hug me. ‘You look beautiful.’

‘Thank you.’ The blood rushed to my cheeks as I took the bouquet from his outstretched hands. ‘Let me get my coat and bag.’

I gestured for him to follow me inside.

‘Titan, didn’t know I’d be seeing you here,’ Charlie said. They hugged one another while I set the flowers down on the side table.

‘Neither did I. He’s here to pick Scarlet up,’ I explained as if I’d been caught cheating. Charlie and I weren’t dating.

Well, neither were Titan and I.

‘I won’t be home too late,’ Scarlet said to me.

‘You’re with your brother, enjoy.’

Titan looked like he had something to say, but thought better of it. He nodded at Charlie then me before he stomped out.

‘Coat and bag,’ I reminded Charlie.

‘Take your time.’ He offered me a small smile.

I rushed into my room and took the opportunity to check my reflection in the full-length mirror. It was as good as it was going to get.

I joined Charlie in the entryway as he looked at a framed photo on the side table. It was one from Savi and Ted’s official marriage at the courthouse.

‘Trust Teddy to surprise us all,’ Charlie said.

I looked down at the frame; Savi and Ted, wrapped up in each other’s arms, while Titan, Ted’s mother, Savi’s parents, Dadi and myself stood around them.

‘It was an adventure.’ I laughed. An understatement if ever there were one. Savi and Ted’s story couldn’t be summed up in one word.

‘Shall we? We have enough time for you to tell me all about it.’ Charlie offered his arm to me.

I curled my arm around his and we walked while I told him about the last eleven months.



‘I’m really glad you said yes,’ Charlie whispered.

The movie—a romcom with fake dating—had begun and I had popcorn in my cheeks like a chipmunk.

‘Mmm?’ I managed around a swallow. ‘To the movie? I love romcoms.’

I could see his faint smile in the light of the screen. ‘To go out with me.’

I turned to look at the popcorn holder on my lap, but didn't try to hide the smile on my face. 'Thanks for asking.'

We spent the first half of the movie turning to one another when we both laughed at the same things and the second half was spent with my hand in his as he'd intertwined our fingers, then asked me if it was okay.

It was like being a teenager again.

The movie ended with the characters admitting their actual feelings for each other, because it was always real. I loved this trope. Where everyone but the two main characters knew they'd end up together.

When the movie ended, and we paused in the lobby, his gaze scanned my face. 'I don't want to say goodnight yet.'

'Me neither.' I had a nice time and Charlie was considerate and kind.

'Would you like to get something warm? To drink?'

I tilted my head to the side. 'Hot chocolate?'

'Yes, please. I love the sound of that.' He beamed back at me, and we walked out of the building.

An icy wind swept right into us, and even with thermal layers, I still shivered.

'Come here,' he said and lifted his arm so I could move closer to his side. He wrapped it around my shoulders. 'Better?'

'Toasty,' I said and nestled against him.

'You said you were planning the reception and the pre-wedding events? How's that going?' Charlie asked, as he picked up our conversation where it'd left off when the movie began.

'It's more stressful than usual. The stakes feel higher with this, like the joining of both families is out there for everyone to see.'

'Do you feel like it's too much?' He turned his head toward me.

I peeked up at him before looking down at my feet again. ‘No, it’s not something I can’t do. Or something I don’t feel confident doing, I want it to feel right. I want people to see what I see when I look at them.’

‘That soul-mate kind of love?’

I didn’t have to look up to know he was smiling. I nodded. ‘Exactly. They’ve overcome so much, and even though this wedding is mostly for their parents, it feels right to have it reflect who they are. As individuals and as a couple.’

‘Your face lights up when you talk about events,’ he stated.

‘Sorry. Too much?’

‘Not at all. I like that you love what you do.’ He pulled me closer.

It was the first time I was on a date with a guy who seemed interested in what I did.

Other than all those times I’d practised with Titan. That didn’t count.

‘Tell me about SLY. I don’t know much about cyber-security.’

‘It’s not that interesting.’ He let out a light laugh. ‘Leo is the one who enjoys the actual IT side of things—he’s the co-founder—and I really like the business and admin side of things.’

‘I’ve never met another person who loved admin.’

He grinned. ‘Next date? I can show you all the files and subfolders.’

I bit my bottom lip to stifle my smile. ‘Sure.’

We walked toward the lit-up cafe a few streets away from the cinema. Charlie had an air about him, warm and soft, and it set me at ease.

Maybe it was because he’d gotten the approval from so many, but I needed to remember this was one date.

‘Oh, I didn’t realise everyone would have the same idea as us,’ Charlie said.

We’d stepped into the cafe where the loud din of conversation washed over us. The place was packed and there was barely room to get to the counter.

My heart sped up at the sheer volume of people in this tiny space. I reached down to touch the beads on my ring, when my hand brushed Charlie’s.

He looked down at my hand, then between me and the counter. ‘Want to try another place?’

I nodded eagerly.

‘Okay, let’s go.’

When we made it back outside, he wrapped his arm around me again.

‘Are you sure? I don’t mind waiting back there.’ It was a lie I had a hard time concealing.

‘It means I get to spend more time with you.’

I smiled. I was having a great night too.

So, we took the longest route back to my place, and stopped at a smaller cafe along the way. It was one of my favourites. Filled with shelves, and all of them were stuffed with second-hand books. The store was cosy and the decor was all rich wood and soft threadbare rugs.

It was comforting.

Charlie went to the counter to get our drinks while I browsed the spines on the shelves, and looked for the titles I was missing in my historical romance series. I found two of the original illustrated covers of a series I’d been obsessed with since I was fifteen.

‘Here you go, hot chocolate.’ Charlie held out the takeaway cup. ‘I wasn’t sure if you’d like mini marshmallows, but I thought who wouldn’t? So, I got them.’

‘Thank you.’ I took it from him and let out a small laugh. ‘You were right, I love them.’

I'd forgotten my lactase at home and it never occurred to me to ask for a milk alternative. I'd suffer later, but that was future Kalina's problem.

She was going to hate me.

'What did you find?'

I lifted the books to show him the covers.

'I loved that series.' His cheeks-tinged pink.

I shook my head in disbelief. 'You read it?'

'Yes.'

'I haven't finished it. I was missing these two.'

'It's so good. That one's my favourite.' He tapped the light pink cover.

'I'm excited to get into it.'

We browsed the other shelves and showed each other some of the books we loved and the ones we had yet to read.

'This is one of my favourite series,' he said.

I leaned over to look at the book he'd taken off the shelf. 'Oh, I just read Albert's book.'

'That's my favourite one.'

'I loved it.'

'Have you read the others?' He grabbed two more books from the shelf.

I shook my head. 'No, I haven't had a chance to get to the bookstore lately.'

It wasn't the full truth. I couldn't read any more books without having dreams of Titan reenacting the scenes.

'Great.' He took the books from my hand and added it to the unstable pile in his arms. 'Let me.'

I shook my head. 'No Charlie, you can't.'

He scoffed. 'Nonsense. It's actually selfish of me. I want to talk to someone about books three and four.'

‘Then let me get it.’

‘No way. This is my treat.’ He walked towards the counter and wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I conceded.

‘Thank you.’

He added a cute bookmark to the purchase.

‘I love reading updates.’ He held up the brown-paper bag.

‘You’re too much.’ I chuckled.

‘I’ve never met anyone else that loved these books. So, I should actually be thanking you.’

‘Do you want to stay? Or walk?’

He shifted the handles of the bag over his forearm. ‘We can walk.’

I wrapped my arm around his and we chatted about Albert’s book until we reached my front door.

‘I had a great time tonight.’

‘I did too, thank you so much. And for the books.’ I lifted the bag he’d handed to me.

‘I know it’s a lot, and you barely know me, but could I take you out tomorrow night?’

I didn’t hesitate this time. ‘Yeah, I’d like that.’

‘Perfect. Are you okay with surprises?’ He looked down at me eagerly.

Titan’s voice played in my head. *If a guy looks like a puppy, it’s probably because the idea or thought means a lot to him. You should run with it.*

‘Yeah, surprises are fun.’ I hoped I hid the discomfort in my voice. Surprises were not for me.

Except Titan’s surprises. Those were all good.

‘Great. Then I’ll see you tomorrow.’ He beamed.

‘Thank you. For tonight.’

‘Anytime. This was fun.’

He waited for a beat, then leaned forward ever so slightly.

I took a step towards him and he cupped my face. ‘May I kiss you?’

I nodded.

His lips brushed mine in a whisper of a kiss.

I leaned in, and placed my palm on his chest to steady myself.

He pulled away a few seconds later, a slight curve to his lips before they met my forehead. ‘Goodnight, Lina.’

I offered him a smile in return and a wave goodbye before I climbed the steps. I wasn’t expecting fireworks or a symphony, and the kiss was nice by all accounts.

But that was it. It was nice.

Charlie was nice.

So, there had to be something wrong with me.

Chapter 22

Act II, Scene XIV: The Nomad, Greenwich

Kalina

Charlie sent me tickets and a link to a music festival.
Which was certainly a...surprise.

I'm sure I could endure a night of crowds, extremely loud music, and flashing lights.

It would be fine.

I messaged Charlie with an update as I left work, responding to the last text he'd sent earlier.

Hi, I'm leaving the office now. See you
soon.

18:30

My plan was simple; meet Charlie and have a good time together.

Easy right?

I got home and stared at the outfit on my bed. With a lot of research, and not a lot of work during the day, I'd discovered *The Nomad* was a themed music festival held indoors and often ran late into the night.

Dressing up made it all worthwhile.

I took my time to shower, carefully apply my makeup, and change into a leather skirt that'd been gathering dust in my wardrobe. Tonight was it's time to shine.

An hour later I popped my earphones in as I walked to the Tube.

Charlie was surprised I hadn't immediately started the next book in the series but, between work and the need to sleep, I couldn't bring myself to it.

Five minutes later I had the entire series of eight books, in audiobook format, delivered to my phone. Charlie was an all or nothing kind of guy.

I found a seat and settled in to continue where I'd left off. Book two was a second chance romance where the characters went through nearly ten years of heartache before finding each other again. I knew it was going to break me in the best possible way.

I could only hope my dreams remained Titan free for the rest of the series.

An hour later, the rakish love interest watched the main character dancing at the ball with another suitor and I'd arrived at my stop.

A warehouse larger than La Nova, but less creepy looking, came into view. People were crowded at the entrance receiving wristbands, the music was loud and vibrated all the way to where I stood, and everyone was dressed up in either an extremely sexy costume or one that seemed impractical for the space. They looked great.

'Hi. Do you have tickets or would you like to purchase at the door?' a young woman asked.

I lifted my phone with the QR code on the screen. 'I'm waiting for someone. This is his ticket as well.'

'Great, I can give you his band and you can give it to him when he arrives.' She scanned the code and looked at the screen before giving me two aqua coloured bands. 'This is for your entrance.' She pulled out two gold bands. 'And this is for the VIP section'

'Oh.' I obviously didn't read the tickets correctly, but it felt like something Charlie would've done.

'Here's a map of the layout and lineup. Enjoy.' the woman said.

I put the map in the pocket of my coat, slipped two of the bands onto my wrist, and the others into my bag, then walked through the doors.

Two things happened then; the crowds cheered, sending a wave of sound over me, and the band shouted loudly into their mics.

‘Perfect,’ I mumbled.

My earphones beeped in my ears and my stomach dropped. I rummaged through my bag for the case and the little yellow light flashed. I could’ve sworn it was green when I pulled the charging cable out earlier in the day, but it meant I only had about an hour of noise dulling.

Charlie would be here soon and I’d be okay.

I’m here.

19:45

The message wasn’t delivered to Charlie, but maybe his phone had died on the way. I’d stay close to the entrance just in case.

Ten minutes turned into thirty, which turned into an hour. I needed to find something to eat and drink. He’d find me when he came?

‘Oh, fuck it.’

I glanced at the map, to figure out where the bar and food was. It was really well thought out and the directional signage was excellent. I needed to look into the event organisers when I got a chance.

‘Food,’ I said to myself. I followed the green path on the map until I reached a veranda with food and beverage vendors. There was bunting and lights strung overhead creating a warm and inviting atmosphere.

The hardest thing to do was choose; between pizza, dumplings, and wraps. With another glance at my phone, and still no response from Charlie, the pizza won.

I popped two lactase pills and walked toward the yellow neon sign.



My earphones died.

It was getting close to ten p.m. and there was no sign of Charlie.

Texts had gone unread and phone calls went straight to voicemail.

No need to panic. There must be a valid explanation.

I could leave, go home, and figure this out in the morning.

I squeezed through the crowd, aiming for the door when I knocked into someone.

‘Sorry,’ I mumbled, knowing they wouldn’t hear me even if I shouted.

The guy braced his hands on my upper arms and his gaze roamed down my body. ‘No worries.’

I tried moving out of his grasp but he tightened it

‘Where are you going? Stay. Let’s dance.’

‘No thank you.’ I pulled back, harder now, and managed to get free. I turned and nearly sprinted to the door.

As soon as I was outside, I exhaled loudly.

I reached for my phone and wanted to call a car when footsteps sounded behind me.

‘Are you here with anyone?’ It was the same guy.

I plastered a smile on my face before I replied, ‘Yeah. Getting some air. My friends are waiting for me.’

‘Oh. So, you wouldn’t mind if I stayed outside with you for a while? Don’t want you out here all alone.’

I didn’t know how to respond.

‘You’re really sexy. I love your outfit.’ He ogled my thighs and exposed midriff through the sheer fabric.

I regretted wearing this outfit now.

I could call a car or walk to the Tube But, both of those seemed like bad ideas. What if he tried to get into the car with me? Or followed me?

‘I should get back to my friends.’

‘Great, I’ll walk you.’

‘Actually, I wanted to find the ladies.’

‘I can show you.’

I swallowed back tears as he stepped closer and placed a hand, firm and sure, on my back. I had no idea what my next step was. My heart thrummed in my ears and the pizza made its way back up my throat.

We walked toward the side of the building where a line had grown and when it was my turn, I ducked into the nearest stall. My hands shook as I scrolled through my phone and tried Charlie’s number again.

‘The number you have dialled is not available, please...’

Voicemail again.

Fuck.

I could call Savi. Or Ted. But it was late.

My breath started rattling and tears pricked my eyes. This was not okay. I was not okay.

My thoughts slowed. There was one person I could call.

But we hadn’t spoken to each other since my birthday.

Did I have much of a choice?

He could’ve been out with someone. Was this really the best idea?

My body decided before my brain could, and I hit the call button.

He answered on the first ring.

‘Kalina?’ Concern laced his voice. Ambient noise flowed through the earpiece.

I hadn't thought about what he might be doing. Or who he was with.

'Hi,' I said, and tears of relief pooled in my eyes. 'I'm really sorry to do this. I was meant to meet Charlie, and I have no idea where he is. I'm kind of stranded and scared and I didn't know who else to call—'

'Where are you?' his voice went taut and I heard rustling on his end.

'Some club...Studio something? In Greenwich. I can send you the location?' My voice cracked and the tears threatened to flow over.

'I'll be there in fifteen minutes, stay inside,' his voice was rough. 'Are you safe?'

'There's this guy, he won't leave me alone.'

'Okay. Where are you?'

'In the bathroom. But the one beside the building. I was trying to shake him off.'

'Wait there.' He dropped the call.

I cleaned up my face and splashed some water on my neck.

He was coming.

Everything would be okay.

I tossed my phone into my pocket

'Pull yourself together Kalina,' I said to myself. I waited for as long as I could in the stall, but the minutes didn't seem to go by fast enough.

'Hey.' Banging sounded on the door. 'Come on, I need to use the loo.'

Fuck.

I unlatched the door and was met by the face of an upset girl with beautiful silver eyeshadow.

'Sorry.'

She scoffed and pushed into the stall, leaving me face to face with the stranger. His eyes shone with purpose.

‘I have to go. My friend is here.’ I added an apologetic shrug.

‘Oh, that’s too bad. But, let me make sure you get there safely.’

It’d been nearly ten minutes. Titan could be here by the time I reached the drop off zone on the other side of the building.

‘Okay. Thank you.’ I kept a polite smile on my face, while my hands shook beside me.

I took the smallest steps I could as I passed the entrance. A group of smokers stood to one side and when we turned the corner a car pulled away with some party goers calling it a night.

‘Finally got you alone,’ he said, a harshness laced his words as he advanced on me.

My back hit the wall and my heart sank down into my stomach as I realised the parking spot was deserted.

Chapter 23

Act II, Scene XV: The Nomad, Greenwich

Titan

‘I have to go,’ I said to the woman at the bar.

I’d considered going home with her, to keep any thoughts of Kalina at bay.

But now I would do anything to get to her. And fast.

I shrugged my jacket on and grabbed my helmet.

All I’d thought about since last night was Kalina.

And Kalina with Charlie.

And what a terrible friend I was.

Fucking hell.

It didn’t matter that I likely broke the speed limit, or pulled some risky and stupid moves on the road, as soon as she’d sent me her location I was on my bike.

I’d barely pulled into a parking spot before I was off my bike.

‘Don’t touch me!’ A voice yelled from the shadows beside the wall and it took a second for my eyes to adjust, but my ears knew the voice like my own.

With one arm on the wall, a guy leaned over her.

My stomach dropped. I clenched my fist, and stalked towards her in long, quick strides. Before I’d reached them, the guy groaned and doubled over.

Kalina’s eyes widened then her gaze met mine. ‘I’ve always wanted to do that.’

‘Are you okay? Did he hurt you?’ I wrapped my hands around her arms and I assessed her face and body.

‘No, no I’m okay. He...it’s okay. I’m fine.’ She shook her head.

She didn’t look fine. Her eyes were glossy and her body shook.

‘Wait right here,’ I said and turned on my heel to the guy who writhed on the ground as his hands cupped the front of his jeans.

I crouched in front of him, grabbed the front of his shirt, and pushed his back against the wall, making sure his head hit the exposed brick hard enough for him to groan.

‘If you so much as *breathe* in her direction again, I will break your fucking kneecaps. Apologise.’

‘I’m...I’m...sorry,’ he stammered.

‘You’re lucky she got to you before I could.’

I let him go and his body landed on the ground with a loud thump.

Kalina’s face had reddened and the tears that had threatened to fall before streamed down her cheeks now.

I wrapped an arm around her and walked a short distance away from the spot.

‘Hey,’ I said, and pulled her into a hug. ‘I’m here, it’s okay. You’re okay.’

She wrapped her arms around me and I held her against my chest until her breath steadied.

‘What if you weren’t here?’

I rubbed her back in small circles. ‘You handled things pretty well on your own.’

Her breath stuttered as she inhaled. ‘Could you take me home, please?’

‘Of course.’ I brushed my knuckle along her cheek lightly. ‘Give me one second.’

I held her around the waist as I walked to the entrance. The security eyed me as I came close.

I told him about the guy lying in a heap outside the bathroom. He nodded once at me. 'I'll handle it.'

Kalina looked between us, her brows furrowed in confusion.

'Don't ask.' It was best she didn't know what would happen to him, and by the look of the bouncer, it was going to hurt.

Even from out here, the place was full, loud, and warm. Kalina's nightmare.

'Let's go. You're not going to be happy with the transport.'

She smiled, even though it didn't reach her eyes. 'Cashing in your prize?'

'I would never force you, dimples.'

'I want to get home as quickly as possible.'

'Is that an enthusiastic consent to the bike ride?'

A small smile crept onto her face. 'Yes. Come on, before I change my mind.'

I pulled a jacket from the side saddle bag once we reached the bike. 'Take off your coat.'

'Won't it be cold?' She pulled her coat closer to her body.

'No, you'll be warm and safe. The most important thing.' I held out the jacket.

She shrugged the rust-coloured coat off her shoulders and my throat restricted. It was not the time to be looking at her, but the black mesh top and leather mini skirt jumbled my thoughts.

I shook my head to clear it. She really turned my mind, and life, upside down.

'It's Scarlet's but it should work to protect you.' I zipped it up and adjusted it. The sleeves were way too long and it fit Kalina really well in the chest.

'Is the helmet going to mess up my hair?' She pouted, trying to get a smile out of me, but she was still shaken. Her body was literally shaking in my grip.

I brushed some of her hair back. 'It'll keep you safe.'

She nodded.

‘May I?’ I said and lifted the helmet above her head.

‘Yes,’ she whispered.

I helped her tighten the straps and every part of me wanted to pull her into my arms and hold her until she stopped shaking.

But I needed to get her home. Needed her to feel safe.

I put my helmet on and stepped over the bike. ‘Come on,’ I patted the seat behind me.

‘Can you help me?’ Her voice was so soft. It broke my heart.

‘Hold on here,’ I said, and patted my shoulder, ‘and put your foot here, then swing your leg over.’

She tried twice before I held out my arm to steady her and give her the leverage to get her leg over.

‘I won’t let you fall. I promise.’

She pushed her body flush against mine, and her thighs hugged my hips tightly.

It was not the time for me to go hard but my body decided to override my brain.

This was wrong. Kalina and Charlie were getting to know each other.

Not to mention she’d just had a traumatic experience.

‘How will you know if I’m okay back here?’ she yelled over the rumble of the engine.

‘Here, if you need me to stop, tap thrice.’ I took her hands in mine and wrapped them around my middle then tapped against her knuckles.

‘Okay,’ she yelled and tapped once. ‘Like morse code?’

It reminded me that I still had her birthday card in the pocket of my jeans.

‘Yeah, exactly like that.’

I gave her hand a squeeze and she squeezed back once. I took it as a signal from her and started the ride to her house.

I took it slower than I would've if I were alone.

Kalina's arms and legs clutched me like her life depended on it. Which, I guess, in a way they did. I rode through the back streets so she wouldn't be overwhelmed by the late-night drivers.

When we reached her house, I parked beside the pavement then killed the engine. I held her arm to steady her as she climbed off the seat.

'You okay?'

'Yes.'

I smiled. 'Good.'

I helped her remove the helmet before taking off my own. Her hands immediately went up to smooth down her hair.

I wanted to tell her she looked beautiful every single time I saw her. Every version of her was beautiful to me. But, instead, I gathered her coat from my bag.

'Scarlet should be home. Are you going to be okay?'

She nodded. 'Yes, thank you again.' Her gaze darted from mine to the ground and back again.

I took a step closer and she closed the distance.

'Kalina—' I started. I had no plan for what it was I'd wanted to say, but her ringing phone made us both jump, neither of us realising how close we'd been to each other.

'Sorry,' she said as she rummaged through her bag and pulled out the noisy device.

'Charlie?' She answered the call and relief flooded her voice and features.

My heart sank.

'I'm fine. I'm home...' She looked up at me and her gaze darted across my face.

I inhaled deeply.

'I'm not. I'm at home. I called Titan.'

I took a few steps away from her to give her some privacy and mindlessly scrolled through my messages.

There was one from a regular meetup and another for work.

I texted her back to say I wouldn't make it tonight and ignored the work text for now.

'We can talk tomorrow when you get back. Okay. Bye.'
Kalina hung up.

'Everything okay?'

She shifted on her feet. 'Charlie had a work emergency and his flight was delayed on his way back. He couldn't contact me to let me know.'

'So, everything's fine between the two of you?'

What was I hoping she'd say? That she miraculously reciprocated my feelings? She didn't know about them, and if I kept it that way, Charlie would make it up to her and they'd live happily ever after.

She took a few seconds to reply. 'Yes.'

It was all I needed to know.

'Good. That's great. I should go.'

'Titan, wait. I—'

'Goodnight, Kalina.' I didn't wait for her response as I climbed onto my bike and yanked my helmet back on, and I didn't turn back to look at her before I rode away.

Chapter 24

Act III, Scene XVI: Hackney

Titan

The suffering of my sleep coincided with Kalina's increased presence in my day-to-day life.

The only place she hadn't affected was the gym.

At least, until today.

'Whoa!' Alex exclaimed as he braced his hand beneath the bar before it crushed my chest.

'Thanks.' I exhaled a long shuddering breath.

'Are you okay? What the fuck was that?'

I shook my head. 'Had a rough night.'

'Get it together, okay?' He slapped my shoulder. 'You're done for the day.'

Alex was great at spotting, advising on investments, and telling me when enough was enough.

My phone rang and I reached for it below the bench.

It was Charlie.

I took another breath before answering. 'Hey.'

'Hi, are you at the studio?'

'No, at the gym.'

'Oh, I can bring you some breakfast? I know you're probably going to need it after your workout.'

He truly was the better man.

'Yeah, thanks. I was just leaving.'

'Great, I'll see you in...thirty?'

'See you then.'



Charlie was exactly on time and showed up outside the studio door with a brown paper bag and yellow disposable cups. ‘You still like the Brewery, right?’

I nodded. ‘Still my favourite.’

‘Great,’ he said and grinned widely.

I let him into the studio and he made a beeline straight for the kitchen. ‘I wanted to say thank you for last night. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you weren’t there to help Kalina.’

I was a shit friend.

I couldn’t meet his gaze and busied myself getting plates instead. ‘No big deal. Really.’

‘Accept my apology and compliment,’ he teased.

I laughed, and it sounded strained even to my ears. ‘You’re welcome.’

‘So, I feel like shit,’ he said and set the bag and cups down on the counter. He hopped up onto one of the barstools then raked both his hands through his hair.

‘You didn’t plan to delay a flight and have no signal.’ I set the plates down.

‘You’d think I’d have a leg up on technology.’ He pulled out a brown container then handed it to me. ‘They said it was the highest protein item on their menu.’

‘Thanks.’ Charlie made this really hard for me. I looked through the clear lid at the contents. Eggs, spinach, chicken, and veg with some kind of dressing on the side.

‘I got pancakes.’ He grinned like a child as he set the container down beside his plate.

That made me laugh. ‘You’re still the same.’

‘Thank you. So are you.’ He lifted the pancakes onto his plate and dug in immediately. ‘I would offer you some,’ he

said around a forkful. 'But I know you're trying to watch your figure.'

I shot him an unimpressed look.

He only smiled as he stuffed more pancakes into his mouth.

I pulled up a seat and hadn't even sat down before he swallowed his bite and looked over at me.

'This is actually a sneaky and selfish visit.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah.' He scratched the back of his head. 'I wanted to talk to you about Kalina.'

I paused with my fork lifted halfway to my lips. 'Mmm.'

'I feel terrible about last night.'

I released the breath I'd been holding. 'Did you tell her that?' I shoved the food into my mouth so I wasn't tempted to say anything further.

'Yes, countless times. She's taking it rather well. The two of you are close, right?' He looked at me expectedly.

Close was an understatement.

I'd seen her sleep, I could tell how she felt based on her expressions alone, and I knew what she tasted like.

'We're friends,' I said and shrugged nonchalantly.

'I want to make things right between us, and she's willing to give it another shot.'

My heart sank, but I smiled at him reassuringly. 'Then you're already good. I know she'll have the best time with you.'

'Thanks, but I want it to be great.'

'Okay...what do you have in mind?'

'That's why I'm here.' He folded his arms on the counter. 'I need your help.'

'*You* are the romantic one.' He didn't need my assistance. In fact, I was the last person he should be asking.

But I couldn't tell him that.

'I can't seem to get it quite right with her. And things between you two are so...easy.'

I let out a breath. He needed to give himself more credit, but if I told him the ways I knew Kalina, and what set her off or what made her do a little happy dance, then they would be inexplicably happy together.

So, I put on my best smile and said, 'Okay, let's get you that perfect second date.'

Chapter 25

Act II, Scene XVII: Date in London 2.0

Kalina

With the wedding only eight days away, I mentally ticked off all the completed tasks. Then I checked my makeup in the mirror above the console for the fourth time.

Charlie had reached out to ask if we could try another date.

After the night of the festival, I'd laid awake thinking back on the last few weeks. From the way Titan's demeanour had shifted over the last few days and the way Charlie did exactly what I'd hoped a potential boyfriend would do.

He'd texted and called repeatedly, even when I didn't think it was necessary, to apologise for not making it to the festival. He listened to me when I spoke about work, he was interested in the things I liked. This was what I'd wanted, what I'd worked towards, and I needed to focus all my energy on him.

I needed to give this a shot.

The light rapping at the door broke me from my thoughts, and I took a deep breath before I opened it.

'Wow, you look...' Charlie's voice trailed as his gaze did the same. I'd chosen a simple long sleeved black dress and knee-high boots.

My cheeks heated. 'You look pretty great yourself.'

I took in his tan coat, grey jumper, and dark jeans. It fit him perfectly, and the colours made his eyes pop.

'Shall we?' He offered his arm to me.

'Let's go.'

He led me to the car parked a little way up the road.

'I'm absolutely dying inside at this surprise,' I said.

‘It would really ruin the whole experience if you knew beforehand. As promised, it’s indoors, quiet, and somewhere familiar.’ He opened the passenger door for me.

That eased my anxiety a little.

‘Okay, but no more surprises.’

He opened his mouth then shut it.

I let out a laugh. ‘Charlie.’

He climbed into the driver’s seat and turned to me. ‘After tonight, no more surprises. I promise.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Can I tell you again how sorry I am about the festival?’

I shook my head. ‘No, I told you it’s not necessary.’

It wasn’t his fault, but I didn’t want to think about it or talk about what had happened. At the festival, or after with Titan. I wanted to forget the night entirely.

‘You’re too nice to me.’

‘You’ve given me no reason not to be,’ I countered.

‘Thank you.’ He drove toward the city and I relaxed into the warm seat.

‘Besides, you don’t control flight times and cell phone connections...I think?’

He let out a laugh. ‘No, unfortunately not. At least not yet.’

‘I’ll let you know if tonight makes up for it.’

In my retelling of the night to him, I’d left out the part where that creep followed me around. Along with the part where it seemed like Titan and I had nearly kissed. It wouldn’t help anyone if I brought it up.

‘We have a bit of a drive. I’d love to hear more about your family.’

This was fine. A topic spoken about on nearly all dates.

‘I grew up with my grandmother and Savi’s parents. My dad lives and works out of town.’

‘Oh, I met a lot of your family at the dinner. Seems like it was fun growing up around them.’ He turned to me briefly as we stopped at a red light.

‘It was. They are noisy and nosy, but I wouldn’t change them for the world. What about you?’

‘Oh, same. Big and loud. My parents are disgustingly cute. They’ve been together for over forty years. I have one older brother, one younger, and a younger sister.’

‘Big family.’

‘Yeah, my parents were the entertainers, so it was always busy in our household.’ He smiled fondly.

I knew what that was like. There was never a quiet Friday night in the Ray cul-de-sac. Our family had taken over the street and having family as neighbours meant celebrations and parties throughout the year.

‘Sounds like you miss it?’

‘I do. All the work and travelling means spending less time with them. But it’s something I’d love for myself.’ He looked at me then back at the road. ‘One day, of course.’

How soon was too soon to bring up the fact you didn’t want kids? In my experience, there was no time frame that made it less weird and awkward.

‘Of course, yeah.’ I laughed lightly to hide my panic.

Charlie told me about his family’s love for hosting and how his parents became surrogates to all of his friends. ‘They’d spend every single holiday with my family. My parents were always thrilled to have them around. The more the merrier.’

‘Sounds lively.’

‘It could get out of hand. Especially when Titan and Nick were around at the same time.’

Titan certainly had a way of keeping things exciting.

‘A lot of fun?’ I asked and pushed down the niggling feeling in my chest.

Being with Charlie was good and right. He was kind and wonderful. I had no reason to feel bad about being here with him.

‘It was.’ His gaze wandered off as if he were reliving some of those moments. He shook his head. ‘Well, we’re here.’

I looked at the building ahead. One I was all too familiar with, and one I hadn’t visited in months—the aquarium.



‘Don’t freak out,’ Charlie started as we walked towards the doors. ‘I called in a favour.’

I narrowed my eyes at him in a silent question, but it was answered as soon as we walked through the entrance of the aquarium.

‘Good evening, Mr. Hughes,’ the man said as we stepped inside.

Charlie acknowledged him with a nod.

I looked between the men with confusion.

‘Good evening, Miss,’ the man said to me before he turned to Charlie. ‘Everything’s set up as you requested.’

‘Thank you so much.’

Charlie took my hand and walked.

‘What did he mean?’ I asked. The man had disappeared into the shadows leaving the space eerily empty.

‘I wanted you to have a good time, and you said the festival was too much, so...’

I looked around us, and down the passages. There was no one else here.

‘Are we...alone?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, and glanced at his feet. ‘I thought you’d like to see what it looks like after hours.’

‘Charlie...this is...’

‘Also too much?’

I laughed. ‘Way too much.’

He frowned.

I laughed and brushed his upper arm. ‘No, it’s perfect. And so thoughtful. Thank you.’

He scratched the back of his head. ‘I don’t know how to hold back.’

I squeezed his hand until he looked at me. ‘And you shouldn’t have to. You should be yourself.’

We took in each exhibit in all its glory. I’d never thought about what this place would look like without anyone else around, with only the sounds of the building and my thoughts.

It was magnificent.

Charlie listened as I showed him one of my favourites, the jelly-fish, and he seemed genuinely impressed at the facts I spewed.

‘The open ocean is my absolute favourite.’

‘Mine too,’ he said.

We walked through the tunnel, the fish and turtles swam above us, and I was in awe. Every single time I saw them, a wave of calm washed over me.

‘I have one more surprise for the evening.’ Charlie ushered me toward the open ocean exhibit.

‘I thought we agreed on no more surprises?’ I laughed as he led the way.

I audibly gasped.

Laid out in front of the large tank was a picnic blanket, complete with snacks and drinks.

‘This is amazing,’ I whispered.

‘I really hope this makes up for the other night.’

‘It wasn’t your fault, and I forgave you as soon as you called.’

We walked towards the setup, stopping to admire the majestic animals behind the glass.

He took both my hands in his and held them between us. ‘I don’t know what the future holds, but I’m really glad I got to meet you.’

His words made my chest ache.

Charlie was perfect.

I looked up at him; at his kind soft brown eyes, at the way his hair was always pushed back—either out of frustration or necessity—and at his slightly parted lips.

‘I’m really glad I got to meet you too,’ I said and took a step closer, lifting my chin in silent request.

He leaned down until his lips brushed mine.

This time the kiss deepened as he teased my mouth open with his tongue, until we were both exploring one another.

I closed my eyes and tried immersing myself in the moment.

He was a great kisser; with his gentle strokes and soft lips, I felt myself being drawn in. Giving back and moving closer until our bodies were flush.

When we pulled apart, we wore matching smiles.

‘Want some snacks?’

I nodded.

He pecked me on the lips twice then took my hand and led me to the picnic blanket. We spent the rest of our time snacking on mini burgers, cheese, fruit, and brownie bites while watching the sharks swim idly by.

A perfect night with the perfect man.

But that feeling in my chest wouldn’t go away.

Charlie was perfect. Tonight was perfect.

But my brain kept repeating one thing.

Only Titan was perfect for me.

Chapter 26

Act II, Scene XVIII: Obsidian Tower, London

Titan

‘You’ve been in a terrible mood lately,’ Scarlet said.

I replied with a non-committal sound, my gaze glued to my screen as I finished up the last batch of edits.

My head swam with images of Kalina’s face when I’d left her at her door two nights ago.

Charlie’s the one for her, I told myself.

He comes from a stable home and family, and he knows how to be in a relationship.

He’s also your friend and he likes her.

It was what Kalina needed. It was the whole point of the stupid Agreement, and what she’d wanted. Their second date would cement things for them, and I could focus on moving on.

‘Between home and work it’s like fire and ice,’ Scarlet mumbled. She continued clicking away on her keyboard.

‘What are you talking about?’ It was the first thing she’d said that piqued my interest.

‘Kalina’s been delightful since her date. You could probably use some. You’re a total grump.’

The date went well.

This was good.

And even though my heart quickened at the thought of Kalina being swept off her feet, she deserved it.

As if she were in my head, a message popped up on my screen.

Hi, we didn't discuss details...do you want me to meet you at the venue?

16:39

Or I can come to you?

16:39

Whatever's easiest.

16:39

She was panicking.

She'd likely forgotten about tonight, and it was the last thing she wanted when she could be out with Charlie.

Hey, you don't have to come if you're busy. I can ask Scarlet to join me.

16:40

Do you want me to come?

16:40

Of course I did. I wanted to be around her every single second of every day.

Yes. I can pick you up?

16:40

It's out of your way. I'll meet you there?

16:40

Let me fetch you. You're doing me a favour and I can't have you trekking around town in heels.

16:41

Thank you. I was worried about that ha-ha.

16:41

See you around 6.30?

16:41

Great.

It was one night.

There would be loads of people there, and I wouldn't have to face the idea of being alone with her where I'd likely confess my feelings.

It was hard enough thinking about her being beautiful and enthralling tonight. Kalina would be amazing, as always, and likely enchant everyone we'd meet.

But tonight was about Mae and I needed to focus on her.

Then, there was the matter of Charlie. One of my best friends. I couldn't do that to him. To them. Not when I'd insisted they go on a date.

Twice.

'Are you even listening to me?' Scarlet stood on the other side of my desk.

'Sorry, no.' I scrubbed my palms over my face.

She inhaled, crossed her arms over her chest, and let out a long breath. 'Could you tell her how you feel already?'

My gaze shot up. 'What?'

'Please don't give me any of the bullshit where you pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, or you're going to make me mad by insulting my intelligence. Tell Kalina how you feel.'

'I—'

'I don't want to hear it. I've sat around for the last two weeks, watching the two of you idiots dance around each other.'

'That doesn't seem accurate.' It had *maybe* only been about a week.

She glared at me. 'You aren't denying it.'

I sighed. 'How did you know?'

She laughed, a loud and unrestrained sound. 'Please. You can't stop looking at each other like you want to devour one

another. And you've been hanging out with her all the time. Add to that the fact that you look like an idiot in love.'

She wasn't wrong.

'Kalina doesn't feel the same way. She's with Charlie.'

Scarlet slapped her palms onto my desk, making my screen shake. 'Because you told her to go out with him! Did she tell you she doesn't feel the same way? If you took one second to look at her, you'd notice it's written all over her face.'

'You said their date went well.'

'I'm sure Kalina had a lovely time but one, I wanted to see your reaction and two, she doesn't have the same look on her face when she's with him. Her spark is missing.'

I let out a strangled breath. 'I have to get ready to leave, and even if—for argument's sake—you were right, she'll be happier with Charlie. He's perfect for her and I don't want to ruin the chance.'

Scarlet shook her head. 'You're throwing this away because of a possibility? God, you're so stupid.'

I glared at her. 'Don't you have plans tonight?'

'Other than telling you you're making the biggest mistake of your life by letting the one woman who is perfect for you slip away? Nope.'

I left Scarlet to finish her work as I went up to the loft to get ready for the night. It wasn't like the things she'd hadn't crossed my mind, but she saw what she wanted to believe.

While I wanted to believe it was the truth.

Tonight would be more difficult than I thought.



I pulled up outside Kalina's house, and I looked at the blue door with trepidation.

‘Are you going to move?’ Scarlet reached over me to yank on the door handle.

‘You could’ve taken the tube.’ I scowled at her but shifted out of the seat and onto the pavement. ‘I’ll be out in a few minutes,’ I said to the driver.

Scarlet straightened her coat beside me. ‘As if you’d let me.’

She bounded ahead before I could respond.

‘Kalina, Titan’s here,’ she called out as she walked through the door.

I reached the doorway as Kalina stepped out of her room, and it knocked the air right out of me.

She was wearing the golden yellow dress. The one she’d worn the night we’d met.

‘Is this okay?’ she asked, pressing her palms against the full skirt.

‘Yes,’ I breathed. My gaze roamed down from her hair, with the golden headband woven through some strands, to the shimmer dusting her collarbone and exposed shoulders.

‘It’s not too much?’ She swung from side to side making the fabric rustle.

‘It’s exactly the right amount.’ I offered her a reassuring smile.

‘Thanks. You look really great.’ She tipped her head at me in my black tux.

‘Wow. You two,’ Scarlet said, as if she’d appeared from thin air. ‘You look amazing. Can I get a photo?’ She lifted her phone up and gestured for me to step closer to Kalina.

I shot her an unimpressed look.

‘Come on, you can do better. Move closer.’ Scarlet smirked at me.

I’d get her back for this.

‘Is this okay?’ I looked down at Kalina.

She nodded.

Part of me wanted to tease her like I'd done before. Instead, I wrapped an arm around her waist, placed my other hand in my pocket, and leaned in slightly as Scarlet snapped away.

'Perfect. You kids have fun, okay?' She winked.

Kalina let out a soft laugh. 'I left some dinner in the oven for you.'

'You're the best.' Scarlet was gone in a flash.

'I need my bag. Two seconds.' Kalina disappeared into her room, reappearing in a tan coat.

It was like seeing the sun disappear behind the clouds.

'Ready?' I offered my arm.

'Yeah.' She wrapped her hand around my forearm.

A sense of comfort ran through me at the familiar feeling but it was overtaken by the silence that followed throughout the drive.

Kalina looked out of the window, and appeared to be counting the trees as we sped by.

Our hands laid between us, our fingers nearly touching.

I cleared my throat. 'Thank you. For doing this.'

'I should thank you for asking me. Are you nervous?'

One look at her washed away my anxiety. 'Not anymore.'

'Good. It's going to be great and you're amazing.' She moved to reach for my hand between us, then pulled back.

I flexed mine at the lack of contact between us.

Being alone with her was much harder than I'd realised.

We pulled up outside the Royal Observatory, giving me a reprieve from this confined space with her. I walked around to open the door on her side and offered her my arm again.

We walked toward the entrance, an exterior of white stone enhanced by purple up lights. It cast shadows over the facade in a beautiful, yet haunting, sort of way.

Guests parked and we walked through the double doored entrance into a low din of chatter and music. Some guests interacted with each other, while the rest crowded around the glass cases scattered around the room.

‘Let me take this.’ I offered to remove her coat, thankful to have something to do.

‘Thanks.’ Her gaze darted around the room.

The lights had been dimmed and there were projections of galaxies and stars all along the walls and domed ceiling. The bar on the left was a dark marble and to the right, crowds gathered around what appeared to be photo booths.

‘Hey,’ I said, and waited for her to turn around. ‘I’ll be right back. Are you okay?’

‘Mmm hmm.’ She reached down and clasped her bare finger. As if realising what she’d done, she looked up at me. ‘I’m fine. Go.’

‘I’ll be two minutes.’ I nodded.

When I returned, Kalina stood over a small square glass case, and a man beside her spoke animatedly. Kalina’s eyes were fixed on the case while his were glued to the front of her dress where it dipped into her cleavage.

My chest heated and I clenched and released my fists before I strode toward them. I placed a hand on the small of her back, and stepped between her and the stranger.

‘Hi,’ she said, and lifted her face to look at him with a dazzling smile, unaware of what he’d been doing. ‘Mr...’

‘Walker,’ the man added. He looked up at me and I only glared back in response.

‘Yes, Mr. Walker was telling me that this whole collection was made with lab grown diamonds, and the campaign is aimed at people who want something special, knowing it’s coming from a sustainable and conflict-free source. It’s so interesting.’

‘Mmm, I’m sure that’s where Mr. Walker’s interests lie.’

‘Lovely to meet you, madame,’ Mr. Walker said as he lifted Kalina’s hand to his lips. ‘Have a good evening.’

He scurried away like the rat he was.

Kalina continued to stare at the diamond tennis necklace that lay on the black velvet plinth inside the case.

‘Have you spotted Mae yet?’ She was none the wiser about Mr. Walker’s ogling.

‘Not yet.’ I took her in for the first time. From the way her eye makeup made the golden flecks of her irises appear even brighter, to her full red lips, she really had no idea what kind of pull she had on people.

On me.

‘Use your genes to your advantage,’ she said, a small smile playing on her lips.

‘What?’

‘Scout her out, you could probably see over everyone’s heads.’

I let out a small laugh. ‘I’m really glad you’re with me tonight.’

‘I’m happy to be here.’

I swore a look flashed in her eyes, but it was gone before I could assess it and I was sure I’d imagined it.

She looked at my lips before looking back up to my eyes.

I shook my head. It was playing tricks on me.

‘Want something to drink?’ I asked.

She cleared her throat. ‘Yes please, it’s quite warm.’ She fanned herself.

‘Wait right here.’

I strode across the room and scanned the room for any sign of Mae. I’d never seen her in person, but had scrolled through enough articles online to recognise her.

‘What can I get you sir?’ the bartender asked as I sidled up to the long marble countertop.

A guest beside me was handed a glass with a blue shimmery liquid.

‘What is that?’

‘The drink of the evening sir, a starry night.’

‘Two of those please.’ Kalina would flip when she saw it. Colourful and shiny was her drug.

The bartender handed the drinks to me and I made my way back to the spot I’d left her, only she wasn’t there.

I searched the crowds, and spotted her easily in her beautiful gold ball gown. I was like a moth to a flame.

She spoke to a woman, whose back faced me, and I took a moment to watch Kalina animatedly tell a story. Her hands were always involved in her conversations.

It was adorable.

‘Titan,’ she said as I stepped closer. ‘This is Mae Dubois.’

I stilled for a moment before handing a glass to Kalina then offered my hand to Mae. She looked exactly like her photos; dark brown skin, silver hair, and piercing blue eyes.

‘A pleasure Ms. Dubois. Could I offer you a drink?’ I lifted my glass toward her.

‘No need, you enjoy that. It’s wonderful to finally meet the infamous Titan Andersson. Your partner was telling me her thoughts on the Nova collection.’

Kalina’s cheeks flushed, and I wondered if it was about the compliment or the insinuation. ‘I love the idea of a sustainable way to make such exquisite pieces of jewellery.’

‘Please, feel free to try some on,’ Mae said to Kalina. She gestured to the photobooth area. Various staff members assisted guests in trying on jewellery then photographed them wearing it.

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ Kalina said with the biggest smile. She took a sip of the drink and her eyes went wide as she groaned. ‘Oh my gosh, this is so good.’

‘Pleased to hear. Thank you.’ Mae’s lips tilted up at the corners. I’d never seen a photo of her smiling and it made my heart swell knowing Kalina was the reason.

Kalina excused herself, leaving Mae and I to our own devices. If I hadn’t known her age from the websites I scoured, I would never have guessed her to be in her late sixties. With her glassy, smooth skin and bright eyes, she had a young air about her.

‘Mr. Andersson,’ Mae started.

‘Please, Titan.’

‘Titan, I was impressed with the campaign shoot you sent to me.’

‘Thank you.’ My heart raced in my chest and I took a sip of my drink to steady my nerves.

‘I saw your work for Mode. Your shoot with the Royal Ballet Academy was actually what got me interested in your work. The way you captured the gracefulness and poise was breathtaking.’

The editorial magazine I’d worked for years ago, Mode was where I’d really found my calling for photography.

‘Thank you, Ms. Dubois. Wonderful and kind words coming from you.’

‘I noticed your architecture degree in your résumé. What was the reason for the pivot to photography?’

Her question took me by surprise. No one had asked me in years.

‘I had an assignment in my final year where I fell in love with the people in the background of some of my photographs. I started to focus more on them than on the buildings in the end.’

She nodded. ‘I see. Your submission with Kalina as the subject was different from the other work you’ve done. I saw something there, and I think you’ve been trying to hide it.’

I laughed nervously. ‘Not on purpose. Sometimes I have to do what the job requires of me. With no say or input.’

‘Good to see you branching out. Unofficially, the job is yours. If you still want it.’

‘Oh, I...thank you.’ I stumbled over my words. I wasn’t expecting that at all.

Mae’s gaze shifted to something behind me. Kalina chatted to one of the assistants as they slipped a diamond and sapphire choker onto her neck. Everyone was enamoured by her.

‘I can’t say she had no pull with my decision. There was something in the images you sent I think many women would love to see. We want our clients to feel like they are worthy of our pieces. You’ve captured that with her.’ She tipped her head in Kalina’s direction.

It was what I’d wanted Kalina to see. She was worthy of so much.

And she deserved to be with someone who let her shine.

‘I expect your answer by the end of the week. Please, send my regards to Kalina. She really is wonderful. I hope to see more of her.’

‘Thank you, Ms. Dubois.’ I wasn’t about to tell my potentially new boss I wanted Kalina wholly, it made my entire body ache.

‘Call me Mae. Tiffany will be in touch with the details. Enjoy your evening.’ Mae spun on her heel and disappeared.

I downed my drink before I weaved through the crowd toward Kalina.

She spotted me as one of the assistants helped her with a pair of drop diamond earrings.

‘Having fun?’ I asked.

‘Absolutely. Are you kidding? She gestured to her neck where the dark blue stones shimmered under the studio lights. ‘Do you want to join me?’

‘Not really my style.’

She rolled her eyes, then tipped her head toward the bench. ‘Take a photo with me.’

‘Fine,’ I said dramatically, but I followed her to the velvet loveseat—ironic—and left a space between us on the small piece of furniture.

It was nearly impossible.

‘How did it go with Mae?’ she asked, her brown eyes were wide in anticipation.

A small smile curved over my lips. ‘I got the job.’

Kalina squealed and threw her arms around my neck. ‘Oh my God.’ She pulled away and shook her head. ‘Sorry. That’s really great.’

My heart sank and the moment was gone.

I brushed her hair behind her ear so the earrings would show.

‘Got it,’ the photographer said. ‘Now look at me.’

The photographer took a few more before we got up and walked back to the cases. The assistants helped Kalina remove the jewellery, but she wouldn’t meet my gaze.

‘Do you want to leave?’ I asked.

She shook her head. ‘No, it’s your night. You should enjoy it.’

I wished things were different between us. I wanted to kiss her, to dance with her under these stars.

To call her mine.

‘Hey,’ I said, and tilted her chin up so our gazes met. ‘I invited you because I knew you’d enjoy this. If you want to leave, we can leave.’

‘I’m good,’ she said. But, judging by the way she picked at the side of her thumb, she needed a moment away from the

crowds.

‘Can I show you something?’

She nodded.

I took her hand in mine and led her toward the long passage. I’d been to the observatory before enough to know my way around. We slipped through the door at the end, and were ensconced in a dimly lit room. Blue-purple clouds and silver stars swirled and glittered above.

‘It’s so beautiful,’ she whispered.

The Planetarium was mostly empty, save for the two couples in the room, but I couldn’t care less and only had eyes for her. The projection reflected off her skin and I watched her look up at the makeshift sky in awe.

‘It is,’ I replied. Not really talking about the same thing.

If this was a week ago, I’d have leaned down to kiss her.

And there it was. The smile that set my soul alight.

My thoughts drifted to Scarlet’s words from earlier.

All I’d wanted was Kalina’s happiness, even if that meant it wasn’t with me.

Chapter 27

Act II, Scene XIX: The Layla Montague Inn

Kalina

‘You don’t look like you slept well,’ Savi greeted as I arrived at the inn. She held out a mug of tea.

‘I didn’t,’ I sighed and took the mug from her. ‘Thanks.’ I dropped my bag on the floor.

I’d spent half the night replaying my last date with Charlie, then the rest of the night replaying Mae’s event with Titan.

My head spun.

‘What were you up to last night?’ she asked over the rim of her mug, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

‘Nothing warranting that look.’ I took a sip of the tea. ‘I went to the DB Diamond event with Titan.’

‘You did?’ Her eyebrows found their way into her hairline.

‘Yes, why are you being weird about it?’

‘I’m not.’

I scoffed.

‘And you went on a second date with Charlie?’

‘Yes. He took me to the aquarium.’

‘How cute.’ she gushed. ‘One of your top ten dates.’

‘It was cute. We had the whole place to ourselves.’

‘Oh my God. What?’ Savi yanked me down beside her onto one of the navy-blue couches. They were definitely not here the last time I’d visited.

‘I like these,’ I said as I brushed the textured fabric.

‘Enough about the couches. Tell me more.’

‘He called in a favour. We saw all the exhibits without the crowds.’

‘Wow. He’s really made up for the music festival huh?’

‘Yeah.’ I laughed nervously. I hadn’t told Savi the full truth about that night. She would ask about Titan and I couldn’t lie to her face as easily as I could over text. I needed to talk to Charlie first.

Besides, Ted and Savi were linked via brainwaves and while I trusted Ted with my life, I wasn’t so sure he’d be able to keep it to himself.

Besides the fact I’d already ruined one, maybe even two, close relationships in Ted’s life. First Jesse and now, Titan. I wanted to do it right this time, and avoid any other broken friendships.

‘He’s so romantic,’ Savi said dreamily.

‘He is,’ I agreed. There was no doubt about it, but if we were reminiscing about romantic nights, then my birthday with Titan ranked number one.

‘And?’ She was almost salivating.

‘What?’

‘Details.’

‘We kissed. Properly this time.’ I took another sip of my tea.

She squealed. ‘You’re awfully chill about it.’

‘It was nice.’

‘Nice?’

‘Yes, nice.’

‘Nice is not selling a good time. Nice is what you say when it’s not going well.’ She crossed her arms over her chest.

‘What’s wrong?’

She was onto me.

‘Nothing’s wrong.’ I set the mug down on the coffee table, beside a plate of pastries. ‘I don’t want to get too excited yet.’ I twirled the ring on my finger.

‘That’s pretty,’ Savi said and nodded at it. ‘Is it new? I saw it at dinner.’

‘It is.’

‘It’s cute. Seems to help with your biting.’

Lately, it was the one thing I never left home without. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her it was a birthday gift from Titan, but I thought better of it.

Like a little memento of what we’d shared. A secret for the two of us.

‘Real question, can you tell me what we’re doing today?’

I smiled knowingly. ‘It only took you ten minutes to ask. A new record.’ She’d been asking for weeks, but I wouldn’t budge.

‘Let me surprise you with one thing today, okay? It’s your bachelorette and you need to relax. What I can tell you is to dress comfortably. But, I have tonight sorted.’ We were having a sleepover themed karaoke night.

‘I’m so excited.’

‘You *know* I dress for comfort.’ She rubbed her belly.

‘Is she moving?’

Savi nodded. ‘Still little bubbles.’

‘I can’t wait to meet her.’ We chatted some more, enjoying my niece’s involvement in our conversations. She was already such a big part of our little club.

‘We have to be out of here in about forty-five minutes.’

Savi shoved the pastry she’d picked up into her mouth.

‘Forty-five minutes! You could’ve chewed.’

She struggled, chewed, swallowed, then downed the rest of her coffee like it was a shot. ‘No time. Let’s go.’

If there was one thing Savi enjoyed it was parties and celebrations, and the events leading up to the wedding had her pretty excited.

The forty-five minutes turned into twenty-five and I took the extra-long route to our first appointment of the day.

‘A full body massage,’ Savi squealed as we walked up to the glass doors of *L’Aurore Spa*.

‘A full body mama massage,’ I clarified. ‘Then it’s pedicures, and lunch.’

‘You spoil me, Lina.’

‘You deserve it so, enjoy.’

It was a bit of a selfish treat, but we both needed it. She was growing a human and I grew an existential crisis. I made up for the lack of sleep the previous night and napped during my massage.

Over lunch, I gave Savi the rest of the afternoon’s itinerary. ‘We have a little shopping stop, I know you hate it but trust me...you’re going to love this.’

‘I trust you,’ Savi said. She took a bite of her perfectly grilled salmon. ‘I wouldn’t trust anyone else with this.’

‘I appreciate that.’

The shop in question was *Madame Enchante*, a luxury lingerie store.

‘Lina, have you seen me right now?’ Savi gestured to her loose T-shirt dress.

‘This is Ted’s gift to you...and himself.’ I pulled the black card from my purse. ‘I’m not going to think about it too much so let’s go.’

‘Well, who am I to deny the man?’ She shrugged.

We entered the store where Savi proceeded to enlist my help.

‘You know, this would have been a great time to message Ted?’ I said, seated on the bench outside the changing rooms.

‘I want it to be a surprise.’ She did a twirl in front of the panelled mirrors. ‘I think this is it.’

She decided on a red lace bra, panty and garter belt set, with various straps and clips. Her belly was still easy to hide in

clothes, but in this, it was on full display.

‘He will be very pleased I am sure.’ The man was obsessed with his wife. ‘This might actually kill him.’

‘Great.’

I loved that this was her aim.

‘You don’t want to get anything? While we’re here?’ she called out from her stall.

‘Me?’

‘Yes, *you*. I saw you eyeing the dark green bodysuit.’ Savi stepped out of the changing room and narrowed her eyes at me.

‘And wear it for...myself?’

‘Of course. Always for yourself, but I thought maybe you’d want to wear it for a special someone...I mean, if things go well, maybe Charlie will be a bit better than nice.’

I shook my head. ‘Firstly, there’s nothing wrong with being nice and secondly, we’ve only been on two dates.’

I walked out of the changing room, but she was right. I kept stealing glances at the beautiful dark green French lace one piece.

She was hot on my heels and grabbed it from the rail. ‘Look, your size.’

‘I don’t think it’s worth the price.’ I gazed at the tag.

‘Come on, he’d love it.’

Without thinking I replied, ‘He would.’

‘So, you do want to wear it for him.’

She didn’t need to know the he I’d been referring to was Titan.

‘You know what? You’ve done so much for Ted and me.’ Savi took the item from my hand. ‘This is from us.’

‘Wait, what?’

‘You deserve it,’ she said with a grin and hurried to the counter before I could stop her.

‘Savi...’

She was fast for someone who had a baby pushed up against her organs.

‘Don’t make me fight you. Besides, it’s been scanned and can’t be returned.’ She shrugged.

I conceded and gave her a quick hug. ‘Thank you.’

With our bags in tow, we headed back to the Inn

While we’d been out, the space had been transformed by the event company. Lounge seating was set up in the main area with multi-coloured velvet couches, beanbags and large pillows. A blow-up screen with a projector sat in front of it, and small tables were scattered around the room housing snacks and drinks. Warm beverages were set up on the bar along with the desserts.

‘For movies and karaoke.’ I gestured to the screen.

‘Pizza is on its way and so is the rest of the party.’

‘This is perfect.’ She wrapped an arm around me and snuggled into my side. Her version of a hug, which I gladly accepted.

‘One more thing but we need to go upstairs.’

We reached one of the bedrooms and I handed Savi a gift bag, which I’d hidden when she went to the bathroom earlier.

She pulled a cream silk night shirt from it, turning it over in her hands and gasped at the monogrammed pocket.

‘Mrs. Montague. I love it.’

‘You get changed, there’s a pair of fuzzy slippers in there as well.’ I pointed to the bag. ‘I’ll meet you downstairs.’

I walked to the bedroom I’d be occupying later, where a dusty pink silk sleep shirt waited for me.

While Savi got ready, I went downstairs to set up the playlist and got the drinks from the fridge.

The bell over the door rang out.

Of course Lexie was the first person to arrive and dressed in bright pink lingerie covered up with a sheer black robe.

I guess people slept in all kinds of things.

‘Hi, Lina.’ She leaned down and air-kissed both of my cheeks.

‘Lexie, hi.’ She was Savi’s soon to be sister-in-law and I had no issue with *her*, per se.

It’s not like she was the one who’d dumped me.

‘Lina, this is so cute. Please, you have to help my friends when the time comes.’

I laughed awkwardly. ‘Sure, but isn’t it a little weird?’

She laughed, but I was fairly certain she didn’t know why. ‘Not at all.’

Lexie always acted as if it were the first time we were meeting. Every single time.

Maybe Jesse hadn’t told her about our history?

‘Let me show you around. You can take a photo with the camera and leave a note on it for Savi,’ I said, and pointed to the table with the Polaroid cameras.

I let her walk around while I greeted the other guests who trickled in. Savi came downstairs, ready to mingle.

Our cousins and Savi’s friends were excited about the evening but even more excited about the Inn.

‘This is kind of a soft launch of The Layla Montague Inn,’ I said to Savi.

‘You’re right. Let me network.’ She disappeared into the crowd.

I walked to the bar to grab one of the sparkling pink drinks when one of our cousins stopped me.

‘Who are you dating? Charlie or Titan? I’m getting mixed information from the aunts and I want to check before I pursue.’ She giggled like a schoolgirl.

‘Oh no, Savi’s looking for me, sorry.’ I disappeared before they could respond.

The BAAs were busy.

I found what I thought was a quiet corner and took a sip of my drink.

‘It’s a frenzy out there. I must say I’m really glad I don’t have to deal with all that anymore.’ Lexie waved her hand in front of me as if to emphasise the huge rock on her finger. ‘Good luck with that one.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Oh, I overheard the conversation. You know Titan, always moving from one to the next. Be careful there. Nothing but heartbreak lies in that direction.’ She took a long sip from her bottle. ‘Anyway, enjoy it while you can.’

I blinked rapidly at her, my mouth opening and closing in silent protest.

‘I’d thank you not to spew such nonsense about my brother,’ Scarlet said as she came to stand beside me, and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. ‘Just because he didn’t want to settle down with you, doesn’t mean the same applies to Lina.’

Lexie looked a little ashamed. ‘I didn’t mean it like—’

‘I know what you meant. Stop.’ Scarlet pulled me away from her and towards the snacks.

‘Thank you. Sorry, I froze. She surprised me.’

‘Don’t mention it. I’m tired of the shit talk on Titan. He gets enough of it from our father, and I don’t need to hear it from her.’

I knew both of them had a strained relationship with their father, but Titan never spoke about it with me.

‘I love your pyjamas,’ I said and we both looked down at the navy-blue dinosaur print set.

‘Thank you. I got it from the boy’s section.’ The cropped length of the T-shirt and very short shorts said as much.

‘They’re super cute.’ I laughed.

Scarlet dragged me along to karaoke with her, but the thought niggled at the back of my mind for the rest of the night. Would Titan be interested in me the way I was with him? Scarlet was only protecting her brother and wanted to prove a point with Lexie.

But maybe he didn’t want the same things I did. Maybe Lexie was right and the moments we’d shared were in the past and he’d moved on to the next person.

Chapter 28

Act III, Scene I: TA Studios, Hackney

Titan

‘Thank you for not including strippers,’ Ted said with a contented sigh. We were seated at the blackjack table, setup in my studio.

‘Not your thing.’

We’d spent the earlier part of the evening attempting a pub crawl, but given we were no longer in uni, it didn’t last very long.

There was a poker table, a large screen with Ted’s favourite games and consoles on one side of the room, while a pool table and foosball table sat on this end of the room.

The snacks and drinks were set up close to what was usually Scarlet’s desk and she’d explicitly said she would injure me if anything was out of sorts when she came back to the office.

‘I appreciate it. I know you used to enjoy it.’ Ted’s smile held a very particular memory. One I wished I could forget.

‘That was years ago.’

‘I know, I know. You’ve changed.’

‘You make it sound like a bad thing?’ I took a swig of my beer.

‘No,’ Ted said, his face scrunched up as he looked at his cards. ‘I meant in a good way. I’ve never seen you this happy. So...tame.’

‘I’m happy when you’re happy,’ I teased.

‘And it has nothing to do with a certain pretty cousin of Savi’s?’ Ted didn’t look up when he asked, but I was glad because my face hid nothing when it came to Kalina.

I looked over my shoulder at Charlie, who was seated next to Nick on the couch, playing FIFA.

‘Kalina and I are friends.’

‘Friends can make you happy, you just said that about me.’ Ted smirked.

He was trying to get me to fold. But I wasn’t going to.

Not in this conversation or our game.

‘Your wife’s turned you into a menace.’

‘She has. Okay, I’m out,’ Ted said. He laid down his hand, totalling thirty.

‘Well done for trying,’ I said and clapped him on the back lightly as I stood. I laid down my winning hand. ‘We can try again later.’

I started toward the bar when Jesse called out to me. ‘Hey, T.’ He stood at the pool table, chalking the end of his stick. ‘Want to play a round?’

I hated that he used my nickname like we were close friends.

‘Sure,’ I said through gritted teeth.

Ted mentioned he’d met up with Jesse a few times since our talk, and they were trying to mend their relationship. So, if I played nice for anyone, it would be Ted.

I picked up the stick while Jesse racked the balls.

‘Go ahead.’ I leaned to the side, using the stick as support.

Jesse pocketed the solid red ball.

I aimed the blue striped ball into the corner and pocketed it.

‘So, you and Kalina...’

It hadn’t even been five minutes and he’d gotten right to it.

I didn’t want to play into Jesse’s hand but couldn’t help himself. ‘What about her?’

‘I mean,’ Jesse said, aiming for the solid yellow ball and missing the middle pocket. ‘You always did have a thing for her.’

‘You’re mistaken.’ The lie didn’t roll off my tongue as seamlessly as I’d hoped.

‘No? You didn’t think about her in that way at the ball? If I remember correctly, you were trying to get in there when I swooped in.’ Jesse looked like he’d hit his mark.

I wanted to wipe the shit-eating grin off his face. I looked over my shoulder at Ted. He chatted to some of the other guys at the games.

It wasn’t worth it.

‘Sounds a lot like you and Lexie.’ I shot the striped yellow ball into the middle pocket where Jesse had missed his shot.

‘A coincidence,’ Jesse said with a shrug. ‘I hope Lina’s okay now.’

‘It’s no longer your concern,’ I said and shot the purple and orange striped balls into one pocket.

I leaned over to get a better angle on the green ball when he came to stand a little closer to me. ‘You know what I miss though?’

I made a non-committal sound as I focused on my shot.

He waited until I pulled the stick back before he spoke. ‘Those little sighs she makes. You know the one, when you kiss her right here.’ He pointed to his neck.

I dropped the stick, took a step closer, and grabbed a fistful of Jesse’s sweater. ‘If you ever fucking talk about Kalina that way again—’

Jesse’s face broke into a smirk.

‘Titan!’ voices exclaimed from behind me.

I turned to Ted’s widened eyes, the guys who’d all stopped what they were doing, and Charlie frozen in his spot behind me.

Fuck.

‘We’re done here.’ I let go of Jesse.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and my stomach flipped when I saw Kalina's name. Her timing was impeccable.

'Hi,' I said, and lowered my voice. I walked away from Jesse toward the bar. I raked my hand through my hair and grabbed another beer.

I couldn't meet Charlie's gaze.

'Titan, thank God.'

I straightened, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and my heart raced.

'What's wrong?'

'We're fine, don't worry.'

I let go of the breath I was holding. 'Then don't scare me.'

'We *may* have blown a fuse at the inn and can't really see anything on the electrical board. Ted isn't answering his phone.'

Ted and technology. They didn't work well together.

'We'll be there soon,' I said and set the drink down. Even without it, I was in no way sober to be driving.

Ted and Charlie strode up to me, Ted's brow furrowed and he mouthed *everything okay?*

His concern from the situation with Jesse had dissipated.

I covered the mouthpiece of my phone. 'The electrical board at the Inn. They may have blown a fuse.'

'Is Savi okay?' Ted asked loud enough for Kalina to hear.

'Yes, she's fine I think. I don't know if she will ever be okay with the power going out mid chorus of *Zombie* though.'

'It was my best version yet.' Savi cried somewhere in the background.

I nodded at Ted and smiled. 'She's fine,' I said, unsurprised at Savi's reaction. 'Okay, we're on our way.'

'No, we can wait until your night is over.' I pictured Kalina's face; the way her brown eyes would widen and her lips tilted

down in a small frown.

Those soft full lips I'd been dreaming of...

'Titan,' Ted called out, his voice slightly louder than usual.

I shook my head. 'No, we'll come there now. I don't think Ted will last another second knowing his wife is in any kind of potential danger,' I said to both Kalina on the other end, and Ted, who looked ready to jump as soon as I said the word.

'Okay, thank you.' She hung up.

'We should call a taxi. I don't think any of us should be driving.' I pocketed my phone.

'I only had one drink and it was hours ago. I'll drive us,' Charlie said.

'Let's go.' Ted was practically out of the door.

Charlie hung back with me as I asked Rowan and Nick to lock up.

We walked out of the door and toward the lifts where Ted frantically pushed the call button.

'What was that about? With Jesse.'

I pinched the bridge of my nose and squeezed my eyes shut. 'We've never gotten along, and I lost my cool.'

'I heard what he said.'

I shook my head. 'He's trying to mess with your head.'

'He wasn't talking to me,' Charlie said flatly.

I couldn't meet his gaze.

The drive was filled with worry, from Ted, and stress, from me. Charlie focused on the road and didn't say anything.

Ted was out of the door before Charlie had stopped to park.

'Charlie...'

He shook his head. 'We can talk later.'

Fuck.

This was bad.

Kalina and Savi yanked the door open.

My gaze immediately took Kalina in; from her messy bun down to the lips I'd been thinking about just minutes earlier.

'Are you okay?' Charlie reached out to cup her shoulders.

All I needed to shake the thoughts from my head and I stepped back.

'Yes, we're fine.' She smiled at Charlie.

'Is the power linked upstairs? We didn't want to venture there in the dark,' Savi said from Ted's embrace.

My presence felt intrusive. 'I'll go up and check it out.'

I shifted past them, but Ted was right behind me. 'I'll come too. Charlie, could you check the board down here? It's in the kitchen.'

'Yes, of course.'

I turned my phone's flashlight on, and Ted and I ascended the stairs.

'Want to tell me what happened back there with Jesse?'

'Sorry. I got a bit...carried away.' I didn't turn to face him when I spoke.

'You don't have to apologise; he is a little fucker.'

I laughed. Ted had never said that about his brother before.

'I've been saying that for years.'

'He's been trying though. I'm sorry.'

'You don't need to apologise for him.'

We walked to the end of the passage and the main switch wouldn't flick back on.

'Can I ask you something?'

I checked the other switches. 'Sure.'

'What's really going on between you and Kalina?'

'Nothing.' I focused on the task at hand.

‘You’re lying.’

‘Anymore,’ I finished.

‘Ah.’

It felt good to be a little honest about it. ‘She’s with Charlie. That’s what matters.’

‘T...’

I shook my head. ‘Don’t.’

‘Okay.’ He didn’t push further.

We went downstairs to find Charlie with Savi and Kalina.

‘No luck?’ Ted asked.

‘No. You’ll have to call someone in the morning.’ Charlie stood beside Kalina.

‘We can stay at the hotel tonight,’ Ted said to Savi.

‘You didn’t have to sabotage the Inn to be together, Ted.’ Kalina smirked.

‘I would never do such a thing.’ Ted’s easy smile and quick kiss on Savi’s lips said otherwise. He would do anything for Savi.

‘Great, then I’ll go home,’ Kalina said.

‘I can take you,’ Charlie offered.

It cut through me. The way they looked at one another and the smile they shared.

‘I should check on the guys. Make sure they haven’t destroyed the place.’ I looked down at my phone to the messages from both Nick and Rowan. I sure as fuck hoped they didn’t *actually* destroy the place.

Not that it mattered much since it was now mine. I hadn’t told anyone, but the investments I’d made, thanks to Alex’s guidance, finally paid off.

‘I’m a little glad about the power. I don’t think a night without you would’ve worked for me,’ Savi said to Ted.

‘And that’s my cue.’ I nodded at Savi and Ted before doing the same to Kalina and Charlie. ‘See you all on Monday.’

I didn’t need the torture.

I took a long walk back to the studio, and picked up my phone, out of habit, to scroll through my contacts. There’d be someone I could drown my feelings in for the night.

A distraction was what I needed.

But, since I’d fallen for Kalina, I didn’t want anyone else.

My phone rang and my heart immediately leapt at the idea that it was her again.

It wasn’t. It was my father.

I turned off the device and shoved it deep inside my pocket. I needed to put distance between us, and put up boundaries.

Ironically, applicable to both my father and Kalina.

So, I kept walking.

Chapter 29

Act III, Scene II: Padua Heights, Finsbury Park

Kalina

Charlie focused on the road and neither of us had said anything for the last twenty minutes.

I fidgeted with the hem of my shirt as I thought of a way to bring up the conversation I dreaded.

‘I planned to take you out for breakfast tomorrow morning,’ Charlie said.

Silence spanned between us again as Charlie pulled into the parking spot outside my house. He switched off the car and turned to face me.

‘Past tense?’ I asked.

‘I feel like we should talk first.’

I nodded. ‘It’s like you read my mind.’

‘Something’s been bothering me and I wanted to talk about it rather than let it run amok in my head.’ He offered me a tight-lipped smile.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Things were off after our date. It didn’t feel...right. I don’t know how to explain it.’

I turned my body, pushed my back against the door, and took his hand in mine. ‘I know when people say, *it’s not you, it’s me*, they don’t mean it. And what they really mean is that it is you. But I really do mean it. This time, it actually is me.’

‘I really hoped I was wrong.’ He fidgeted with my ring and his eyebrows knitted together as he twisted the beads.

I pursed my lips to the side. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lead you on or give you the impression I wasn't interested. I was. At least, I wanted to be.'

'The fact that all of this is past tense tells me you're not feeling that way anymore.'

It wasn't a question and my throat constricted.

I looked at the centre console. 'I thought things between us would grow. You're an amazing guy, but—'

'You have feelings for someone else,' he finished.

I lifted my gaze in surprise. 'What? How did you—'

'I thought I saw something, the night after the festival, but I wasn't sure until tonight. It's clear, from the both of you. Something is going on and you're either trying to forget it or too afraid to admit it.'

My eyebrows pulled together. 'Both?'

He laughed. 'Kalina, he clearly has feelings for you.'

I shook my head. 'Are we talking about the same person? If we are, I don't think his feelings for me are romantic. We had an...agreement and it's run its course.'

'This is going to sound so sappy and sad, but you are the whole package; kind and sweet, you're funny, beautiful, and lovely to be around. Believe me when I say he feels the same way about you.'

I blinked rapidly. 'There's no way. No.' I shook my head. 'He doesn't feel that way about me. You were there at the dinner. He insisted I go on the date with you.'

Charlie ran a hand through his hair. 'Trust me, he does. I can't tell you why he did that. He's got some issues he needs to work through, but I've never seen him act this way with anyone.'

'Thank you, I think you're wrong and you're being too nice about this.'

'Because you don't have feelings for me? This is the bare minimum.'

‘I like spending time with you,’ I admitted.

‘I like spending time with you too.’

‘What to do?’

He shrugged sheepishly. ‘We can be friends? I don’t see why we need to let this get in the way of what could be an amazing friendship.’

I grasped his hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. ‘I would love that.’

‘Thank you for being honest with me. I appreciate it.’

‘I had no reason to lie and I would never want to lead you on.’

‘Are you going to tell him?’

‘I want to,’ I said. ‘But I wanted to talk to you first.’

‘Well, good luck. I don’t think you’ll need it but take it anyway.’

With that, we greeted each other and I waved at Charlie from the front door.

It broke my heart to see his face fall. I never wanted him to get hurt, but it would only grow harder if I lied and continued seeing him.

I dropped my bags on my bed and immediately called Titan. It went straight to voicemail.

Not how I envisioned this going.

I tried again and the same thing happened.

Hi, are you awake?

23:58

Undelivered.

Great.

I chewed on my thumb until I’d worked my way around my nail.

I couldn’t show up there...Could I?

I groaned and laid face down on my bed and yelled into my pillow. There was no way I'd get any sleep if I didn't talk to him right now.

I called a taxi and showed up at his studio twenty minutes later.

The buzzer rang out but there was no answer.

I went home, defeated, and tried to get some rest.

We had the drive to Montague House tomorrow, and I would tell him then.

He couldn't ignore me for all forty-five minutes of the drive.

Unless he doesn't show up at all.

Chapter 30

Act III, Scene III: Padua Heights > Montague House

Kalina

I didn't sleep at all, and when the doorbell rang, I was still dressed in my gown and severely uncaffeinated.

I yanked it open and was met by Titan who looked absolutely amazing in a green knit jumper beneath a black coat and blue jeans.

His eyes were the colour of dewy grass and he had to be taking some magical potion, because he looked gorgeous and fresh.

'Titan?'

'Yes?' His brows furrowed together in confusion.

'What...what are you doing here?' Maybe he'd gotten my messages and missed calls?

'Montague House? For the walkthrough? That's still happening right? It's in my calendar.' He pulled his phone from his pocket and looked down at it.

'Oh. I didn't know you were still coming.' I held the front of my gown together with one hand as I remembered how naked I was underneath.

We stared at each other, for what felt like a full minute.

'I agreed, didn't I?' His lips pulled up a little at the corner.

'Fair.' I shrugged.

'Besides, you texted and called? I thought you needed the backup. Do you want me to leave?'

I shook my head. 'No, no. I'm not ready yet...'

'Is Scarlet home?'

‘In the kitchen.’ I stepped aside and he walked by.

I tried not to think about the way he looked.

Or smelled.

Both of which were delicious.

‘I’ll be ready in five minutes.’

‘Take your time.’ He started down the passage.

I bounded to my bedroom and slammed the door. ‘Okay. Breathe. You’ve got this.’ I leaned against the wood and took some steadying breaths.

This was it. We were going to be alone and I could finally tell him how I felt. It didn’t matter what the outcome was. What was important was being honest with him. And this time, when I chose my outfit carefully, he’d keep his gaze on me long enough to realise I was wearing it for him.

I put the emerald green bodysuit beneath sheer stockings, and a soft grey knitted jumper and mini skirt set. The bodysuit would give me the confidence to go through with this, or it would be a great distraction if words didn’t work. Win-win.

With black leather knee-high boots to complete the look I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

I ran my fingers through my hair, and let it fall loosely around my shoulders. Exactly the way he liked it.

If this didn’t make him fall to his knees, then I didn’t know what would.

Maybe I read into things, maybe it was the way he looked at me, but one thing was for sure. I’d never felt this way about anyone else.

I needed to tell him.

Titan sat at the dining room table across Scarlet, who was hunched over the wooden tabletop.

‘I’m ready,’ I called out and Scarlet flinched.

Titan’s gaze roamed down my frame and I tried not to smile.

Kalina-1.

Titan-0.

‘Everything okay?’ I asked, innocently. I picked up the container I’d spent the night filling and placed it in my bag.

‘Yeah.’ He couldn’t look at me.

‘One second.’ I strutted over to the cabinet above the sink and grabbed a pill bottle and a glass of water before depositing it on the table in front of Scarlet. ‘Hydrate and rest.’

Scarlet mumbled her thanks.

I nodded at Titan. ‘Ready.’

‘Should we leave her on her own?’ His voice was laced with worry.

I urged him toward the front door. ‘She needs to rest and she can’t do that with you around.’

He held the door ajar. ‘After you.’

I traipsed down the steps and waited for him to join. The same way I’d always done when he’d picked me up before.

Instead of turning right on the pavement, he walked toward a dark green car and opened the passenger door.

I looked at the car then him and back again. ‘What’s happening?’

‘We’re driving to Montague House.’

‘I thought we were taking a taxi?’

He exhaled loudly. ‘We’ll get there just the same. I thought you’d like the drive.’

I walked hesitantly toward him and inspected the door and seat before climbing in. ‘Oh, these seats feel like butter.’

A peal of laughter escaped him. ‘Are you comfortable?’

I wiggled in my seat. ‘Very.’

He shut the door and walked around to the driver’s side.

‘Have you been trying to get me to ride on your bike when you had a car all along?’

He adjusted the seat, started the car, and the engine roared to life. ‘You’re saying you didn’t enjoy our ride the other night?’ He looked over his shoulder and pulled out of the parking spot.

‘The best ride of my life,’ I said and flicked my hair over my shoulder.

His foot shifted and the car stalled.

I didn’t expect it, and judging by the look on his face neither did he.

He cleared his throat and started up the car again.

‘Where have you been hiding this?’ I gestured to the general space around us.

‘It’s Ted’s. It was his father’s, and we usually take turns driving it, letting it get some time on the long road.’ He pulled out onto the street.

‘It’s beautiful, and suits Ted. Suits you too actually.’

He lounged in the seat, all long limbs and ease.

I wanted to make him laugh. I wanted the flirting and teasing between us.

Like before.

‘One of those are yours.’ He tipped his head at the centre console.

The lifted armrest housed cupholders underneath, where two thermal, reusable cups now sat.

‘You didn’t have to.’ I lifted the cup and inhaled. Sweet, spicy, and caffeinated. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s almond milk, so you don’t have to worry.’

I took a sip. ‘I wasn’t worried. You’re the one that’s so stressed about it.’

‘Do you like being in pain?’ We’d stopped at a red light and Titan lifted his cup to take a sip.

‘Depends if it’s worth it,’ I replied.

He sputtered as he nearly choked on his mouthful of coffee.

‘Like pizza. Gosh, your mind is in the gutter.’

He smiled, a genuine one that reached his eyes.

‘I actually brought something for you too.’ I held the cup between my thighs, before reaching into my bag and producing the container I’d packed. I lifted the lid to show him the cinnamon rolls. ‘Couldn’t sleep and there’s no way Scarlet and I would eat all of them.’

He let out a groan. ‘Those smell so good.’

I broke off a flaky piece the outside spiral, his favourite part, and held my hand out. ‘Here.’

He hesitated, looked at me, then looked at the road.

‘Come on, you can drive and I’ll make sure your needs are met.’ I lowered my voice, because that’s what he always did when he was making these sultry suggestions to me.

He shifted in his seat. ‘I should focus on the drive. But thank you.’

With disappointment in my chest, I pulled back, then popped the piece of pastry into my mouth instead.

I was as sad and unwanted as the cinnamon rolls.

Titan rubbed the back of his neck, then sat up straight to crack his spine.

‘Everything okay?’

‘Yeah, I couldn’t sleep either.’

‘You weren’t answering my texts. Or calls.’

Or the doorbell.

He waited for a beat. ‘My battery had died.’

‘Mmm...Well, if you’d answered me, then we probably could’ve helped tire each other out.’ I picked up my cup and took a sip.

Titan’s brows knitted together, he opened his mouth, and closed it. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Peachy.’

‘You seem...off.’

This wasn’t going the way I’d planned. He didn’t like the lines and I needed to switch to a different tactic. I reached out to touch his arm. ‘I’m fine, but you actually seem off. If you’re too tired to drive, I can take over.’

‘You’re a little too eager to get behind the wheel for someone who hasn’t slept.’

We were now on the main road. Montague House was far enough out of the city to make you feel like you were on a holiday and breathe in fresh country air, but not too far that you had to make a million stops along the way.

‘This car looks like it’s fun to drive.’

‘You can drive back,’ he offered.

‘Sure,’ I conceded.

I looked down at my phone and scrolled through my notes.

- *Touching parts of your body you want them to notice*
- *Complimenting them*
- *Flirty or suggestive remarks*
- *Placing a hand on them in an innocent spot - for a physical connection*

I’d tried all of the tricks Titan had taught me, but he was even more guarded now than when we’d started the drive. Frustration started rearing its head inside me.

‘I don’t trust *anyone* with this car. Don’t feel offended.’

‘Keep left,’ I said, ‘there’s a turn off coming up.’ I pretended like I’d been checking directions all this time.

‘It’s quicker to stay on this road.’

‘It’s easier if you turn off.’ I narrowed my gaze.

‘I’ve been there a million times more than you.’

‘Titan,’ I said sternly.

‘Kalina,’ He replied, his tone matched mine.

‘Must you always be so stubborn?’ I asked.

‘Must you always get your way?’ he countered.

The turn off came and went as he continued on the main road. The sky had turned grey from here, until as far as the eye could see.

‘Sit back and enjoy the drive. Do you know how to relax?’

‘I am relaxed.’

He scoffed. ‘Nothing about you says you’re relaxed right now.’

‘Could say the same about you.’ I turned toward the window.

‘Want to talk?’

I looked at him, at the softness in his green gaze, and the tilt of his lips.

Maybe this was the right time to tell him. ‘Actually, I wanted to tell you—’

The car jerked and he slowed down.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, and my hand gripped the edge of my seat.

‘Don’t panic,’ he said in his most calm voice.

There were no cars around and only rolling fields on either side of us as he pulled onto the shoulder of the road. The car slowed to a halt.

‘Wait here,’ he said. He climbed out and inspected the front tyre.

‘Everything okay?’ I asked through the rolled-down window as I leaned over the centre console.

‘Tyre puncture.’

‘Can I help?’

He looked up at me. ‘Could you turn on the emergency lights please?’

I pushed the button then climbed out of the car.

‘What are you doing?’ He stood.

‘I can’t stay inside the car while you change the tyre. I might as well help you.’ I rolled up the sleeves of my jumper.

‘You’re not going to get onto the ground and change a tyre. You can stand over here though.’ He placed his hands on my upper arms and moved me back to the other side of the car. ‘Sometimes drivers can’t always see this side, and I don’t want you to get hurt.’

‘I can see perfectly fine, and I’m capable of—’

My words trailed as he shrugged off his coat then reached behind his neck to tug on the neckband of his jumper. His T-shirt got caught in the mix and lifted, revealing his toned, golden skin beneath.

I didn’t know where to look. Further down was the low waistband of his jeans, which seemed worse.

So, I looked at the ground instead.

He tossed his coat and jumper onto my seat, then went back to inspecting the tyre. ‘It’s pretty much fucked. There’s a rusty old nail embedded in it.’

Thunder rumbled behind us and dark clouds rolled through the sky.

‘Get in the car. Please.’ He looked at me sternly.

‘Not until you let me help you.’

He groaned audibly, but didn’t say anything as he walked to the back of the car, and pulled tools and a spare from the boot.

‘Stop being so stubborn, and talk to me.’ I took the tyre iron from his hand.

‘About the tyre?’ He bent down and jacked up the car causing the muscles in his arms to flex beneath his skin.

I swallowed hard then shook my head.

He took the tool from my hand, which broke me from my reverie. ‘Yes, and also whatever else it is you’re not talking to

me about.'

A flash of lightning lit up the sky and the crack made me jump.

He quickened his pace. 'Could you not do this right now?' He groaned as he got the last bolt free. He switched out the tyre for the spare, then glanced up at me.

My breathing had quickened, from fear or frustration I couldn't be sure. 'When should I do it? You've been ignoring me, my texts, my calls.' I crossed my arms over my chest.

He tightened the spare wheel then stood. His gaze burned a line down from my eyes to my lips and back again.

I inhaled sharply, and instinctively leaned forward.

He took a step back. 'Don't.'

His voice was barely a whisper. He walked to the boot of the car and I followed, hot on his heels.

'Why won't you even look at me? You stopped talking to me, and I don't know what I did, or what I said, other than what you told me to do.' I wanted to shake some sense into him.

Even now, his gaze was focused on his task, wiping the grease from his hands, and not on me. He looked up, his jaw tight and a deep frown set between his brows. He tossed the rag aside with more force than a flimsy cloth required. 'What I told you?'

I scoffed. '*You* told me to go out with Charlie. After I'd thought there was something between us.' I gestured between our bodies. 'You treated me as if nothing had ever happened. Like you didn't care that I shared things with you. Things I'd never even said or done with anyone else.'

The clouds opened up above us, and in a matter of seconds we were both drenched.

But neither of us moved.

Both of our breaths were ragged, my brain told me to get in the car, but my body stayed rooted to the spot.

His white T-shirt was soaked, and now transparent. This only added to the growing ache in my chest and my belly.

‘Kalina,’ he said, and raked a hand through his hair in frustration. ‘Do you think I wanted to see you with anyone else?’

I shook my head. ‘What?’

‘I hated every second of it.’

I blinked rapidly, tears mixed with the rain streaked its way down my face. ‘Why did you tell me to go out with him? Why did you tell me he was perfect for me?’ I yelled over the torrential downpour. ‘Why didn’t you tell me how you feel?’

‘Because you deserve him!’ he shouted back at me. ‘You deserve someone who can give you the world. Someone who sees how wonderful you are.’ He looked up at the sky as if it’d give him answers. Then, he looked at me. ‘I knew if I told you how I felt, you wouldn’t give him a shot, and I never wanted you to regret what might’ve been. What you could’ve had.’

Anger and something else rolled around in my chest. This man frustrated me. We’d been so honest with one another, until he decided he knew what was best for me without consulting me.

‘So, you made the decision for me?’ I swiped at the angry tears and water on my cheeks.

‘No, I...’ He groaned.

Words wouldn’t get through.

I had to show him.

‘You’re so stupid.’ I shook my head.

I took a step forward, grabbed the front of his T-shirt, and pulled him down until his lips met mine in a searing kiss.

Chapter 31

Act III, Scene IV: Padua Heights > Montague House

Titan

I was gone.

Kalina's lips were as soft as I'd remembered. She tasted like cinnamon, and a moan escaped her as my tongue parted her lips.

I raked my fingers through her hair, and found purchase in the soaked strands. I wanted time to slow down so I could exist solely in this moment with her.

All those times I'd thought about pressing my lips against hers and tasting her, of feeling her body, and hearing her shaky breaths, nothing could prepare me for this. All the thoughts I'd had of this moment, the dreams, and my desires were now a reality.

She inhaled shakily and moulded herself to my chest as she circled her arms around my neck.

I moved her backward until her back pressed into the metal of the car. My hands roamed down the soft damp fabric clinging to her curves.

She nipped my bottom lip.

My watch vibrated wildly and I pulled away to look down at the little red icon on the screen. I laughed and leaned my forehead against hers.

'What's wrong?' she asked between breaths.

'My watch thinks you're trying to kill me.'

'What?' Her eyes went wide and she looked up at me with such concern, it made me melt.

I showed her the irregular heart rhythm notification.

‘I’m fine, dimples,’ I said before I leaned down to kiss her again. Her worry vanished as she sighed and pulled me closer.

Besides, it didn’t seem like a terrible way to go.

‘Kalina,’ I mumbled against her lips.

‘Mmm...’ she replied deliriously.

I pulled back, and watched the now steady downpour run down her face and body. ‘Did you call me stupid?’

She laughed, leaned up to give me a peck, then said, ‘Yes. You made me mad.’

I raised an eyebrow.

‘I was doing everything you taught me. The hair flicking, the laughing, the flirting. None of it worked on you.’ She frowned.

‘I told you it wasn’t necessary with me. I didn’t need the tricks.’

The frown between her brows disappeared and her smile returned, along with her dimples. ‘But you wouldn’t even look at me.’

I cupped her face between both of my hands. ‘I knew you and Charlie were starting to get to know each other, and he’s one of my closest friends, but...’ I rested my forehead against hers. ‘I love you and I have for a while now.’

The rain stopped, and the dark clouds disappeared.

‘I love you too.’

A symphony played in my head.

I covered her hand with mine, toying with the beads on her ring.

I kissed her one more time. ‘Let’s get you into the car and warm you up.’

‘That would be amazing.’ She shivered.

I bundled her beneath her coat and mine before turning up the heat.

Kalina placed her nose against the fabric then inhaled.

‘Are you sniffing my coat?’ I moved my arm to rest behind her head, and twirled her hair around my fingers.

‘Not at all,’ she lied.

I smiled. Her scent was one of my favourite things about her too.

Her teeth stopped chattering after a few minutes.

‘Curse you and your European blood.’ She wiggled back further into her seat.

‘It’s the one thing I can thank my father for, I guess.’ I laughed softly.

She reached behind her head and took my hand in hers, weaving our fingers together and placed it in her lap. ‘Want to tell me about him? Scarlet told me her story, but she said you’d talk to me when you’re ready.’

I inhaled then looked over at her briefly. She was the only person I’d ever wanted to be honest with. I wanted her to know the good and the bad.

I touched the ring again. ‘I was going to tell you how I felt, the night of your birthday. This was actually a little clue.’

Her eyebrows knitted together. ‘What do you mean?’ She put her other hand over mine and spun the beads.

‘It’s morse code for “I love you”. It was on the card.’

She made the cutest face. Like a cartoon character. ‘You are sneaky. And romantic, but you also took the card.’

I laughed. ‘I have it in my wallet.’

‘This is so special.’ She admired the ring thoughtfully.

‘But,’ I said, sucking in a deep breath before continuing, ‘I do want to tell you more about my life and my dad... My dad messed me up. He got inside my head. He always says I’m exactly like him.’ Kalina rubbed her thumb across my hand but didn’t say anything, nodding along in acknowledgment as I spoke. ‘He also thought throwing money at my mother, and Scarlet’s mother, would fix everything, and he didn’t need to be a present father in our lives because of it.’

‘But you speak to him? Now?’

‘I try not to. But he wants a relationship. He started contacting me after my mom passed.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ She gripped my fingers tightly.

I shook my head. ‘I let him get to me. I believed the things he said about me, and about you.’

Thinking back to that night made my jaw clench.

Kalina smiled. ‘You told him about me?’

I laughed. ‘Yeah. I told him how I felt about you. He said I didn’t deserve you. That you deserved so much more.’

She frowned. ‘And you believed it too.’

I exhaled. ‘I did.’

‘Pull over,’ she said.

I checked the mirrors before pulling onto the shoulder.

‘We are not going to let him be the voice in your head, okay?’

‘Okay.’ I nodded.

‘I’ve never felt this way about anyone. You’re the best person I know. You’re not going to tell me or yourself you’re not good enough. Understand?’

I was sure my face had a goofy grin plastered across it.

My heart expanded at the idea that someone saw this side of me. The side my father had convinced me didn’t exist. Slowly, but surely, the space he’d occupied in my head was replaced with Kalina.

‘You’re so hot when you’re demanding.’

Her face flushed. ‘Are you going to listen to me?’

‘If you talk to me like that, then yes.’

She laughed. ‘You’re the worst.’

‘Yes, but now you said you’re falling in love with me, so no take backs.’

‘Never.’ She shook her head.

‘You’d make an excellent motivational coach,’ I said.

I reached over the console to cup the back of her neck.

She leaned in, and braced her hands on my knees, before I kissed her.

For the first time, I wasn’t worried about being with someone, and what our future held. She was the one for me.

Chapter 32

Act III, Scene V: Montague House, Surrey

Kalina

The sycamore trees that lined the gravel road came into view and it was as if the grounds had become more beautiful since I'd seen it nearly a year ago. Creeping vines twisted up the high brick walls, threatening to cover the entirety of the black wrought iron gate.

Having only seen it at night, I could safely say it was even better in the daylight.

'Hi, we're here to meet Mr. Smith,' Titan said into the intercom. There was a light buzzing sound before the gates swung open.

The driveway led to a circle; on the left was a gravel road that led to the lake. To the right was access to the fields, and the main building sat ahead.

'Where it all began,' I said.

It was true for both Savi and Ted, and us. The masked ball seemed like an eternity ago, but here we were. Together.

Titan drove into the courtyard and around the lush green labyrinth. It was a new feature and added a soft element to the otherwise hard, limestone backdrop.

'It's more beautiful every time I see it,' Titan said. He parked outside the reception doors and turned off the car. 'Let's get you warm and dry.'

'What about you?' I gestured to the darkened denim of his jeans.

He waved me off. 'I'll be fine. European blood, remember?'

I rolled my eyes. We never missed a moment to tease one another.

When he walked around to my side, and opened the door, he slinked an arm around my waist, and pulled me towards him for another kiss.

I didn't stop him.

'Can't believe I said no to kissing,' I said between breaths.

'You didn't know what you were missing,' he said earnestly.

I gave him my most unimpressed look.

'I told you it was good.'

He wasn't wrong.

With a peck on my lips, he took my hand and we walked to the entrance.

A large fireplace on the left filled the space with warmth and a reception desk sat to our right. I could take in all the details this time around, without all the guests from the night of the ball filling up the space. My mind already pictured cascading blooms from the bannisters. I could see tall plinths with vases lining the passages, and the hurricane vases of lit candles. It'd be breathtaking.

'Good afternoon, do you have a reservation with us?' the pretty brunette receptionist asked as we stepped up to the desk.

'Oh, no, we have a meeting with Mr. Smith.'

'Let me call him,' she replied. She wasn't looking at me when she said it, but rather thirty centimetres north above my head. 'Nice to see you again, Titan.'

'You too,' he mumbled under his breath.

The receptionist stepped through a door to the back offices.

I turned to face him. 'Friend of yours?' I teased.

He responded by wrapping an arm around my waist. 'Doesn't matter.'

My chest bubbled over with happiness.

'Lina.' A tall salt-and-pepper haired man stepped through the doors.

‘Afternoon, Mr. Smith. So sorry we’re late, car trouble.’

‘Please,’ he waved his hand in the air, ‘call me George.’

‘This is Titan.’

‘Oh, we know each other very well,’ Mr. Smith said, and shook Titan’s hand.

Of course. I’d forgotten Titan was well acquainted with the Montague family and all of their properties.

‘You two look as if you’ve taken a dip in the lake. Vanessa, can you check if there’s rooms available for Ms. Ray and Mr. Andersson?’ Mr. Smith asked the receptionist.

‘Oh, no we couldn’t.’ I shook my head.

‘Nonsense. You’ll stay here for the night. I don’t want you on these roads in this weather, it’s a bit of a hazard when it’s storming, the drainage isn’t very good.’

‘Are you sure? I don’t want to be an inconvenience. You must be so busy with all the check-ins for Monday?’

‘I will hear nothing of it. And please; lunch, dinner and anything in between is on us. Mrs. Montague would have my head if I didn’t take care of the two of you.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. He was as kind in person as he’d been over the phone and email.

‘Everything is being brought in today and tomorrow, so you’re welcome to walk through whenever you’d like. Titan knows his way around here.’

‘I’m sure he does,’ I said with a smirk.

Titan glared at me and I had a feeling I would regret it later.

And by regret, I mean thoroughly enjoy.

‘Sorry,’ the receptionist said. ‘There’s only one room available.’

Mr. Smith looked at Titan and me, then at Titan’s hand around my waist. ‘Doesn’t seem like it’ll be a problem?’

Titan looked at me and I was sure the receptionist, Mr. Smith, and anyone within a five-mile radius could see the

wanting look in his gaze.

‘Not a problem at all,’ I squeaked out.

‘Let me know if there’s anything else you need. I’ll be in and around the hotel.’ With that, he left Titan, the receptionist and me.

‘Here you go,’ she said, and handed the keycard to me.

‘Well...’ we both said simultaneously.

The sound of thunder rumbled from outside and we turned to the large windows. The sky was dark grey again and it looked like we weren’t going anywhere today.

‘I swear the weather seemed clear when I checked.’

‘No one is blaming you for the weather Kalina.’ Titan brushed some loose hair behind my ear.

‘I should call Scarlet.’

‘I need to call Ted.’

He kissed the top of my head then stepped away.

I walked over to the fireplace to get warm. Scarlet answered on the fourth ring.

‘Hello.’ Her voice was thick with sleep.

‘Sorry, did I wake you?’

‘Hmm,’ she groaned.

‘There’s a bad storm and we had some car trouble so we’re staying the night.’

‘Oh, staying over?’ Suddenly, her voice perked up.

‘Yes.’

‘As in...together? You and Titan?’

I smiled. ‘Yes.’

‘Oh my God,’ she yelled. ‘Ow.’

‘Drink water, love you bye.’

‘Wait. I want details. Tell me mo—’

I hung up as Titan strolled over to me. ‘Is she okay?’

‘She sounds a lot better than she did earlier.’

My phone pinged with notifications; all texts from her.

Finally.

10:40

I’m so happy for you guys.

10:40

:’) These are happy tears.

10:41

Be safe. If ya know what I mean ;)

10:41

‘Oh my god.’ I laughed.

‘What?’

I showed him the messages.

‘Scarlet...’ He shook his head. ‘Come on, let’s get you warm.’

My stomach flipped at his words. I knew he’d meant it in the literal sense, but my body took it as much more. I’d thought about being with him for months.

Dreamt about it.

We walked down the brocade carpeted hallway in a comfortable silence. My hand in his, his thumb stroking the beads on my ring which sent tingles down my spine. We reached the end of the passage and I swiped the card over the scanner.

I was not prepared for what greeted us on the other side.

A large, mahogany four poster bed set up against the wall to our left, a dark blue velvet couch sat beneath the window ahead, and the door on the right led to the bathroom. The room was opulent with its dark woods and jewel toned drapes.

The fabrics screamed heavy, dark and luxurious.

‘Kalina.’

‘Yes?’

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes.’

‘You haven’t moved.’ He scooted me into the room and shut the door.

We were still standing in the small entryway.

‘That’s one very large bed.’

He smirked.

‘Don’t give me that look.’ I laughed.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ He walked over to the giant bed and sat on the edge. He leaned back on his hands, spreading his legs, and eyeing me like I was his next meal.

I strode hesitantly toward him, and his gaze followed my movements, like a predator watching their prey.

‘Shower?’ His tone was suggestive.

I stood between his thighs and shook my head. ‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’ve never been surer about anything in my life.’ I cupped his face.

He kissed the inside of my wrist, sending a shiver up my arm. ‘We don’t have to do anything right now.’

I levelled him with an unimpressed look. ‘Who’s being hesitant now?’ I asked, returning the smirk. ‘After three days of ignoring me—’

‘I wasn’t ignoring you.’

‘Ignoring me,’ I continued, ‘then kissing me like your life depended on it.’

He smiled and placed his hands on my hips, tugging me closer.

‘I think it’s safe to say we’re doing this.’

‘*Doing* this?’ He chuckled.

‘You don’t want to? Are you having second thoughts?’ I stepped back.

He tightened his grip on me. ‘Do you know how much I want you? How I had to stay away from you to stop myself from reaching out to touch you every time you were around.’

‘You don’t have to stop now,’ I breathed.

‘Thank fuck,’ he said. He grabbed my backside and lifted me off the ground.

I squealed with surprise as he set me astride his lap.

‘I want to show you how you make me feel,’ he whispered against my neck.

It sent shivers down my spine, and I let out a soft moan.

I twisted my hands in the still damp strands of his hair at the base of his neck, and tilted his head back.

Then, his lips were on mine, devouring and hungry as his hands stroked my sides and gripped my hips through the soft fabric of my skirt.

I sighed against his mouth when he cupped my breasts. His palms massaged the textured lace against my aching nipples.

‘Fuck, Kalina, the things you do to me.’ He pulled me against his erection.

I gasped. ‘I haven’t done anything yet.’

‘You’ve ruined anyone else for me. I can’t even think about you without wanting you. Even after I’ve had you.’

I took in his appearance; from his darkened eyes to his staggered breaths. ‘I’ve never wanted anyone this much.’

He kissed his way along my collarbone, up my neck then my lips.

I regretted not kissing him before. The strokes of his tongue against mine sent heat through my body that pooled between my thighs.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ he breathed against my mouth.

I shook my head.

‘You need to say it.’ His focused gaze met mine.

‘Don’t ever stop,’ I whispered.

He made a sound, somewhere between a groan and a growl before his lips were on mine again, fervent and insistent. I tugged on the front of his shirt, using my grip as leverage as I rocked my hips forward and back.

Both of us sighed into each other’s mouths at the pleasure.

‘I’ve never seen you this...undone. I like it.’

He rested his hands on my thighs, and squeezed gently. ‘It’s because I don’t know where to begin with you, dimples.’

‘I missed that.’

He stroked my cheek until I smiled against his touch. He leaned in to kiss the spot. ‘I missed seeing them.’

It was the two of us.

No interruptions.

No unspoken feelings.

He traced my bottom lip with his thumb. ‘This lipstick is such a perfect colour on you.’

‘Kiss me, fool.’

Then he did. With an intensity that set my body alight.

I laughed against his lips and pulled back. ‘It’s the name of the lipstick.’

He made a sound low in his throat and reached under my top to cup my breast. ‘You should wear it all the time.’

I sighed. ‘Keep doing that.’

He obliged and gently massaged through the silk and lace of the bodysuit. ‘Kalina...’ He lifted my top and his hungry gaze took in the strappy, lacey green lingerie. ‘What...is...’

‘This was plan b. If the flirting didn’t work, I would’ve taken my clothes off.’

‘Who’s the menace now?’ He yanked my top over my head and flipped me around until my back hit the mattress.

A giggle escaped me.

‘Plan b would’ve sent me to an early grave.’ His gaze raked over the lingerie appreciatively.

I giggled as he shimmied my skirt down my legs, leaving me in the bodysuit, stockings, and boots.

‘This look is really doing it for me.’ His hands squeezed up my thighs.

I shook my head. ‘Too many clothes.’

‘I can change that.’ He grinned and got the boots and stockings off in record time. With deft fingers, he undid the back of the bodysuit, and teased the fabric down my body. He sat up and his gaze burned over every single exposed inch of my body.

Heat radiated from my face downward.

‘I do enjoy seeing you blush. I wouldn’t have guessed it travelled so low...’

I let out a laugh and covered my face with my hands. ‘You’re shameless.’

He leaned down and kissed the softness of my belly. ‘You’re beautiful,’ he murmured. His lips seared a path over the swells of my breasts. ‘How could I not?’ He grazed each taut nipple with his teeth before soothing them with his mouth.

‘Titan,’ I sighed. The tension in my lower belly was almost painful.

He had a way with being gentle, but firm at the same time.

I loved it.

‘What do you want, Kalina?’ he murmured against my neck.

‘More,’ I breathed, and I ran my hands over his shoulders and down his back. ‘You smell so good,’ I said, and pulled his neck down to plant kisses there. I couldn’t help myself as I sucked on the spot, leaving a red mark on his skin and a groan on his lips.

'Fuck, Kalina.' His eyes shut as I reached between us and grasped his erection through his jeans.

'My turn.' He flashed me a devilish grin before he stroked me.

I threw my head back at the pure ecstasy of it.

'I love how ready you are.' His fingers curled through the wetness and he circled the sensitive bundle of nerves.

'Titan,' I breathed.

'I love the way you say my name.' He increased the pace of his strokes, bringing me close to my climax before slowing entirely.

'What are you...' I breathed.

'I want this moment to last forever.' He sat back then kissed my calf. *'I will never tire of feeling you...'* His fingers followed the path his lips were making as they ascended my legs. *'Of the taste of you...'* I laid back as he kissed me softly between my thighs, eliciting little sighs from me. *'Of being with you.'*

'Mmm,' I moaned as he hooked his arms behind my knees, and pulled my legs over his shoulders before he stroked his tongue through the wetness. His kisses were slow and deliberate, making me squirm and moan as I ached for a release.

'Please, Titan.' My hands found purchase in his hair and I paused as I pulled him toward me.

'Leave it,' he said roughly, holding my hands in place. *'Show me what you like. Use me.'*

His licks increased, the kisses quickening, and my climax inched closer and closer.

'I'm going to...'

'Let go,' he said, then circled my clit with his tongue. *'Come for me.'*

A cry escaped my mouth as I squeezed my thighs together and grasped his hair between my fingers. The build-up was so

immense, it broke down in waves over and over again. I couldn't tell where it began or ended and all I saw was stars.

When I let go of him, he crawled up over me, his face inches from mine. 'You taste even better than I remember.'

I couldn't move my legs or my body, but I managed a weak smile.

'Still want more?' He kept his gaze on mine.

'Yes.' I was sure my body was red. How could I want more after that? How could I want him like he hadn't given me the most earth-shattering climax?

He stood and pulled his T-shirt from his body.

I took in every toned line, the definition in his arms and the v lines that dipped into the waistband of his pants. He was like a work of art.

'How?' I whispered.

'What?'

'I don't know what to do with all of you.'

He laughed then dropped his jeans and briefs to the floor. 'Let me handle it this time.'

My eyes widened and I let my gaze roam over his body. Down his strong thighs and calves, the muscles honed and carved from his fitness efforts.

It was glorious.

'Are you okay?'

I nodded. 'Yes.'

'That's my girl.'

I did not think it was possible but I pooled between my legs again.

He climbed on top of me, holding his weight on his forearms as he kissed my jaw softly. Given the vigour that he exhibited a few minutes before, it took me by surprise.

'Could you take it slow?'

‘Of course,’ he said, his gaze and voice softened. ‘I want this to be good for you. You can tell me anything at any time. We’ll take as much time as you need.’

I reached down to stroke him and he hissed on a breath.

‘Good?’ I asked.

‘So...good.’

I stroked him like he’d done to me, slowly at first before picking up the pace.

He threw his head back and took a few deep, steady breaths. ‘Kalina...’

I slowed it down again. ‘I want to feel all of you.’

‘Wait,’ he said, and pushed himself up. ‘Let me get a condom.’

I could look at him all day. At the strong muscles corded beneath his skin and the way it moved as he strolled over to his discarded jeans.

When he returned to his spot over me, he smiled. ‘What?’

‘I can’t believe this is happening.’

He kissed me and all the noise quieted until it was our breaths and sighs between us.

‘I’ve thought about this for a while.’

‘Me too,’ I whispered.

He rolled the condom on and kissed me softly as our bodies fit together like a puzzle. All the hard planes of his muscles lined up with the softness of my body.

I covered his hand with my own as he stroked himself.

I wanted him. Needed him

He guided himself inside me.

‘Oh my God,’ I moaned, and my eyes rolled back.

He gasped as he moved forward inch by exquisite inch. ‘Oh fuck...’

Seated fully inside of me, he stilled. I could see the tension in his neck and shoulders, as he held back.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked.

‘Just a second. You feel so fucking amazing and I need this to last. I need this to be good for you.’

I cupped his face. ‘It already is.’

He moved, slow and languid, making me gasp a little every time he thrust forward.

‘Look at me,’ he said, his voice demanding but gentle.

I did as he asked, taking in his intense gaze.

He circled his arms around my head and I curled my fingers in his hair, pulling him down to kiss me.

He moved with deliberation, watching my reactions, increasing the rhythm until the twisting and tightening in my lower belly returned.

‘I can’t...’ It ached to the point of exquisite pain.

‘Yes, you can. I’ve got you.’

The build-up tugged and tugged in my core until it snapped. His name was a cry on my lips. A desperate plea for a release only he could give.

‘That’s it, take what you need.’ He thrust forward, once, and I gasped at the climax that rippled through me. He pulled back, then with one last thrust his climax followed.

Our lips crashed together in a burning kiss.

We were breathless, wrapped around one another, and undeniably happy. He slipped out of me and rolled onto his side, pulling me along with him. With his arms wrapped around me we lay together until our breaths steadied.

‘Never thought I’d be happy about a flat tyre,’ he said between breaths.

I laughed against his chest. ‘It only took two and a half dates with someone else, a bachelor party, and a rainstorm to get us here.’

‘Worth it.’ He stroked my face with the back of his hand.

‘Be right back.’ I got up and padded over to the bathroom.

There were two fluffy, and warm gowns on the heated rail. It was like wearing butter.

When I finished up, I took a look in the mirror, at my kiss swollen lips, the pink marks along my neck and chest made my cheeks flush the same colour.

I could get used to this.

When I opened the door, Titan had closed all the light blocking curtains and I carefully padded across the room to find my way back to the bed and his arms.

‘I love the way you smell, the way it’s woven in your hair and hits my senses every time you walk by.’ He stroked my hair in soothing circles.

‘That’s because it’s my shampoo and it’s literally right under your nose.’

‘It’s heavenly. What is it?’

‘Neroli jasmine.’

‘Never stop using it.’ He buried his face in my hair.

‘I need a snack.’ I nuzzled my face into his chest.

‘I ordered room service.’

I found his lips in the dark and gave him a peck. ‘You’re a keeper.’

He deepened the kiss. ‘I hope so. You know I really love you?’

‘I do.’

He brushed his fingers over the ring on my finger. ‘We’ve got to teach you morse code.’

We laughed until our breaths caught.

The rest of the day was spent in bed, after sending our clothes to housekeeping who assured us they would be dry and ready to wear in the morning.

We ate and spoke, making up for lost time.

Somewhere during all of it I nuzzled closer to him and fell asleep listening to his heartbeat.

Chapter 33

Act III, Scene VI: Montague House, Surrey

Titan

I never wanted to wake up any other way.

Kalina lay beside me, her eyes shut and her breaths slow.

I'd been lying awake since she woke me in the middle of the night, shoved a protein bar into my hand, then climbed on top of me.

Another way I didn't mind being woken.

I got up and, with careful precision, extricated my arm from under Kalina's head. She shifted a little, but continued to sleep.

I needed hot water on my aching muscles, and padded across the room.

I must've been in there for about two minutes when Kalina walked in, the gown she wore bunched up in certain places, the sleeves were too long, and the slit in front revealed a lot more than I thought she was aware of.

'Hi,' she mumbled sleepily. She rubbed at her eyes then yanked off the offensive item.

I would never get used to seeing her like this. Better than every dream I'd had.

I opened the door and she stepped inside, before nestling against my chest.

'I need breakfast first, dimples.' I chuckled.

She laughed. 'I'm broken. That was my limit.'

I looked down at her and smirked. 'I'd be happy to test that theory.'

She met my gaze and stood on her toes.

I closed the distance between us and kissed her.

The effect of the shower head above was not too dissimilar to our first real kiss yesterday, and I could see it becoming something we'd recreate often.

'What time are we leaving?' Kalina asked.

'After we have breakfast. I want to show you around.'

She beamed. 'Exciting. A private tour, how romantic.'

We got dressed and made our way downstairs. The formal dining room had a wall of windows overlooking the terrace and the gardens. It was all blue-grey skies outside, and only a drenched lawn left behind after the storm.

'You should know I love breakfast. Especially hotel breakfast.' Kalina handed a plate to me as I stepped up beside her.

'This feels like something I already knew about you.'

'You do know me well.'

Every time she looked up at me, I leaned down to kiss her because I could.

The dining room was mostly empty, so we grabbed our food and drinks before heading to one of the tables near the French doors.

I pulled out her seat then sat down beside her.

'My thighs are aching,' she said under her breath.

It immediately made me look down at her legs, wrapped in sheer black tights. 'I can massage them for you.'

She shook her head. 'We know what that'll lead to... Maybe later.'

I laughed and kissed her neck. It wasn't a no.

She giggled with delight.

'Has Savi called?' I asked.

She took a sip of her tea. 'She tried to. I texted her.'

'She's probably losing it.'

She took my hand and gently massaged each finger. ‘I just want it to be the two of us. For one night.’

‘I can make that happen.’

‘What did you have in mind?’

‘A surprise.’ I lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles.

Kalina reached over and grabbed a blueberry from my bowl and popped it into her mouth. ‘You know I don’t like surprises.’

I planted a kiss on her lips. ‘Last surprise. Maybe.’

She narrowed her eyes.

‘You are everything I never knew I wanted.’

Her cheeks went red. ‘You can’t say stuff so casually over breakfast.’

‘Why not? I’m going to tell you every single thought I have about you.’

‘I’m going to enjoy this.’ She did a little dance in her seat.

We finished breakfast and took a walk through the grounds.

The pond was similar to the one I’d taken her to so many weeks ago. How things had changed between us.

I was so glad they did.

We walked to the conservatory and Kalina relayed the night of the ball to me.

‘When I saw Ted and Savi standing here that night, my entire body went cold. I can’t believe she didn’t recognise him. His face is plastered everywhere.’

‘Same goes for Ted,’ I said. ‘He didn’t realise it at the time either. They were too far gone already.’

We’d been the ones to rein them in, but we were also the only two people who knew about their secret letter writing. We were actually in the middle of it all.

‘I’m glad we were spies together,’ she said.

‘I wanted any reason to see you.’

She pulled me down for a kiss this time.

We walked into the main building from the garden entrance. On our left was a grand staircase, lined with clear hurricane vases, that swept upward to the platform where the ceremony would take place.

‘It’s going to be so perfect,’ she said.

I could see the way her head filled in the gaps.

‘I know they said they’re happy without all of this, but they’re going to love it.’ I wrapped an arm around her waist

There were rows of seats, to our right, for the two hundred guests. Which shocked me to my core. ‘I can’t believe two hundred is too little for your family.’

Kalina laughed. ‘Oh, you should see what they do when there is no limit. It’s...overwhelming to say the least.’

I looked down at my watch. ‘One more stop then we can leave.’

I led her to the ballroom, where we’d first met.

‘It’s as beautiful as I remember.’ She looked around at the opulent wallpaper and chandeliers.

Everything about this place exuded luxury.

‘Savi and Ted can finally be together openly with no secrets between them.’

‘I’m really glad they get to recreate that night,’ she said.

‘Actually, there is one thing I’d like to recreate.’

She tipped her head to the side.

I took her hand in mine and spun her around before pulling her close. ‘Will you dance with me?’

She giggled and wrapped a hand around my shoulder. ‘There’s no music.’

I lifted a finger and pulled my phone from my pocket, scrolling until I found the perfect song. We swayed and moved around the marbled floor until she broke into a fit of laughter.

‘You’re a great dancer.’

‘And now I can finally dance in this room with you.’ I leaned down and kissed her in the middle of the dance floor.



I had one night to get this right.

One night to tell and show Kalina what I’d been holding back for the last week and a half.

‘Dimples,’ I said into the speaker of my phone.

‘Yes, Titan?’

I grinned like an idiot as I did up the buttons on my shirt. ‘I love the way you say my name.’

‘Like your name is meant to be said?’ She laughed.

‘Like you’re a little irritated.’

‘Old habits die hard.’ The smile in her voice was clear.

‘Are you ready?’

‘You said seven?’ her voice rose.

‘I was checking if you were impatient like me.’ I glanced at my watch.

It was six.

There was a pause and some shuffling on her side. ‘I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.’

‘See you soon.’

Fuck, I was so nervous.

It wasn’t like we’d never gone out together.

Or kissed.

Or made love.

Not even twenty-four hours ago we’d been tangled up with one another.

But this was Kalina.

And she deserved the best.

I grabbed my jacket and made my way to her house, arriving at exactly six twenty.

The door swung open, and the air was knocked from my lungs.

Kalina stood in the doorway wearing the green dress from the night of Savi and Ted's dinner. Soft velvet wrapped around her body dipping low in the front, accentuating her breasts. It looked like it was made for her, and also, me.

'You look...' I didn't have the words.

'You look handsome.' She beamed back at me then took the bouquet of yellow and white flowers from my hand. She breathed in deeply above the soft petals. 'Thank you. I need to put my shoes on.'

'Take your time.' I leaned down to kiss her. 'You look beautiful.'

A blush spread across her cheeks.

'Okay, stop or we won't go out tonight and I'm really excited about it.' She spun around and I followed her into her bedroom.

We'd shared so many memories between the front door and her bedroom, and it all came full circle to this moment—me sitting on the edge of her bed, while she stepped into a pair of black heels as we got ready to go on our first official date.

'The shoes that started it all.' I gestured for her to step closer.

She stepped forward then tilted her head to the side. 'I'm so confused.'

I knelt down in front of her, and pulled her foot onto my knee to tie the strap at her ankle before switching to the other. I focused on my fingers and not the way the dress dipped like a heart on her chest. 'The ones from the expo.'

Recognition set in and she laughed. 'To be fair, I didn't know this would be the outcome.'

I let my fingers graze up her calf, and she inhaled sharply.

No. Later. I needed to focus on getting her out of the house and not onto her bed.

‘I’m glad it was.’

‘Hair up,’ she asked, grabbing her hair and scooping it into a makeshift ponytail, ‘or down?’ She dropped it, letting it fall down her back.

‘Down,’ I said without hesitation. I wanted to move the pieces brushing her collarbones just to get a glimpse of her skin.

I failed dismally at listening to her as I stared at her calves and the way they curved from the shoes, the hem of her dress as it brushed her thighs, and how the back of the dress was done up with velvet laces my fingers itched to undo.

I tilted her chin up and leaned down to kiss her. Fully this time. She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me down until her body arched up against mine.

I couldn’t get enough of the way she tasted and felt. I wanted to drown in it.

She stroked her hand down my chest and moved it lower and lower.

‘Wait,’ I whispered and pulled back. ‘Let me buy you dinner first.’

She sank back and tapped my chin with her finger. ‘You’re working backwards.’

‘I’m trying to do things right.’

‘Kiss, practice dates, confusing middle bits, sleep together, and date?’

I laughed. ‘We know how to keep things exciting.’

She took my hand and a beatific smile set in. ‘Let’s go then.’

We were met with Scarlet—wearing a huge grin on her face—as we stepped out of Kalina’s bedroom.

‘You two look cute.’

I rolled my eyes at her.

‘Thank you.’ Kalina squeezed my hand.

‘Do you want me to stay out late tonight? Give you two some space...’ She grimaced mockingly.

‘No, you stay in. Don’t go anywhere.’

Kalina swatted my arm lightly. ‘He’s kidding. You can go out. You’re not under house arrest.’

I opened my mouth to say something, but Kalina’s look said don’t push it.

She was so sexy when she was bossy.

‘Okay, we’re going. Be good,’ Kalina called over her shoulder as she dragged me out the house.

‘You too,’ Scarlet yelled back.

Kalina shook her head then stopped short on the pavement. ‘Are we really going to risk the car again?’

‘You never got to experience it fully. I checked the tyres and replaced the spare.’ I opened the passenger door to the Jaguar, and helped her into the seat.

‘Okay, but if there’s a flat this time I’m not offering to help. I can’t risk getting grease on this dress.’

I gave her another kiss, for good measure, and because I could. ‘Deal. There’s something for you in there.’ I tipped my head toward the centre console.

Her groan was loud, even from the driver’s side of the car.

‘Really?’ She threw me an impressed look.

‘We have to be prepared and I don’t trust you.’

‘I have never met anyone more worried about lactose intolerance than someone who was not lactose intolerant.’

‘Now you know how much I care about you.’

Her gaze softened. ‘I appreciate it.’

I took her hand in mine as I started the drive.

‘Are you going to tell me where we’re going?’

‘No. I told you what to wear. Isn’t that enough?’

She huffed. ‘You’re no fun.’

‘Not what you said last night. Or this morning.’

‘Titan.’

‘Definitely what you said last night.’ I grinned as I snuck a glance at her.

She shook her head and bit her bottom lip, but couldn’t hide the little half-moons in her cheeks.

‘I’ll give you a hint; I’m recreating the moment I messed things up so I can make it right.’

We’d stopped at a red light and I looked over at her.

Her hand was on her chest, her eyes were glossy, and she’d pursed her lips. ‘That’s...the nicest thing you’ve ever done.’

‘You’re too easy to please.’

We pulled up outside Basilic ten minutes later. I helped Kalina out of the car before I handed the keys to the valet attendant. I wrapped an arm around her waist and leaned down to whisper, ‘I’m regretting asking you to wear this dress now.’

‘We could skip dinner.’ She danced on the spot, ready to get back into the car.

‘Absolutely not. I’m trying to court you.’ We walked towards the doors.

‘You’re such a charmer.’

‘You’re so mesmerising.’

Being back here made my chest ache. Sadness overlapped with immense joy when I looked down at Kalina.

The table we were shown to was pushed up close to the glass, giving us an unobstructed view of the outside.

‘I actually get to look around this time,’ Kalina said. She rested her chin on her hand as she took in the views below.

‘All I want to look at is you.’

‘Your lines hit differently now.’ She looked over at me.

‘You never believed me; I meant what I said. Always.’ I took her hand and placed a kiss on the inside of her wrist.

If the waiter hadn’t appeared at that very moment, I’d have skipped dinner and taken her straight back to my place.

They introduced themselves and handed each of us a menu. Kalina flicked straight to the dessert page, and her eyes scanned the items.

‘Lavender creme brulee. Mmm...sounds good,’ she said.

‘You haven’t checked the starters yet,’ I said, a smile playing on my lips.

‘You’ll likely choose something super amazing and I’m great at choosing desserts. Know your strengths.’

‘Do you want me to order for you? I’m going to order the same thing.’

‘No, that’s no fun. You know we’re going to end up sharing our food.’ She grinned widely. ‘And if I don’t like my food, I’ll steal yours.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

Our waiter returned a while later and I ordered the seared scallops and salmon starter. ‘Something I know you love and something you can try.’

Kalina ended up loving the salmon.

‘I knew it.’ I took her hand on the tabletop and held it as we finished the rest of our starters.

‘This is a very fancy first date. I would have been fine with burgers.’

‘We’ve already had burgers with each other. Besides, I wanted to spoil you. Maybe celebrate a little.’

‘Celebrate?’

‘With the advance from Mae, and my investments, I bought the studio.’

‘Titan,’ she squealed and jumped up, nearly tackling me to the ground as she sat in my lap and gave me a kiss.

‘I regret coming out with you dressed like this,’ I said, and adjusted the front of my pants carefully as the restaurant goers eyed us.

‘Foreplay,’ she said and winked at me.

‘Cheeky.’

She grinned down at my lap as she stood. ‘Now I’m going to have to put a lot of careful thought into our next date.’

‘Come here.’ I leaned over and pulled her seat next to mine. ‘You were too far away to begin with.’

Our mains arrived—lamb and chicken—that shifted back and forth between the two of us.

‘Okay that was a tie, they were both really good.’ Kalina leaned back in her seat and rubbed her stomach. ‘I can’t even think about dessert, where is it meant to go?’

‘Good thing we have some time,’ I said and called the waiter over.

‘We’re not staying for dessert? What about the creme brulee?’

‘Not here, no.’ I settled the bill then offered her my hand.

The drive was filled with longing gazes and soft touches. I’d steal a glance at her at every red light, and she’d stroke my fingers as they interlaced with hers.

Recognition lit up Kalina’s face as we pulled up outside the old warehouse.

‘Ice cream?’ She grinned.

‘Yup.’

‘I’ve been thinking about the lemon cheesecake flavour since that night.’

‘I’ve been thinking about you since that night.’

She chuckled. ‘Okay, that was smooth. I’ll give you that one.’

I leaned over the console to kiss her until we were both breathless. ‘Ice cream then my place?’

‘This is quickly becoming my most favourite date ever.’

‘It’s number one in my books.’

‘Your wooing is working.’

I winked at her and we strolled to the ice cream vendor, holding hands and sneaking kisses in the queue. I ordered one cone and when Kalina eyed me questioningly, I simply held it out to her to take a swipe.

‘Nothing for you?’ Her brows furrowed with concern before she took a taste.

I leaned down and kissed her. The coolness of the dessert mixed with the warmth of her lips. The combination of tastes was exquisite. ‘I’ve been wanting to do that since I brought you here. Never imagined I’d be able to.’

Her cheeks flushed, from the kiss, my words, or the warmth in this space. It didn’t matter. She was perfect.

‘You can keep doing it.’ She licked the ice cream and lifted her chin for another kiss.

I obliged without hesitation.

‘Now, you’ve gotten your sweet treat, let’s get mine.’

She giggled as I took her hand and led her back to the car. We were at the studio in record time. My hands were on her as soon as we stepped through the door, my fingers curled through her hair, and my lips on hers.

She sighed and reached up to cup my face. Such a tender action it made my chest ache.

She pushed my jacket down my arms and onto the ground.

‘I don’t think I’ll ever tire of this. Of you.’ I traced kisses down her neck.

‘You may want to spend more than a week with me before you make those kinds of confessions.’ She teased.

‘I’ll always want you,’ I said. I pulled away until our gazes met. ‘I’ll look for you in every room, I’ll listen to you talk for hours. I’ll. Always. Want. You.’ I punctuated each word with a kiss.

‘You can’t say things like that and expect me to focus.’ Her amber gaze met mine.

‘All you have to do is have a good time. Don’t worry about anything else.’

I reached around to grab her ass and lifted her off the ground.

She squealed before kissing me.

I walked her to the kitchen and set her down on the counter top.

‘I need you,’ I said, my breathing laboured.

‘You have me,’ she replied.

I leaned over her, taking her bottom lip between my teeth and sucking on it lightly.

She moaned against my lips, sending a jolt down my body.

‘Now,’ she sighed as I pushed her dress up.

She reached for my belt.

‘Let me...’ I squeezed the skin above her thigh highs. Those were a welcome surprise.

‘I want you inside of me.’

I reached into my back pocket.

‘I meant now. Are you clear?’ she asked, breathless with anticipation.

‘Yes.’ I brushed the hair back from her face. ‘I was just tested.’

‘Me too, and I have an IUD. I could totally email you my results right now.’

‘I believe you.’ I laughed then hesitated for a moment.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing. I’ve...never had sex without a condom.’ The idea alone nearly sent me over the edge.

‘Do you want to? We don’t have to.’

He chuckled. ‘Of course I do. I want everything with you.’

‘Good. Then it’s a first we can both share.’

‘You are so many firsts for me.’ I brushed her hair behind her ear.

Her forearms rested on the marble as she leaned back. Her skin was flushed pink.

I wasn’t going to last.

‘You’re going to end me.’ I pushed her dress up until my fingers grazed elastic and lace. I yanked it down her legs then reached between her thighs. ‘Fuck, I love how wet you get for me.’

‘Titan...’ she sighed as my thumb circled her clit.

I leaned down to kiss her, swallowing her moans as she rode my fingers.

‘Stop teasing,’ she said, and grasped my cock. She stroked until I hissed through my teeth.

‘Now, please...’

I pulled her hips towards the edge then sank into her.

‘Oh Titan...’ she sighed against my lips.

‘I can’t go slow.’

‘I don’t want you to.’

It wasn’t gentle and slow like the first time we’d been together. It was a desperate need to be close, to feel each other everywhere.

‘Are you close?’

She nodded.

‘Tell me.’ I sucked the skin along her neck.

She let out a breathy moan. ‘I’m very close. So close—’

‘Come for me, Kalina.’

She arched against me, her cries lost in my mouth as she climaxed hard. It was all it took for me to let go and find my own release.

She held me against her chest as our breathing slowed.

‘That’s definitely going up to the top of the list. This dress really is as magical as I thought it’d be.’

I pushed myself up onto my forearm and kissed her softly. ‘It’s the girl *in* the dress.’

Her face flushed pink.

‘Let’s go to bed.’

‘Here?’ She sounded surprised.

‘Yes? What do you mean?’

‘You don’t let anyone stay here.’

‘Kalina, I’m currently inside of you on my kitchen counter.’

She bit down on her bottom lip. ‘You’re bending all of your rules for me.’

I moved out of her then kissed her head. ‘My rules never applied to you.’

Her gaze softened and her lip trembled a little.

‘I knew I wanted to be with you. From the moment you asked me to kiss you. Just took me a while to get there.’

‘It was the sex, right? Too good?’ She teased.

‘Better than good.’

Our nighttime routine was effortless and less than twenty minutes later, we were lying in bed; Kalina’s leg draped over mine and her arm wrapped around my waist.

‘Hey dimples?’

‘Hmm...’

I inhaled deeply. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

Chapter 34

Act III, Scene VII: Verona Hotel, London

Kalina

‘Lina, what’s going on? You usually pick up the moves so quickly.’ Savi leaned over me as I laid down on one of the yoga mats.

We’d been practising the dances for the sangeet, a pre-wedding celebration of singing and dancing, and I was ready to become one with the ballroom carpet.

At least from down here I could check that all the lightbulbs were working in the light fixtures.

‘I don’t know why you decided to change the songs and the choreography. We’re not this fit.’ I gripped my side where a stitch threatened and my thighs turned to jelly.

To be fair, they’d felt that way most of this morning and all of last night.

Did I not know what sex was? Because surely whatever Titan had done could not be considered sex.

Savi patted my thigh and I yelped at the pain in my muscles.

‘What is wrong with you? Did you do that extreme Pilates class again? You know that instructor is out to torture everyone.’

The rest of our cousins were too engrossed in their own activities to hear what I had to say, so I turned to Savi and smiled. ‘Not the Pilates, but I did get an extreme workout last night. And this morning.’

Savi’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

Her exclamation was loud enough to turn a few heads.

I protested and lifted my head to tell Savi, but, as if he were summoned, Titan walked into the room.

Ted strode beside him as they walked our way.

‘Are you saying?’ Savi’s expression was split between wide-eyed shock and a smile.

‘I wasn’t expecting an audience when I got you on your back again, Kalina.’ Titan wore a devilish grin.

‘Oh my god.’ I lifted my palms and covered my reddening face.

‘What’s going on?’ Savi looked at Ted, Titan, then me.

Ted lifted his palms in defence. ‘I have no idea.’

‘I told Kalina I love her.’ Titan crossed his arms over his chest. He looked mighty chuffed with himself.

‘After I called him stupid.’ I leaned up on my elbows and winced.

‘So, the two of you are...together? How are you so calm about this?’ Savi vibrated with excitement and, possibly, confusion.

Titan crouched beside me and brushed my hair from my face. ‘Yeah.’

‘You’re being too nonchalant about this.’

‘Come on, love, let’s give them a moment.’ Ted ushered Savi to the other side of the room.

‘You okay?’ Titan asked.

‘Good. Savi’s going to need a one-on-one later.’

‘I meant your body. You look like you’re in pain.’

‘If I keep my hand here and don’t move my legs then yes, I’m okay.’

He laughed and shook his head. He moved to the end of the mat and my mind filled with images of yesterday afternoon.

The room felt like a sauna.

‘May I?’ he asked, his hand circling my ankle. Even with leggings between us, my skin burned at his touch.

‘Sure,’ I replied, not at all sure what I was agreeing to. Not really caring either because his hands were on me.

With soft and slow movements, he massaged my calves, moving up to my thighs, his fingers brushed dangerously close to where he’d been not even twenty-four hours ago.

The higher his hands moved, the more his body came close to covering mine. He was now hovering over me with his hand on my waist and his face above my own.

‘Want to give them a show, dimples?’ He grinned.

‘You are this close.’ I said, lifting my hand to show him the smallest space between my thumb and forefinger, ‘to getting a criminal record.’

‘As long as you feel better, it’ll be worth it.’

He lifted my leg and I winced at first but the way he bent my calf and circled my hip was painfully satisfying.

‘Oh man, that’s so good.’

‘Careful,’ he said, warning in his tone.

‘What?’

‘Don’t moan like that, you’re making me hard.’

He lifted my other leg to do the same and I felt his erection against my thigh.

‘Oh.’

‘Hmm mmm.’

‘Oi! You two, stop fornicating and come over here,’ Savi called out.

Titan hopped up and offered his outstretched hand to me. Even with the help my body felt weighed down.

‘Hope you’re stretching and warming up. I don’t want you to pull a muscle later,’ he whispered in my ear.

‘What?’ I whipped my head towards him.

‘I meant for the dancing. Get your mind out of the gutter.’

How could I still want him? Like last night and this morning wasn't enough.

His phone rang and he winked at me before tapping my ass lightly, 'Titan Andersson speaking.'

As I walked over to Savi and Ted, she rested her hand on his forearm. 'Ted, I need a moment with Lina.'

He kissed Savi then disappeared.

'Are you going to tell me what happened?' She didn't seem upset. More curious than anything.

'I'm sorry.'

'Why are you apologising?'

I looked down at my feet sheepishly. 'I should've spoken to you. I didn't know what I was doing.'

'Don't be sorry. I knew you'd come to me when you were ready. I didn't want to pry or push.'

My heart swelled. 'The search for a wedding date turned into a little more.'

'Oh?' Her eyes widened.

I pursed my lips, holding back a smile. 'He walked in while I was trying to...um...sort myself out.'

'Lina.' Savi's hand went up to cover her mouth. 'Did he... assist?'

'Why are we talking in code?' I asked with a laugh.

'Because it's Titan. I can't even *think* about it, let alone hear it.'

'He assisted.'

She squealed. 'Tell me everything.'

So, I did. From the moment we'd signed the Agreement, to the dates in-between, Charlie, and the dreaded flat tyre.

She smiled. 'But you're happy?'

'Very.' I grinned.

‘Good. I really like him.’

‘Me too.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner.’

Savi gave my arm a reassuring squeeze. ‘Titan isn’t Jesse, and I knew he wouldn’t hurt you.’

We turned and looked at Titan. He was still on the phone but winked at us.

‘You should go. Your *boyfriend* looks like he wants to devour you.’

My stomach dipped. ‘No, we still need to practice.’

‘You can leave.’

‘Really?’ Relief flooded me. I couldn’t do another run through of this dance.

‘You can barely walk. You should go home and rest.’ She wiggled her eyebrows.

‘You think sex is going to help?’

‘Sex always helps. Besides, Titan cannot stop undressing you with his eyes.’

A blush crept up my neck because I knew that was exactly what he was doing.

‘You’ve done so much worse *in front* of us.’

Savi grinned as if it were her greatest achievement.

‘Lina, the two of you are adorable,’ one of our cousins said.

‘Thank you.’

‘We’re so jealous, there’s like no single men at this wedding that we’re not related to,’ another cousin added.

‘Hey, I’m inviting all of Ted’s uni friends. There’s bound to be someone there, but Titan is off limits,’ Savi said sternly.

Titan walked over; his eyes wide as he heard the end of Savi’s threatening statement. ‘What did I walk into?’

‘You can thank me by buying me at least a million chocolate brownies.’

‘Thank you, and it’s a deal.’

‘Let’s go before she says anything else,’ I said and grabbed Titan’s hand.

He chuckled as I dragged him to the door. ‘I quite like this protective side of Savi. She’s so feisty for such a small person.’

‘Like Dadi,’ I said.

‘Exactly like her.’

‘They’re the reason I find myself in troubling situations.’

‘You have to tell me about it.’

‘We’ll see.’

He spun me around, trapping me between him and the wall beside the lift. ‘Am I going to have to coax it out of you, Kalina?’

‘I can’t say I won’t stop you if you try.’

He snaked a hand under my T-shirt, brushing his thumb under the band of my bra and my breath hitched.

‘Your place or mine?’ I replied, breathily.

‘First food then we can decide.’

‘Food?’ How was he thinking about anything other than sex right now? I was ready to explode from his touch alone.

‘Need to get your energy up,’ he said, as if he’d heard my thoughts.

The lift dinged and the doors opened. Lexie’s voice echoed in the empty space as she spoke to Jesse.

Both of them looked confused at what they’d walk in on.

Titan pulled me along as he climbed into the lift.

‘Enjoy,’ I called out before the doors shut.

Less than thirty minutes later, with paper bags in hand, we strolled through the door of my house, and Titan deposited our order on the large dining table.

‘You want to eat now?’

‘Something like that,’ he replied. He stepped forward and trapped me between himself and the table. ‘This look is really doing it for me.’

I let out a soft moan as he kissed my neck. ‘What look?’

‘This athleisure thing you have going on.’ His hand grazed under my top, as he’d done at the hotel, continuing his torturous touch over my bra and the side of my waist.

I reached out to cup the front of his jeans, his need clear and very apparent.

‘I like the way you whimper a little when I touch you here...’ His thumb grazed the seam on my leggings.

I placed a hand on his chest, moving it to feel the ridges underneath.

‘Less clothes.’ He lifted my T-shirt up and over my head, discarding it behind him.

‘Is it my turn?’ I asked a little too enthusiastically.

He nodded once.

I pinched the hem of his jumper and T-shirt between my fingers and pushed it up, revealing his abdomen inch by inch.

This time we weren’t interrupted.

Chapter 35

Act III, Scene VIII: Montague House, Surrey

Kalina

‘We’re going to be so late.’ I tried doing up the back of my top, while Titan undid it.

‘They won’t miss us,’ he said, placing a kiss on my neck.

I leaned back against his chest and he wrapped his arms around my waist. His thumb toyed with the skin between the hem of my top and waistband of my skirt. It sent little tingles up and down my spine.

‘No, no.’ I tried putting some distance between us. ‘Savi will have my head if we don’t show up.’

‘But you can have mine if—’

‘Titan,’ I exclaimed.

He grinned from ear to ear before lifting his palms in mock surrender. ‘Fine, but don’t say I didn’t offer.’

‘After.’ My voice was filled with promise.

‘I’m not going to stop trying.’

‘You’re not playing fair,’ I whined.

He pulled his shirt on—much to my dismay—and I watched his fingers move painstakingly slowly doing up each button. ‘You didn’t want any of this, now you have to wait.’

‘I am my own worst enemy.’

He flashed me an impish grin.

‘I like this. When you’re so playful and happy.’

‘You make me happy.’ He gave me a once over, stepped closer, and did up the back of my top. He ended it off with a

kiss on my shoulder. ‘Have I told you I like this look? A lot.’

‘Thank you,’ I replied, doing a twirl so the skirt of my lehenga flared out. ‘You’ve said it at least thrice.’

‘My favourite colour on you—sunshine yellow.’

He took my hand and squeezed it before placing a soft and quick kiss on my lips. ‘Let’s go so we can come back here. I have some plans for this outfit of yours and where I’d like it to end up. Spoiler, it’s the floor.’

I laughed as I dragged him out of our room and down to the ballroom of Montague House where the mehndi and haldi was being held.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked as we walked towards the stairs.

‘A little nervous.’

‘Why?’ He placed soft kisses on the inside of my hand and wrist.

‘This is the first time we’re...together. In front of my entire family.’

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘So, I can do this.’ He kissed my neck, and I giggled. ‘Or this.’ Another kiss on my collarbone while his hand found my waist.

‘You’re distracting.’ I wiggled out of his grasp but he pulled me back and rained kisses all over my face.

‘You’re enticing.’

‘Okay okay, the quicker we go, the quicker we can get back to this.’

‘Promise?’ He pouted down at me.

‘Yes.’

He kissed me, gently pushing my back against the wall.

‘Public space,’ Ted called out.

We pulled apart.

‘Hi,’ I greeted Ted sheepishly.

Titan pulled Ted into a hug.

‘Ted, you look dashing. Does Savi know about this?’ I gestured to the navy-blue traditional outfit he wore.

His face flushed red. ‘It’s a surprise.’

Titan and I smiled widely.

‘She’s going to enjoy this. A lot.’ Titan nodded approvingly.

‘Let’s find your bride.’

We started toward the stairs, my hand in Titan’s, and walked toward the ballroom.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked Ted as we reached the entrance.

He looked like he was going to break into hives as he hovered in front of the doors anxiously. ‘I don’t know what to expect.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s going to be fun,’ I said. I let go of Titan’s hand and hooked my arm through Ted’s.

We walked into the room and it was spectacular. String lights and soft colourful fabric was draped from the ceiling and hung down the sides of the room. There were pockets of luxurious seating around the room.

Savi was seated on a golden chaise where the mehndi artist had started on her arms and worked her way down to her palms.

Before Ted could approach her, our family and friends swarmed him with well wishes and greetings. A beautiful blend in the space where their story had begun.

Titan stepped up beside me and offered me his hand. ‘Ready?’

I wrapped his fingers with mine. ‘Yes.’

The BAAs were on us in an instant.

‘What’s happening here?’

‘Are you two together?’

‘It’s about time.’

‘Our two girls have found their Englishmen.’

They barely gave each other a chance as their questions flew our way.

‘Titan would love to tell you,’ I said to the aunts. ‘I should see if Savi needs anything.’

‘Do you need me to help you?’ Titan’s voice was layered with desperation.

I shook my head. ‘No, I want to talk about you, so you can’t be there.’

He leaned down, while my aunts tittered excitedly amongst themselves, and whispered, ‘You are in so much trouble when I get you alone.’

The blood rushed to my cheeks, but the excitement rose in my belly.

‘Promise?’ I asked.

He held back a groan.

‘Enjoy,’ I told the aunts and ducked under Titan’s arm toward Savi.

‘I see they’ve staked their claim.’ Savi tipped her head behind me.

Titan spoke to them patiently.

‘He’s so wonderful,’ I gushed.

‘I told you.’ If she hadn’t needed to sit still during this process, she’d have shimmied her shoulders.

‘We needed to find out for ourselves.’

‘We’re so glad you did. You two are idiots.’

‘Hey!’

Savi smiled. ‘But idiots I love and couldn’t see with anyone else.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I bet you finally know what sex eyes are now.’ Savi burst into a fit of laughter.

My face heated. ‘Maybe.’

Ted, now freed from the clutches of the other family members, crossed the room a little while later and rescued Titan.

‘What a man,’ Savi said and sighed.

‘And that outfit?’ I wiggled my eyebrows.

‘I can’t wait to get him upstairs.’

The artist interjected. ‘Let me wrap your hands first.’

Savi and I burst into a fit of giggles.

Ted walked over to his bride and I took the opportunity to wrap my arms around Titan. ‘Hi.’

He kissed my head. ‘You are a menace.’

‘I learn from the best.’ I nuzzled into his side.

‘A year ago, I wouldn’t have pictured myself standing here.’

We both looked around the room; Ted and Titan’s friends mingling with our cousins, Ted’s mother talking to Savi’s, and Titan and I openly together.

‘You didn’t see yourself here with me?’ I asked.

He pulled me closer. ‘Of course I saw myself here with you. Do you know this is almost the exact spot where I met you?’

‘We’re doing this?’ I tilted my chin up.

‘We are,’ he said, then he leaned down to brush his lips over mine.

‘Finally,’ my grandmother’s voice rang out.

This was turning out to be the debut of our status as a couple.

With Scarlet on her arm, my grandmother stopped in front of us.

‘Dadi,’ I greeted her and Titan followed suit by touching her feet.

My grandmother pulled the both of us into a tight embrace. ‘It’s about time.’

‘You were right, Dadi.’

‘I couldn’t think of anyone more perfect for my Gulab.’ My grandmother took my hand and placed it in Titan’s.

‘Thank you.’ I kissed her cheek.

‘Don’t let me keep you. We can catch up over chai. The both of you.’

‘We’d love that,’ Titan said.

‘Do you want to get your hands done?’ Scarlet asked.

‘Of course.’

I kissed Titan then we traipsed off to the artist for the guests.

Titan spent the night keeping my hair out of my face and hydrating me with drinks, even though I’d only had the backs of my hands done.

The festivities continued well into the night, but I’d given Savi a strict bedtime. Rest was key in the lead up to her big day.

‘Can we go to bed early too?’ Titan asked in a low voice.

‘I am feeling a little sleepy...’ I smirked.

We barely made it through the door of our room before my back was pressed up against the wall. His lips were on mine and his hands wrapped around my waist.

‘I’ve wanted to rip this off from the moment you put it on,’ he groaned. His hands bunched up the fabric of my skirt.

‘You can,’ I breathed.

‘Not yet.’

He kissed my collar bone and all along the front of my very low top.

My hands hovered over his hair, and I was too afraid to touch the golden strands.

He kissed his way up the inside of my arms then held them above my head. ‘Don’t move them. Okay?’

I nodded.

He raised an eyebrow at me.

‘Okay,’ I breathed.

His lips moved along my jaw, further down my body along every inch of my skin until he knelt down in front of me.

With a focused gaze on mine, he slid his palms under my skirt, and circled my ankles.

I sucked in a breath as his fingers brushed up along my skin.

‘I’ve been craving you all day, Kalina,’ he said as he ran his thumb along the thin mesh between my thighs.

I moaned.

‘I love the way you react.’ His voice dropped an octave.

‘Titan...’ I leaned my head and arms back against the wall, unconcerned with the smudges it may cause.

My words turned into sounds and became incoherent as his mouth and hands got me over the edge and into a climax that wracked through my entire body.

‘That...was...’ I said between pants.

‘I know,’ he said.

‘What about you?’

He stood and kissed my forehead. ‘That’s all I wanted. Let’s get you ready for bed.’

He helped me remove my makeup and wrap my hands.

‘You can sleep in this,’ he said, and pulled the green T-shirt from his bag.

‘It exists.’ I grinned.

‘I told you, if you stayed over you’d see it.’

‘It’s mine now.’ I lifted my arms.

He slipped the T-shirt over my head. ‘And so am I.’



It'd been two nights of celebrations, and I was in desperate need of caffeine, but when I walked into Savi's room the morning of the wedding, my breath hitched.

She was dressed in a heavily beaded red and gold bridal lehenga, the now darkened mehndi swirled up her hands and arms and disappeared under her sleeves.

'You look so beautiful Sav,' I whispered. Tears sprung from my eyes and ran down my cheeks.

'No,' she said, and shook her head. 'Don't start doing that. If you cry, I'm going to cry.' She waved her palms at her face, as if that could stop the tears in its tracks.

'Okay, okay, I'm trying not to.' I mirrored her movement and grabbed a tissue from the dresser to dab at my eyes.

Her makeup was done and it hadn't budged.

Her makeup artist was Tara, the same woman who'd done mine for the photoshoot with Titan. I'd definitely use her for the foreseeable future.

'Can you help me with this?' she asked, holding up her dupatta.

Her hair had already been styled in loose waves and it was just a matter of pinning it in place.

'What about your mom and Dadi?' It was quite a special and significant moment, and seemed as though they should be the ones to do it.

'They've already helped me this morning. This is for me and you.'

Now I really cried. 'This means so much to me. Thank you.'

She sat down in front of the dresser and I stood behind her, adjusting the gauzy fabric until we were both satisfied with where it lay.

'Hold it here,' I said, then moved her hands into the right positions before I reached over to grab the little box that housed the hair and safety pins.

‘Can you believe it?’ Savi asked, wriggling in her seat. ‘How far we’ve come.’

‘I cannot. How are you feeling?’ I focused on my hands as they worked.

‘I feel really good actually. No sickness or anything.’

‘She’s on her best behaviour today.’ I tipped my head at her abdomen. It was still concealed by careful pleating and adjustments from our grandmother. As excited as they were about being parents, Savi had insisted she not look too pregnant on this big day.

‘She knows. Her dad is the one.’

‘Don’t,’ I said, narrowing my eyes at her. ‘We’re going to look awful and puffy.’

‘You know your boyfriend has magic fingers.’

‘Oh my God.’

‘For editing, Lina, get your mind out of the gutter.’

Savi laughed and it was infectious. I couldn’t help but join in and the tears that threatened to fall were now ones of joy.

A knock sounded at the door before it opened, and Savi’s parents walked in.

‘I’ll leave you to it.’

It was the last quiet moment of the morning, so I headed downstairs.

The setup of the ceremony area was done and the staff were walking in and out of the back door with flowers, candles, and various other decor items.

I followed them to the ballroom, where any remnants of the celebrations over the last three nights had been cleared and the space was transformed.

The staff lined the outer edges of the room with the large hurricane vases, which would be filled with white pillar candles and lit before the reception.

I looked up at the painted ceiling, the gold light glimmering off the surfaces.

‘Lina, are you still happy with the table placements?’ Mr Smith asked.

‘Yes, it’s perfect.’

Long tables were arranged along the walls, creating a square, with the white dance floor in the middle of the room. Maximum walking space on either side of the tables to encourage mingling, as Ted and Savi had requested.

I checked the place settings and looked up as Lexie entered the room.

‘Lina, just the person I was looking for.’ Her voice rang through the empty space. She looked as fresh as ever, not as if she’d spent the night up until one a.m.

I slapped a smile on my face. ‘Lexie, hi.’

My blood turned to ice as soon as Jesse walked up behind her.

‘Sorry to corner you like this.’ They stopped in front of me. Jesse couldn’t meet my gaze. ‘Jesse has something he’d like to say.’ She folded her arms over her chest.

Jesse took a deep breath. ‘I’m sorry about what happened between us.’

An apology from Jesse Montague was not on my bingo card for the day.

It wasn’t really on my bingo card for my life.

‘And...’ Lexie looked about one second away from tapping her foot with impatience.

‘I was an ass and I wasn’t thinking about how everything would affect you. It was selfish and wrong.’ He exhaled, as if it’d been sitting on his shoulders for ages. ‘I was an idiot and I’m really sorry.’

Lexie nodded once and took a few steps away from us. ‘I’ll give you two a moment.’

‘I...don’t know what to say.’ I was in total disbelief.

‘You don’t have to say anything. I’m the one that has the explaining to do. I’m genuinely sorry about what happened. I really liked you, but I shouldn’t have used you that way. I’m trying to fix things between Ted and I.’

That surprised me. ‘Oh?’

‘Yeah, and I told Lexie about what happened. She was furious.’

I looked over his shoulder and she waved at me.

‘I hope you can forgive me. This is only the beginning of my apology, but I will do anything to make things right with you.’

I waited for a beat. I hadn’t needed his apology, although it was quite nice, but let him simmer in it for a while. ‘Well, you should know I’m not going to make this easy for you.’

He smiled. ‘I didn’t expect you to.’

‘I’m going to charge you so much to plan your wedding.’

‘Whatever you want. Double it. Triple even.’

‘You need to talk to Titan. Probably more than you need to talk to me.’

He sighed. ‘I know. He’s on my list. Being an ass toward him has always come so naturally for me.’ He laughed. ‘I think I took it one step too far though...’

I narrowed my eyes, thinking about what he could be referring to, but drew a blank. Wanting this to end, I said, ‘Thank you. I forgave you already. I didn’t want to make things weird with Savi and Ted being together so I pushed my feelings aside.’

‘Which isn’t fair. I should’ve spoken to you sooner. I’m sorry. Again.’

I nodded. ‘Thank you for doing it now.’

Lexie squealed from where she stood. ‘So, you’ll plan our wedding?’

I shivered at the high pitch of the sound. ‘Yes, I’ll do it.’

Jesse hadn't really crossed my mind since the Wedding Expo and seeing him now didn't bother me as much as it used to.

A set of arms snaked around my waist.

'Hi, beautiful.' Titan spun me around and planted a kiss on my lips that stole my breath away.

'Hi.'

'Titan,' Jesse started, then cleared his throat. 'I, uh, owe you an apology. Quite a few actually.'

I looked at Titan's set jaw. His gaze over my shoulder softened and his grip on me eased up. 'Thank you. But, not today. I'm going to let you grovel a bit.'

Jesse nodded. 'I deserve that. Whenever you're ready.' He walked over to where Lexie stood.

'What did you hear?' I asked Titan once they'd left the room.

'Almost everything.'

'Ah. Explains your scary calm tone.'

'I'm a changed man, dimples.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Sure sure. You should actually thank him.'

Titan arched a brow.

'Without him at the expo, we wouldn't be together now.'

He chuckled then leaned down to kiss me. 'I would've found a way to be with you.'

'You're so romantic.' My chest was ready to burst.

'Ready to get those two hitched, again?'

'You bet,' I replied.

I hurried back to our room to get changed, then we made our way down the aisle together as Maid of Honour and Best Man.

The ceremony went off without a hitch, and there wasn't a dry eye in the room. But my gaze only sought out one person.

As I looked up at Titan his gaze softened and his lips turned up in the smallest of smiles.

It was the look I'd seen hundreds of times before at weddings.

It was the look I'd been searching for.

And now it was being directed at me.

Once Ted and Savi walked back up the aisle, and greeted their guests, Titan strode over to me and wrapped his arms around me.

'You look beautiful. Have I told you that today?'

I leaned up to kiss him. 'Only once.'

'Well then, you look breathtaking and I want you to find me later so I can kiss you properly.'

My stomach flipped at his words and I nodded.

We parted ways as he took photos of Savi and Ted in and around the grounds and I mingled with the guests as they had pre-reception drinks and snacks.

I snuck away to help Savi change and when I walked out of her room, Ted paced the corridor.

'You're going to burn a hole in the carpet,' Titan said. He leaned against the wall and I really wanted to identify as a wall at that moment.

'Sorry.' Ted stopped.

'Don't be. It's very endearing that you want to be beside her all the time.' Titan straightened when his gaze met mine.

'Hi,' I said.

'Hi,' he replied.

My heart raced. I couldn't believe that look was all for me.

The door opened and Ted's breath hitched. 'My love, you look...'

Ted's gaze took in the champagne and ivory coloured lehenga Savi now wore. The fabric was a little more modern, made up of lace and silk, while the style remained classic.

Much like Savi herself.

Despite the negativity and the barriers they'd faced before, they were together and happier than ever. They deserved all the celebrations and festivities.

'I'm going to...yeah. Okay,' I squeezed past the two of them, who'd forgotten I'd existed as they reached for each other and made out.

Titan took my hand and pulled me close. 'I missed you.'

'It's only been two hours.'

He cupped my face and stroked the back of my neck, sending goosebumps down my arms. 'Still missed you.'

'I missed you too,' I admitted.

'Want that kiss now?' He grinned.

'I wish. I have to make sure everyone finds their way to the reception, but you could meet my dad.'

'What?' Titan's eyes went wide.

I laughed. 'He's obviously here. Savi is his favourite niece.'

Savi and Ted were still whispering sweet nothings to one another beside us.

'Are you sure? This seems like such a big moment.'

'It's very casual. I mean, you got through Dadi. That's the person you should actually be worried about.'

He laughed. 'Weirdly enough that makes me feel better.'

'Okay, let's go.'

I led him down to the reception, and scanned the crowd before I spotted him talking to Savi's father. I hadn't seen my dad in a while but when they stood next to one another, they looked like twins.

'Papa,' I said as we walked up beside them. 'This is Titan.'

They shook each other's hands.

'Oh, it's so nice to meet you. My brother's told me a lot about you.'

Savi's father gave me an encouraging smile that set me at ease.

Seems like everyone was hoping we'd be together.

'It's so good to meet you too.' It was the first time I'd seen Titan blush.

'You should have a seat. Savi and Ted will be down any minute.'

I pulled Titan away, but his expression remained frozen in confusion. 'I don't feel like I had a chance to process that.'

I laughed. 'It was meant to be brief. I wanted him to meet you officially.'

'I've never met anyone's father.'

'Another first for me.' I did a little shoulder shimmy.

'You're enjoying this way too much.'

'I am.' I squeezed his hand. 'But I think you are too.'

He stole a kiss. 'Wouldn't want to share this with anyone else.'

The MC introduced Savi and Ted. Both families cheered loudly and excitedly as they made their way to the dance floor and their first dance song started up.

Scarlet stood beside me and Titan as we watched Ted spin and twirl Savi around the dance floor with a practised ease. He was really good at it.

'They're so beautiful together. Their baby is going to be adorable.' Scarlet gazed at them with hearts in her eyes, much like everyone else in the room.

'I know,' I agreed with Scarlet. 'I can't wait to smush her.'

'What?' Titan asked.

'Right? She's going to be too cute for me to handle,' Scarlet said.

Titan opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, and shook his head instead. 'You two are so weird.'

We both grinned at him.

The dance floor opened up and the guests were more interested in it than they were in the food.

‘Hello, hello,’ Nick said as he strolled up with Charlie alongside him.

‘Hi,’ I greeted them.

‘Would you like to dance?’ Nick asked Scarlet.

Titan opened his mouth to say something, but I stopped him.

Scarlet looked at Nick and Titan then Nick again. ‘Sure.’

‘It’s just a dance,’ I said to Titan.

‘It’s never *just* anything with Nick.’ Titan shook his head but made no move to stop them.

‘Chill out, it’s a room full of people,’ Charlie said as he tapped Titan on the back.

‘Exactly,’ I agreed.

‘Are the two of you ganging up on me?’ Titan crossed his arms over his chest.

I shrugged.

‘Yeah. We’re a team now.’ Charlie grinned.

Titan sighed with resignation. ‘Thank you.’ His words held so much meaning.

Charlie shook his head. ‘Don’t be. I know you. Sometimes better than you know yourself.’

‘Are we okay?’ Titan asked.

‘Of course.’ Charlie nodded and pulled Titan in for a hug.

It was really endearing.

‘Okay, go. Kalina is itching to dance.’ Charlie chuckled.

He was right, I was moving around on the spot.

‘Come on,’ Titan said and he took my hand in his, pulling me through the throng of people. The music was slow and beautiful.

I placed a hand on his shoulder and looked up at him.

‘Thank you for kissing me at the expo.’ His hand tightened on my waist, closing the gap between us.

‘You were in the right place at the right time,’ I joked.

His breaths were deep and his gaze focused on mine.

‘Everything okay?’ I rubbed my hand up his neck.

He nodded. ‘I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and I hope you know I would never do anything to mess this up.’

‘Of course. We found our way to each other. Eventually.’

I looked at our entwined hands, where his fingers gave the beads on my ring a spin. ‘I wanted to tell you that I loved you then. I think I fell in love with you from the moment I saw you across this room.’

‘Titan...’

He shook his head. ‘I want you to know that I’ll always love you.’

Tears sprung into my eyes then. ‘I love you too. I’ve fallen in love with the way that you accept me as I am. I can be myself around you and my head gets quiet. I’ve never had that with anyone else.’

He reached down, steadying my chin between his fingers, and kissed me on the dance floor. The very same room I’d met him in nearly a year ago.

The room that changed it all.

‘Right place, right time, dimples,’ he murmured in my ear.

Epilogue

Act III, Scene IX: Padua Heights, Finsbury Park

Four Months Later

Titan and I moved around the kitchen in my house with the ease and comfort of two people who'd spent every single day together since Ted and Savi's wedding.

Since then, we'd split our time between his place and mine, and fallen into an easy rhythm. Not much different to our time spent together before.

I lifted his wrist to check the time. 'We have to go.'

'You could wear the watch I got you,' he teased.

'Why? You're like a personal grandfather clock.'

He scrunched up his nose. 'I don't like that.'

I laughed then reached up to brush his golden hair aside. 'Tall, sexy, and old. I love it.'

He was unimpressed, but kissed me anyway. 'Let's go. We have to make a stop first.'

'We can't stop. I want to meet my niece.'

Titan walked to my room, which had become ours during the nights he'd spent here, and shook his head. 'It'll take ten minutes.'

He grabbed my bag and ushered me out of the house.

We walked by his bike, now reserved for weekends where I got to wear the full protective leather suit, toward the waiting taxi.

'You know we were once the best timekeepers?' I said.

'We'll make it in time,' he promised.

'I'm going to tell Savi it was your fault.'

‘She won’t mind,’ he said with a wide grin.

‘You’re abusing your power.’

‘You like it.’

His tone made my stomach flip. It was his bedroom voice, and it got me every single time.

‘Don’t start.’

‘Foreplay,’ he whispered.

If the driver heard him, he sure didn’t let on.

‘It’s another property, and it’s five minutes away from Savi and Ted.’

‘Your viewings never take a couple of minutes.’ We’d looked at ten potential properties to move his studio to, as business had expanded and grown. None of them spoke to him.

‘I’ll buy you some chai on the way?’ he said.

He knew the way to my heart, and also knew I’d forgo being on time for a good cup of chai. ‘Fine.’

‘You’re so grumpy today.’

‘And you’re extra cheerful.’

‘Because I love you so much.’ He lifted my hand to kiss my knuckles, and managed to elicit a smile from me.

I would never tire of hearing it.

We pulled up to a terraced Georgian-style townhouse whose dark blue door reminded me of home. We were greeted by the realtor as we walked into the quiet space. It was probably too early for other viewings.

She excused herself when she got a phone call, but told us to have a look around.

We walked up the flight of stairs and peeked around the bedrooms. I was in awe of the clean and minimalistic decor in every room. It was the perfect blank canvas, but totally up Titan’s alley with its dark and moody palette. Little bits of light contrasted in the furniture or the paintings on the walls.

‘I can see why you like it,’ I said as we descended the stairs.

He took my hand in his. ‘Do you?’

‘Like it? Yeah, it’s so open and light.’ I gestured to the large windows all around as we stood in the kitchen. ‘A little much for an office space don’t you think?’

‘Good. It’s not an office space.’

I tilted my head to the side. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I would never move the studio, that building is a prime location. This is for...us.’

‘Us?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Us.’ He walked me over to the island where the pink travel tumbler and sunflower plate, from our “date” at Cambio Clay, now sat filled with cinnamon rolls.

He took my hands in his. ‘I want to spend every single day and night with you, but I also want to start a life with you. In a space that’s ours.’

‘What?’ I looked around us in awe as I processed what he was saying.

‘Before you say anything. The garden cottage is for Scarlet. She doesn’t want to share a space with us but agreed to a separate area. I kind of need to make sure she has somewhere to live.’

I laughed. ‘Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way. But it would be nice to have sex in the lounge without her walking in on us.’

He laughed. ‘She agrees.’

‘Okay, so what now?’ I grinned.

‘Do you want to move in together? Build a home with me?’

I looked around again then nodded. ‘Of course I do.’

‘Thank God.’ He peppered kisses all over my face. ‘I love you so much.’

‘I love you too. You chose a house I would’ve chosen, but you’re missing one crucial thing.’

‘Anything.’ He wrapped his arms around my waist.

‘The Agreement is going to need an update.’

‘Just tell me where to sign, dimples.’

Note from the author

If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review online—anywhere you are able to. Even one sentence would make a difference and I'd really appreciate the support.

Thank you,

Nuhaa

Acknowledgements

I Can't believe that my original story (well, version 15 of it) is out in the world. Titan was the OG character I dreamt up (literally. I had a dream about him) and now he's here and so wonderful and perfect.

As always, thank you to my parents, Nazlie and Igsaan. You've supported my work and are so proud of what I've accomplished. Please don't read this book. Read *Till This Night* instead.

To my husband, Labeeq, thank you for encouraging me to pursue writing and publishing my books. Even when the days were hard and I wanted to give up. I love you.

My son, Haaziq, you are the light that keeps on giving. I love you the most.

To my sister Ilhaam, I couldn't have done this without you. You are encouraging, supportive, and have read so many versions of this story, yet you keep coming back for more. I love you.

Thank you to my brothers, Naeem, Imraan and Amir. You don't have to read this ha-ha. (Please don't.)

To my bonus parents, Amina and Moejaahied, thank you for always supporting my work and for marketing it to everyone.

To Ilyaas, Janell, Kaamilah and Ebraheem, thank you for your support and encouragement. You're amazing siblings.

Shameez. I will need an entire book to tell you how wonderful you are. How you took my story and said to me that it WILL be published. You have been there since day one and Titan would not exist without William. So, thank you for giving me Rolliam first.

Kelly, you were one of the first people to love Titan so thank you for supporting my blond MMC journey. We will change everyone's minds one book at a time.

Aaqi, Kat, and Zayaan, you read the OG Titan story and I appreciate your encouragement and love during those times. It kept me going and now Kalina and Titan exist because of it.

Thank you, Khalida, for always encouraging me to write and tell my stories. I write for the younger versions of us, those girls who couldn't read enough. The ones who walked to the library together and got stuck in the books.

Cindy-Lee, you loved every beautiful muscled version of Titan and I appreciate your feedback, support, and love.

My beta readers; Tasneem, Nadine, Keisha, Nicolle, Rushdiyah, Tasneem A, Tasneem B, Jaina, Sheena, Jinal, Kate, Tams, Nicole, Aishah, Naathirah and Muntahaa. I could not have done this without you. Thank you for taking the time, for the critical and productive feedback, and for falling in love with my characters and stories. It's what keeps me going.

A special shoutout to Zoe. I cannot believe you read this in one day, with a shoddy WiFi connection, and you still managed to give me such wonderful feedback, comments, and support. You are the real MVP.

Husnaa, I never thanked you for being so supportive and for reading, and loving, *Till This Night*. So so sorry. Thank you so much.

Ray, you've made my dreams come true. Please get Threads so I can pimp you out.

To those who shared my cover, thank you for the work you put in to make my book look so gorgeous and photo worthy.

A special thank you to the Belhar Library and book club for loving my work and for being the reason I grew up loving books.

Mr. Patel, thank you for the bike information ;) Titan would not be who he is without it. (P.S. Will still give you the choc chip cookies).

My granny would've loved this story and she would've loved Titan so much.

Last, but not least, to the Almighty. For granting me the knowledge and capability to express myself and my thoughts in written form.



P
h
o
t
o

b
y

L
a
b
e
e
q

NUHAA BARDIEN writes stories with swoon worthy men and strong women. She lives in Cape Town, South Africa, with her husband, son, 11-year-old cat, and new kitten. You can find her picking up a new hobby or reading one of the books from her never-ending TBR list.

CONNECT ONLINE

 www.nuhaawrites.com

 [NuhaaMakes](https://www.instagram.com/NuhaaMakes)

 [NuhaaMakes](https://twitter.com/NuhaaMakes)
