



FILTHY  
RICHES

WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN LANDISH

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

All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

# CONTENTS

[Playlist](#)

[Also by Lauren Landish](#)

[Prologue](#)

[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](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt: Beauty and the Billionaire](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Playlist

Rihanna - Diamonds  
Rihanna Ft Drake - Work  
Drake - Started from the bottom  
Nelly - Hot In Here  
Sammy Davis Jr. - I've Gotta Be Me  
Rihanna - Umbrella  
Beyonce - Naughty Girl  
Frank Sinatra - New York  
Frank Sinatra - Come Fly With Me  
Dean Martin - Until The Real Thing comes Along  
K.D. Lang - Constant Craving  
Prince - Diamonds and Pearls  
Disturbed – The Sickness  
System of a Down – Aerials  
The Tokens – The Lion Sleeps Tonight  
Alicia Keys – Empire State of Mind

# Also by Lauren Landish

*Dirty Fairy Tales:*

[Beauty and the Billionaire](#)

*Get Dirty:*

[Dirty Talk](#) || [Dirty Laundry](#) || [Dirty Deeds](#) || [Dirty Secrets](#)

*Irresistible Bachelors (Interconnecting standalones):*

[Anaconda](#) || [Mr. Fiance](#) || [Heartstopper](#)

[Stud Muffin](#) || [Mr. Fixit](#) || [Matchmaker](#)

[Motorhead](#) || [Baby Daddy](#) || [Untamed](#)

**The Virgin Diaries:**

[Satin and Pearls](#) || [Leather and Lace](#) || [Silk and Shadows](#)

**Bennett Boys Ranch:**

[Buck Wild](#)



# Prologue

**Nathan**

*She shouldn't be here.*

*This has to end.*

*Now.*

Pain blossoms in my chest at the thought as my hand curls into a fist. I knew letting someone close to me could lead to this. My downfall. My end. Yet, I did it anyway.

*Fucking fool.*

The damning words thunder in my mind as my shoes tap against the polished marble stairs.

My dark thoughts continue as I reach the second floor and fling open the ornate double doors, revealing an opulent master bedroom bathed in gray and white.

“You have to go . . . now.”

The words die on my lips at the sight before me, and my cock instantly hardens in my slacks.

Fuck, she's so beautiful. Enchanting. Bewitching.

And I am definitely under her spell.

She's lying on my king-sized bed, garbed in black lingerie that graces over her lush curves, highlighting every hill and valley, stark against the creamy white satin of my sheets. Her lips are parted in a sensual O as she looks at me, her eyes brimming with a vulnerability that reaches across the space between us, squeezing my heart in her iron fist and giving me hopes for something other than the future I am destined for.

"Nathan," she moans, her voice filled with a desperate need that pulls me to her like a magnet. She knows she has this power over me. She must know, and she has to know how much I both hate and love every tug she gives, her tendrils slithering through the distance to entwine her magic around my groin and my heart at her whim.

She arches her back, her breasts pressing against the flimsy fabric, her nipples pebbling beneath the sheer fabric. "Please, I need you. *Now.*"

Lust rages through my blood, even as my mind screams for me to deny her, to tell her no, that this can't happen. Not now, not again.

I open my mouth but the words won't come, my

body forcing my brain to let the traitorous thought go.

It's then that I see little sparkly fireflies of light surrounding her body, and I realize that she's lying on the gifts I gave her earlier, the light from the chandelier causing them to shine and glitter.

Diamonds.

My heart rages inside my chest like a caged animal as I make my way to the bed. To her.

With each step, my heart pounds harder, faster, with every beat a drum reinforcing that she has to go. I have to tell her to go.

But as I reach the bed, my hand reaches out without my consent, tracing a line from her ankle up to her thigh. Her skin is satin warmth, and I want to drown in her, bury my face in her lush center as I sip from her.

The reverberation in my mind changes, no longer saying *go, go, go*, but instead repeating *mine, mine, mine*.

She is mine, and as I fall onto her, covering her body with my own, I know that she always will be.

# Chapter 1

## Nathan - Six Weeks Prior

“Here are your damn diamonds,” my brother Caleb announces as he bursts through my door, a snide hint subtly cached in the crass words.

I turn from the window of my office, leaving behind the idyllic view of some of the most breathtaking scenery this side of the Mississippi to take in his appearance with a barely repressed sigh.

He’s in baggy jeans and a tank top, his hair mussed in a way intended to look careless but which takes him numerous products to achieve.

It’s a cultivated casual look that I suspect he adopted mostly to annoy our more formal father when he was alive.

And now, he continues it as a rebellion to differentiate himself from me, the older brother whose shadow he both loathes and relishes in equal measure.

Though Caleb has come in on his own, Grant stands in the doorway, ever a bastion of propriety as he

needlessly announces, “Sir, Mr. Stone wishes to see you.”

The experienced professional face is carefully neutral, but I can see the hint of distaste in his eyes, even from across the room.

He served my father for decades, and along with the business, I inherited Grant’s employ as a house manager and personal assistant. He cares for both Caleb and me in his distant way, but he decidedly doesn’t care for manners to be glossed over or skipped altogether, so Caleb drives him a bit batty.

“Would you like me to pour you two a scotch?”

“No thank you, Grant. That won’t be necessary.” He hears the discreet dismissal and with a nod, closes the door behind him. Despite saying no, I move toward the bar, pouring a generous tumbler for myself and one for Caleb.

Though Caleb takes the offered drink and trades me for the small bag he’s brought, he’s still surly. “Do you know we almost lost Jake to get you these? What makes them so important anyway? You said you’d explain once we had them in hand, so time’s up. Explain. I don’t think *any* of our men are worth losing over a fucking rock.”

I sit at my desk, setting my drink aside to focus on

the bag's contents, which I spread on a velvet mat. Grabbing the magnifying loupe, I hold one up to examine it more closely.

Under the magnification, I can see every flaw but also appreciate the beauty more fully in the kaleidoscopic lines and prismatic reflections.

Mindlessly, I answer part of Caleb's line of questions.

"I did not know about Jake. Please pass along my appreciation for his dedication. I trust he's okay, otherwise you would've said as much."

I hum, turning a second stone and then a third as I appraise each one.

Caleb scoffs, interrupting my mental checklist. "That's it? Tell him *thanks*?" He sighs heavily, and I can hear the eyeroll in the huffed breath.

He doesn't have patience for the work we do. Not really, not like I do.

If you'd told me I'd be in charge of a billion-dollar jewelry company with the world at my fingertips at barely thirty, I'd have laughed at you, believing the very idea that I would ever follow in my father's footsteps to be as far from possible as pigs sprouting wings and spontaneously taking flight.

I am not a businessman, or at least I didn't intend to be. I'm a soldier, a man of action, not a desk percher whose big moves of the day are with a pen.

No, I'm used to guns, dust, and sand, battles of righteousness, and shows of power with strategy and war.

It was a good life, full of adrenaline, adventure, sweat, and action. I lived fast, partied hard, and loved long and strong before disappearing on the breeze the next day to do it all again a continent away.

But then my father died. Or rather, he was *killed*.

In a single moment, my whole world tilted on its axis, the things I knew to be true suddenly shown in all their falsehood, and my father's business, both true and dark, was revealed.

Still mourning and angry at his murder, I was thrust into being the figurehead of his company, trading Kevlar vests for tailor-made suits, a GPS locator for a Cartier watch, and covert action for long board meetings in stuffy offices surrounded by hot-headed executives.

While I'd had plenty of training in combat, I had virtually none on how to run a billion-dollar global corporation.

All of the industry, both inside my company and outside it, laughed at the idiot ‘boy’ with no experience who dared to challenge the status quo.

They’d been hell-bent on teaching me my place in what is now my own company.

It hadn’t gone well. For them.

I might not have been a businessman, but I understand power. I know how to wield it like a weapon, sometimes delicate, and when necessary, bluntly aggressive.

The lengths some people will go to hoard it, believing it gives them some intrinsic worth that is greater than their fellow man, is the key.

But my father didn’t get that, and he paid with his life because of it, leaving behind a final, deadly example for me to learn from.

Caleb doesn’t understand it yet, but I refuse to let him suffer the same fate.

His life is one of missions, even now. He hasn’t evolved to design plans, foresee obstacles, and work toward something greater like I’ve had to do.

He’s like an excited dog who wants its owner to throw a bone. Merely chase, retrieve, drop it, and wait for the next throw, with an occasional treat



thrown in to keep the cycle repeating.

It's not a bad thing. I love dogs. It's actually truly necessary to keep the company rolling. I need worker bees, and my brother, while usually coming off as a joking goof-off, is quite adept at being a high-level pack leader, my second in command, leading others in teams to chase down the bones I throw.

Like the diamonds in front of me.

I set down the last gem, giving my brother my full attention as he sits across the desk from me in a tufted leather chair.

“Yes, Caleb. Tell Jake thank you for a mission completed. Same to you. Thanks. These stones are vital to getting Nikolai's cooperation. And you know we need that to move forward.”

Caleb's reaction is instant and fiery. “That's what these are for? You said you had a specific request for them. We paid too great a price to use them as a bartering chip for a thug like Nikolai Romanov! I told you this is a shitty course of action to begin with. No, just no, Nathan.”

He smacks his palm to the desktop, driving his point home as if we haven't already had this fight.

But he has a point.

Nikolai Romanov is a Russian gangster and a monster in the underworld business. But along the journey of my controlling the Stone Corporation, we reached a tenuous truce. It's an unfortunate side of my work, both as a soldier and as a businessman, playing ball with every big name in the game regardless of personal feelings about them. You simply never know who will come in handy.

But our 'friendship' only stretches so far, and Nikolai won't give up what I truly need from him without a hefty price.

Normally, I'd take Caleb's feelings on the matter into consideration, but in this instance, I simply can't. Insuring our relationship with Nikolai is merely step one in a complex situation, every step hinging on the last, and all of them are dependent on Nikolai's giving in.

Something Caleb fucking knows but refuses to admit.

"It's not up for debate, Caleb. We have to do this and you know it," I say, not wanting to rehash the fight again.

But Caleb doesn't suffer from the same desire. "He's a notorious scumbag, and he can't be trusted. You know this, but yet you're trying to get his word that he'll give you safe passage into his territory on

a harebrained mission for a gem that only exists in fairy tales and late-night gem dealer bullshit sessions. It's the fucking Holy Grail, except it likely never existed. And even if it does, it most likely got our father murdered. This is madness.”

Though argumentative, I can hear the concern in Caleb's words. He's worried I'll end up with the same fate as our father, and I can't promise him I won't.

But I have to see this through. Following Dad's footsteps is the only way to find out who killed him, which is my true goal. The idea of a massive diamond would simply be a bittersweet memento of the journey.

“Nikolai wouldn't be so stupid as to start a war on American soil, not when the government is salivating for a reason to take him into custody,” I remind Caleb. “While he's here this month, we need to take advantage of his proximity. There's no other way. If we can gain his favor while he's here, he'll grant access to the cave system and we can search. For clues and maybe more. That's why we need to throw this party and gift Nikolai with these diamonds.”

Caleb chuckles bitterly. “Who'd have thought I'd be the one telling you *not* to throw a party and you'd be the one bound and determined to host a

raver?”

I shake my head, and despite his mocking tone, I'm amused at his choice of words. “Not a *raver* for sure. But a classy get-together where we can talk to Nikolai. I've got everything covered, food, drinks, music, and guests.” I pause, my mind attaching to something that I'd set aside earlier in my preparations. “Actually, we might need a better balance on the guest list. It's a little testosterone-heavy.”

Digging into my desk drawer, I pull out a small black book. “Hold on to your arguments for a moment. I need to reserve a few hostesses to work the party. I've used one company before.” Before I can dial, Caleb balks.

“Oh, c'mon, Nathan! Hostesses? Are we running a brothel now? Throwing Nikolai a party, giving him expensive gifts, and now supplying the pussy. Why don't we just throw him a damn parade too?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You know it's not like that. The girls are merely for the headcount and conversation, and the diamonds are a gift, though one that comes with strings. The strings we're going to pull like puppet masters to get what we want.”

“What *you* want, you mean. I don't want any of this and you damn well know it,” Caleb spits out.

“Father’s killer? I’d shake the man’s hand. The so-called priceless gems he chased all over the world? They had a price. He wanted them more than he wanted us, devoted all his time and energy to finding the next big discovery. Like an addict, he sacrificed his family, everything that should’ve mattered, for something that never even came to fruition. And just like the dutiful son you are, you’re picking up the pieces and carrying on, continuing his *legacy* even though it only brought pain and death to this family.”

Caleb’s words are hard to hear, but if I’m honest with myself, his assessment is correct. My father was a cold, business-minded man who gave little more than a passing thought to his sons. I turned his dismissal into a fire to conquer, while Caleb was younger and felt the rejection more pointedly.

I give him an olive branch, because there’s another price that was paid, not by our father, and the weight of it is upon my shoulders even now.

“Caleb, I share the same misgivings you do about Nikolai. Still, I need to see this through. He might’ve been a bad father, but Dad deserves someone to avenge his murder. If not that, I at least need to know why. Like you said, he sacrificed everything. I need to hold what he valued so dearly in my hand, really see what’s so great about it, so I

can begin to understand why it was more important than we were. I'm not trying to complete Dad's work in some wild attempt to receive his favor from the grave. I'm doing it to show how worthless it truly was and that he would've been better served with us, with nightly dinners around the table, playing catch with us in the backyard, just being a family. Especially after Mom killed herself. It should have been the three of us against the world. But he ditched us with nannies to go gallivanting around. I just need to understand. Then . . .”

“Then what?”

“Then I might just take a sledgehammer and smash the fucking thing into a million pieces,” I admit. “Let the dust blow away in the wind.”

I swallow thickly, surprised at what just came from my mouth. Though I'd thought those things over the years, I'd never actually put them into words before, especially not aloud to another person.

But of anyone on the planet, Caleb would be the most likely to understand.

He eyes me for a moment, testing the truthfulness of my confession, and then sags. “Fine. I'm behind you then. Not for the famed Michael Stone or for his name to be cleared of the mud, but for us. Just you and me. We deserve a name that stands for

something. We deserve some answers. We deserve the *truth*. And if this is how we get it, then throw the damn party for Nikolai. I'll find the girls."

I nod, accepting his agreement graciously because it's not a victory worth celebrating. It's just a cog in the wheel, one step of many in the plan. "We'll throw the party and give Nikolai the stones to secure safe passage and access to the caves. It's as simple as that."

He shakes his head. "It's never simple. Not when the Russians are involved. Don't fuck with them, Nathan."

"I won't," I assure Caleb. "I have no intention of double-crossing Nikolai. Just trust me. That's all I ask."

Caleb sighs and rubs at his temples, something I've seen him do for years when he's working a problem out in his mind. His idiot façade intentionally covers his intelligence, his brain the one thing he's selective in showing.

"I was afraid you were going to say that. Brother, remember . . . pride goeth before the fall. This is not some step-by-step mission you can outline with target points. This is a whole system you're trying to manipulate by working Nikolai. A system his people designed, built, and strengthened while you

and I were off shooting people and blowing shit up. And he likely knows what you're up to. You're at an inherent disadvantage and he's well aware of it."

I nod, but at the end of the day, I've weighed the potential risks and possible benefits. And whatever the outcome, it's a price I'm willing to pay.

One way or another, permission granted or not, I intend to gain access to those caves.



# Chapter 2

## Emma

“I got it! I got the part!” I scream into the phone and then quiet when my childhood bestie hisses painfully in my ear.

But even knowing I probably made her ear ring, I can't stop my excitement as I run around my apartment like a five-year-old hopped up on Mountain Dew.

The noonday sun streams through the windows, and I'm so ecstatic over today's news I feel like dancing, hopping from square to square.

My next-door neighbors probably think I'm crazy, but after listening to their loud wall-banging every other night for the past year, they can damn well listen to me celebrate a bit.

Especially for something this big.

And this is huge for me, finally a sign that I'm doing the right thing in chasing my dream.

I've gone to audition after audition and spent hours

practicing lines, only to get turned down again and again.

Okay, I didn't get turned down every time. I have scored a few small roles every now and then, but they were barely enough to keep the roof over my head in a city this expensive.

But it seems the one leading role I had in the way-off-Broadway production of *Cleopatra* that I was sure no one had even seen is actually paying off in a huge way.

When I'd gotten the call that the barely off-Broadway production of the same play was calling for a last-minute replacement, I'd been shocked. Actors don't just lose roles like this, and even when they do, there's an understudy waiting in the wings to take over.

But when the lead and the understudy get caught doing some rather bad things together, I guess it leaves a pretty gaping hole of opportunity. And the director had remembered my performance in the role.

Oh, God, let me say that again. She remembered *me!*

And now, I'm starring!

Me.

I jump onto my bed and fall back, bouncing on my ass a few times as my breath gushes out in a whoosh. “I did it, Carly! Can you believe it?”

I can hear her grin even through the thousands of miles between us. “Of course I can believe it! I’m the one who told you to ditch your ho-hum and chase your dreams. Seems like it’s working out for the both of us.”

She’s right.

Carly and I grew up together, private schools and debutante balls, privilege and wealth, which sounds like a dream come true.

We both knew how fortunate we were growing up, but coming from a family like that comes with expectations.

Lots of them. Plans are made for you, never taking into consideration that you might have some dreams of your own.

We’d both been good girls, not rocking the boat and always doing as our parents told us—good grades, attending the university they chose, representing the family at galas . . . all the upper-crust society shit.

Carly had even dated the guy her parents chose for her, like some modern-day arranged marriage

between industry giants, but she had, at some point, decided she'd had enough.

She bailed on everything . . . except me. She dropped out school, broke up with the douchebag boyfriend, told her parents she wasn't marrying for their business interests, and took off to Europe.

She's been backpacking it ever since, initially using her trust fund, but when her parents tried to manipulate her with it, she eventually began truly making her own way in a smorgasbord of methods that was worthy of a whole documentary miniseries.

Since then, she's been on a path of self-discovery and independence, living a carefree life, not having to answer to anyone for the first time ever, and more importantly, not being something she's not to make someone else happy.

And I'd watched, awed at her gumption and guts and inspired to my own revolution, albeit on a smaller scale.

My only rebellion at the time had been to choose a major my parents detested.

I'd majored in Ancient Civilizations, probably the most useless degree in the world, according to my father, who wanted me to focus on something

practical like business.

But I'd been a lover of ancient cultures my whole life, studying Greek mythology, Mayan ruins, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and more. As a little girl, I'd had to explain virtually every Halloween costume I'd worn. Yes, I know who Athena is, and of course, I know who Hera is. I had a habit of telling their history, relevance, and victories ad nauseam until people would just shove candy in my bag to get me to shut up.

Still, I had let one element of my fancy life affect my studies, as I'd loved focusing on the artifacts of the various time periods.

My mom had been slightly more understanding when I'd explained that the giddiness she got from diamonds, I got from ancient figurines and art.

She'd laughingly said I just liked my baubles dirty while she preferred them shiny. She'd been agreeable, so I hadn't corrected her gross misunderstanding of what I actually studied and why I found them so fascinating.

But even that small mutiny against their practical plans for me had nothing on my next sidestep when I'd discovered acting.

I could be anyone, say things I'd never have the

courage to voice myself, and experience life a million times over through the characters on stage and on screen.

Though I'd finished my degree and even work for a local professor now, being on stage has become a true passion.

And neither of my parents supports such an absurdly fanciful goal as being on Broadway.

But Carly always has.

She was with me when I'd wax on for hours about some article I'd read in *Smithsonian Magazine*, or when I'd drag her to museums every weekend, and she was by my side at my most pivotal moment when I saw a stage adaptation of Antony and Cleopatra's story. Not Shakespeare's famous one, but a modern take on the ancient story.

While I'd begun by analyzing the authenticity of the costumes and jewelry, the stage props, and backdrops, along the way, I'd become lost in the story, suspending reality and truly traveling to ancient Egypt with the actors on stage.

It was then that I'd known, and even at my first crazy mention of wanting to 'do that' as I'd pointed at the stage, Carly had been my cheerleader.

She still is.

“It is working out! You’re a fucking genius, girl. But oh, my God, I made such a fool of myself with the director!” I cringe at the memory.

Carly laughs. “It must not have been too bad because she didn’t take the role away. What’d you do? Spill it!” I can tell she’s ready to hear that I did something over-the-top wild.

I sigh, feigning nonchalance. “Oh, the usual. She says, ‘We’d like to offer you the role,’ and before I could stop the words, I said, ‘Get the fuck out!’ and then clapped my hand over my mouth, loudly slapping myself silly. I apologized profusely, of course, and at least Carol laughed at my reaction. But shit, I’m such a dork!”

Carly is laughing big and hard now, taking twisted delight in my embarrassment. But her giggles are contagious, and I find myself laughing along too. All the euphoria from the news and from talking to Carly bubbles out like champagne, popping and fizzing all around me.

“You are a dumbass, but such a cute one, so I guess I’ll keep you around. Seems like Carol felt the same way. Just don’t go blasting my eardrum again with the screaming. Damn, girl. Can I suggest you not take on any singing roles?”

The banter is easy and comfortable, nothing

changed between us though we're separated by miles.

“Oh, shut up!” I say, lying back and staring up at the ceiling. “I can act my ass off, but I know I can't carry a tune in a bucket. Musical theater is not my calling. But this play, it *so* is!” I kick my feet and my voice gets high-pitched and loud as the adrenaline rushes through me again.

I glance over at the wall, worrying again about my neighbors calling the cops on the screaming banshee next door more than popping Carly's eardrum. The thought of the cops banging on my door makes me realize something else.

“You have to come! Come back, stay with me, and see my big debut! Please, Carly!” It's a big request and I know it. She hasn't touched ground in the US in over a year, correctly believing that the ocean dividing her and her parents provides a much-needed buffer. But I need her for this.

“You've always been my biggest cheerleader, telling me that I don't have to accept whatever my parents are willing to dole out and pushing me to chase my own dreams. I need you for this. It's like we finally did it.”

I'm sniffing by the end of my plea, the emotions at not seeing her in person in so long hitting me hard,



and I continue my hard sell. “We can have a sleepover like the old days, stay up all night and eat shitty food, gossip about boys, or I guess *men* now. And you can come see the play. I promise, it’ll be just between us. Your parents don’t even have to know you’re here.”

I hear her answering watery voice, and I know she’s fighting back the feels too. “You suck. Don’t make me cry. I’m sitting in a café in public, for fuck’s sake.”

There’s a pause where I hear her shuffling around, and I imagine her sitting in an Italian café, coffee in front of her, and dabbing gently at her eyes with the linen napkin.

In my head, it’s like a foreign film, beautiful and poignant.

“But yeah, I’ll come. If you pinky promise not to tell anyone about it, I’ll come. Just us.”

I nod hurriedly even though she can’t see me. “Yes! Good. Okay, rehearsals are already underway since I’m joining the cast in the middle of pre-production. But opening night is in four weeks. Book your ticket, girl! Fair warning, I’m going to hug the snot outta you right there in the airport like some cheesy rom-com movie, but it’ll be besties reunited.”

Her bark of laughter is exactly what I needed to make the warm fuzzies inside me burn a little brighter. “And thanks, Carly. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

She does sniffle now, and I bet we’re both about two comments away from ugly crying. “Oh, please, you give me too much credit. This is all you. I’m just your bitch, here to give you a kick in the ass when you need it—”

“And advice when I don’t!” I finish, and we share a laugh as though we’re sitting in the same room.

“Damn, I miss you!” she says wistfully, echoing the thought rolling through my mind.

“I miss you too. But I get it. You can’t be here. You’re the only child of wealthy and overbearing parents, so the only logical escape is to frolic aimlessly around Europe, trading farm work for a bed. Let me know when you monetize your Instagram documenting your jet-setter lifestyle so I can follow your pursuits.”

The barbed teases are our way of showing love and laughing sarcastically at the absurdity of our lives. Fairy tale from the outside, but more often, a nightmare from inside the castle.

But we’re both making that proverbial mad dash

for freedom.

And while Carly's European life is filled with backpacking, hostels, and day jobs, mine is filled with playing pretend and doing mindless data entry for a Grinch of a boss rather than the real fun of ancient discoveries.

Still, we are doing it all on our own terms.

And somehow, that's more important than any easy, posh life our parents could offer.

"Oh, I will. And you be sure to let me know when you and your boss discover something new. I mean, something old. Some old terra cotta junk that will change our beliefs about ancient Mesopotamia. Oh, wait! Nobody cares about that but you," Carly replies, getting her jabs in too.

"Just the fact that you know the word *Mesopotamia* tells me how much you love me and actually listen to my rambling. I love you too, Car."

She mumbles, "Love you, Em. Better jet though. I'm hoping to do a bit of street performing on the Ponte Vecchio at sundown, so I'd better get my spot."

"Street performing? And you give me shit for acting?" I ask, laughing though I know her street gigs are more athletic than thespian. Carly did

karate all through her teen years, mostly because I'm actually a better singer than she is, and the debutante balls required demonstrations of a talent.

Carly had delighted in being the only girl to ever do a fully-choreographed demo of her acrobatic kicks and aggressive punches, capping it off by roundhouse kicking a watermelon in a clear signal to any boy who wanted to take liberties with her. Kind of a 'fuck you' to the traditional norms of the 'sit still and smile pretty' thinkers and the girls singing the same three songs ad nauseam every year.

And now she's parlayed those moves into performing on the sidewalks of Europe. When she isn't doing hostels or farms, I've gotten pictures of her doing spin kicks and more in Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Athens, and more.

"Hell yeah. I can make more money in a few hours of exhibition than I can with any other job. Did I tell you I quit my last waitressing gig? Even with the good tips there, I can make double on the street on a busy night. It's like work and a workout all at once."

"Well, then get out there. *You'd better werk!*" I say, my impersonation of RuPaul weak but clear. Especially when I add the Z-snap that Carly can hear but not see.

We say our goodbyes, promises to call again soon spoken over I love yous, both of us prolonging the call, but then finally, she's gone.

And it's just me.

But though I'm alone in my tiny NYC apartment, I feel like I'm finally making it. Like I'm on the cusp of a big change in my life, and I'm going to grab on to this role with both hands and wring every bit of opportunity from it that I can.

I'm still lying in bed, reflecting on just how far I've come, when I hear a firm knock on the door. I give a moment's thought that maybe my neighbors really are coming over to bitch at me, but then the knocks pound out again.

And I recognize my older sister's distinct pattern.

Bam, bam, pause two three, bam, bam, bam.

I roll my eyes and laugh at the same rhythm she's drummed on every door, tabletop, and steering wheel she's ever been near.

At least she's consistent, and more than once, I've teased her that she must use the same rhythm with her boyfriends.

I open the door, leaning against the frame, "Hey, Sis. You know, I was hoping you were Theo James,

come to ravish me and give my loud neighbors something to really aspire to noise-wise.”

She smiles, but it’s not her usual wide grin, and she quickly looks left and right, scoping out my hallway like the boogeyman is gonna jump out at her.

It’s then that I notice how she’s dressed.

Blue jeans, a generic white tee, and a red ball cap pulled down low over her face. And though I can’t see her expression since she’s dropped her head again, I can read her energy that something is wrong.

Claire pushes past me into the apartment, watching as I close and lock the door behind me. But she comes back to peek out the peephole.

She still hasn’t said a word, so I try again. “Uh, hi?” I offer, not sure what’s going on.

Claire is an FBI agent, but she’s always compartmentalized to the extreme so I tend to forget what she does.

Okay, not really forget, but push it to the back of my mind so I don’t worry myself crazy over what her not-at-all 8-to-5 gig happens to be and how dangerous it is.

Finally, she lifts her face fully to me and I can see

the fury in her eyes.

“We need to talk. I need a favor, Sis.”

# Chapter 3

## Emma

“Say that again? You want me to do *what?*” I ask incredulously, sinking down to a chair at my tiny kitchen table.

I knew Claire was in trouble, but what she’s asking isn’t just out there, it’s Nucking-Futs.

She grabs my hand, squeezing it. “I know, Emma. Trust me, if I had any other way, I wouldn’t ask this of you. But something is up at the office. I don’t know what yet, but I need this intel and I got denied at work. You know I’m a rule follower, black and white, right and wrong to the ninth degree. But I’ve thought this through more times than you can imagine and this is the only way.”

“Okay, speak slowly. Tell me what you want me to do again,” I say, humoring her though the refusal is on the tip of my tongue.

“There’s a guy, Nathan Stone. He’s a big shot in the gem industry, but we strongly suspect he’s got some under the table dealings that aren’t quite so legal.



He's meeting with a Russian crime lord, Nikolai Romanov. In fact, he's throwing him a party. Stone's really rolling out the red carpet for Romanov, and I need to know why. This party is a perfect opportunity to get some information because Stone is notorious for keeping a small circle, and even then, he doesn't share intel with them. The only one who knows all his dirty secrets is his brother, and he'd never say a bad word about Nathan."

Her explanation sounds more like a movie plot than real life, but I guess it is her life.

I'm probably a wuss because my next thought is *Better her than me*, but then I'm reminded that she wants to throw me into this mess.

She's my big sis and one of the most awesome agents I've ever seen, not that I've seen many, but this has got to be some sort of sick prank.

Otherwise, she's lost her damn mind.

I give her the stink eye, challenging, "So, two big bad guys are having a meet and greet, and you want me to go waltzing in like Hostess Holly and start asking questions?"

When she doesn't disagree with my assessment of her crazy idea, I ask, "You know that's insane,

right? Don't you have undercover agents for stuff like this, or can't you make one of the girls spill after the party? Hell, why don't you do it yourself? You can get gussied up."

She nods but doesn't look happy about it. "We do have agents, a whole list of female agents who can get prettied up with the best of them. And trust me, I considered doing it myself. But the op got the red light, which makes absolutely zero sense. Our suspicions are circumstantial at best, but this is our best shot on two big fish like this. If I go in after being told no, it'd be career suicide. If you do it, I have plausible deniability. I hate to say that, but it's the truth."

She drums on the table, telling me wordlessly just how nervous she is about this idea. "Look, I know you're not an agent or anything. But you're something *better*."

She pauses dramatically, like she's coercing me to give her my best Barbie doll for her old one after she'd chopped its hair. Yeah, that happened, and I haven't forgiven her even though it was fifteen years ago.

She continues, laying it on thick. "You're an actress who can get in, strut around a little, and fit in with the other hostesses, but if they start talking gems and stuff, you have a brain in that thick skull of

yours that might actually pick up on something important. That's why I don't want to use one of the other hostess girls. She'd be an unknown, and what if she's ditzy as can be? I can't risk that she might miss something. Don't go snooping or anything dangerous. Just play hostess and *listen*. Small talk at most."

She takes a deep breath, her eyes meeting mine, and I can see the fierceness lurking in their depths. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't the only way, Em. Please."

"Tell me about the hostesses. I'm not going Pretty Woman hooker for your work, Sis. No matter how big the bust might be." Though I don't say yes, she hears that I've already decided in my heart. She's my sister, and I can't turn her down. Not on something this important, not when she's virtually begging.

She shakes her head vehemently, unable to hide the smirk at my reference. "No, no, no, not hookers or escorts or anything like that. I mean, some of the girls I'm sure will be gold diggin', but this will be just like one of Mom's galas. Walk around, make small talk, and compliment all the men, basically just eye candy."

She rolls her eyes at the same time I do. We have been to enough of Mom's so-called charity events

and Dad's business get-togethers to know the routine by heart. Look pretty, play nice, and fawn over the guy's substantial wallet so he'll open it up, while making sure our legs don't go the same way. It's a role I could play in my sleep because I've done it most of my life.

“And the hostess company? How do they feel about me encroaching on their gig?” I ask, looking for any flaw in her plan. But Claire is a pro and has thought of everything.

She pulls a few pieces of paper from her bag, setting them down and slapping an ID on top with a picture of me from a few years ago.

“They won't even know. The call went out for ten girls, and ten girls will show up. I'm afraid Jessica is due for a little car trouble and she won't be able to make the party.” Claire's smirk is one of pure arrogance. “The girls don't always know each other. It's a pretty high turnover rate industry, so you'll just be the new girl.”

I pick up the ID, running my finger along the picture and words. “And my name is Kitty? Seriously, you couldn't have chosen something a bit less ridiculous? Since you've already got my picture on there, I guess you thought I was a pretty sure thing, huh?”

She shrugs, not upset by my biting tone at all. “I strongly hoped you’d do it for me. And I had to do the fake documents on the fly. They’re good, will pass muster, but I had to take what I could get.”

I set the card down and look Claire in the eyes as I take a big breath. “Okay, but if this is like one of my usual acting gigs, I need to know the characters. Who they are, what makes them tick, any advice on getting the details you need. Lay it all out for me, Claire. If we’re going off-assignment at work for you, and into the lion’s den for me, we need to be smart about it.”

She bites her lip and I can see the hesitancy. She needs this, but she’s nervous about sending me into it, or maybe about going against the rules at work.

Or more likely, both. And that is more telling about her desire to run with this scheme than anything else she’s said.

Claire was always the one to look out for me, hiding away from Mom and Dad together to make our own clubhouses, and later, setting the precedent for not being a trophy wife. No, she went to university and started pre-law, a respectable decision, according to Dad. Not because she’d actually be a lawyer, but because she could speak legalese at her future husband’s parties. He actually told her that.

And when she'd been recruited by the FBI, she'd jumped in with gusto, declaring that she was never getting married and was instead going to love her work.

And she has. Until tonight.

After a moment, her face hardens and she goes into business mode, pulling a file folder from her bag. I vaguely wonder what else she's got in there since it seems to be the Mary Poppins style of tote, just a Bourne version.

“First, Nathan Stone, oldest son of Michael and Monica Stone. Mom died when they were young, suspected suicide after a bad cancer diagnosis. Michael was a businessman dealing in gemstones but widely suspected of running an underground shadow network of . . .well, basically, treasure. He was legit a treasure hunter, full-on Indiana Jones type, but he was murdered a little over a year ago. Nathan was a soldier. Well, mercenary is more like it, but when his dad was killed, he came home and took over the family mantle. He's good. Too good, I think. The company has had a huge upswing in profits under him, but I think the true influx of cash is much greater behind the scenes and under the table. I think he's running an illegal jewel operation that stretches globally and involves multiple people, from government workers to sales reps within

respected institutions. We're talking billions of dollars annually here."

She spreads her arms wide to emphasize her point, then places a fingertip hard on the table. "That's the info I need. What he's doing, how he's doing it, and where the assets are. You're not gonna get all that info, but anything will help."

She pauses to let me confirm that I understand. "Got it. Main lead is Nathan Stone. Soldier, businessman, dangerous, and smart. Who else?"

"The younger brother, Caleb. He's more the wild child of the family. Works for Nathan doing odd jobs, but we're not talking running the dry cleaning. More likely, stealing jewels, strong-arming competitors, and the one who gets his hands dirty so Nathan can appear to be above-board. He's cute, charming, got that whole boy next door façade, but he's hardcore. Served as a mercenary with Nathan too. Last, but certainly not least, is Nikolai."

"The Russian crime lord?" I say sarcastically, like that's something I would ever say on a regular day.

Claire must hear something in my twisted humor that sets her off because she leans forward, getting in my face.

"This is serious, Em. I mean it. If you go in there all

casual and get up in something dangerous, I'll never forgive myself. I need you to understand that this is risky and to be smart."

"I do. I'm with you," I reassure her. "Nathan, Caleb, dead mom and dad. And a crime lord in a pear tree." I singsong to the famous Christmas tune. "Seriously, Claire. I get that this is dangerous. I'm coping with some humor here."

She closes her eyes for a second, and I think she's changed her mind, but when they open again, she keeps going. "Okay, Nikolai Romanov. He's a thug, ruthless and powerful, cruel and smart. Looks a lot like every Russian mob stereotype you've seen, but don't let the central casting looks deceive you. He's been on the FBI watchlist for a long time because he controls a large territory in Northern Russia, like his own dictatorship. But his organization has tendrils that reach out. His family is the major financier for one of the cartels in South America. He basically owns the land but lets them play shot-caller unless it suits him otherwise. He even has pull in the US, right here in New York, as the distant boss for our local Russian mob hierarchy. As far as we can tell, he's never committed a crime on American soil. At least not himself, but people have died at his command, and likely at his hand. We're hoping that this might be our chance to get something on him, and maybe Nathan Stone, all in



one swoop.”

“Okay, so Nikolai is the wild card danger. I’ll be extra-careful with him,” I say to show Claire that I’m not taking this lightly.

But she shakes her head. “Not just him. Nikolai is dangerous in a confrontational, impulsive way. Nathan is just as dangerous, but he’s slick, sneaky. I wasn’t sure I should tell you this, but I think you need everything before you walk in those doors.”

I swallow, nervous that after all the crazy shit she just dumped on me, there’s something worse she doesn’t want to tell me. What’s worse than murdered families, thug mafia, and jewels stolen by devious businessmen?

“So, this is all rumor and speculation, but I think it’s a real possibility. Back when Michael Stone was alive, he had an Italian resource named Anna Russo. She was a linguist-slash-historian who worked with him on the more off-book jobs, particularly in Europe.”

“Was?” I ask, dreading the answer.

Claire nods. “Shortly after Michael was murdered, she was found dead in her apartment. She was six months pregnant. Foul play was suspected, but nothing could be proven. We didn’t even find out

about it for weeks because the tie between Michael and Anna was quiet and shadowy, and the distance didn't help. Two intercontinental agencies worked the crimes individually, mostly. Since it happened in Italy, their *polizia* investigated and the FBI could only do so much. Interpol's corrupt as shit, and the Italians weren't interested in our help. But the working theory is that Nathan believed she had something to do with his father's death and put out a hit on her. An eye for an eye vengeance-type deal."

"Jesus, that's awful. Six months pregnant? What kind of monster would do that?" I shake my head, not able to accept the pure evil something like that would require.

Claire takes my hands. "You sure you can do this? I don't have any other way, but if you don't want to, I'll figure something else out. Really, Emma."

"If these guys are the monsters you say they are, and all you need from me is to play nice at a party and keep my eyes and ears open, I can do that. Let's just hope I get something that will put these bastards behind bars. The sooner, the better."

I agree to this madness with bluster and venom, but inside, my heart is pounding and my brain is yelling at my stupidity.

# Chapter 4

## Carly

After hanging up with Emma, I don't give myself a moment to back out of the plan I agreed to.

Immediately, I use my phone to book a flight to NYC in a few weeks' time. I could probably shop around for a better rate, or wait a week to book the ticket, but I might back out if I do that.

But for Emma, I'd do just about anything. And to be fair, she doesn't know the truly bad stuff since I always glossed over the details, just telling her my parents were malevolent dictators of Carly-land.

She didn't know about the more sinister side of things in my household. Instead, she was my constant friend who always accepted me, who loved me for who I was and never asked for more. So I click the *Book Now* button on the non-refundable ticket, ensuring I don't chicken out.

But even if I am going back to the United States, come hell or high water, I am standing by my decree to not see my parents. I refuse to let their

toxic venom back into my life. I've had more than enough of it.

*"I've given you everything, you ungrateful brat! This is how you repay me?"*

*"You won't last a day in the real world without me to save you. Stupid girl."*

*"You're a disgrace! Do not call me for handouts. If you walk out that door, you're dead to us."*

And that was just in our last encounter. There'd been years of verbal beatdowns before that. Never good enough, but expected to do everything to the letter as they prescribed. The perfect little puppet for their storybook life.

And I'd gone along with it for way too long.

Until I realized it was all fake. Every single bit of the life they represented. Just sparkly lipstick on a really ugly pig.

The house? Mortgaged three times over.

The money? Like the house, more debt and show than substance. As soon as Dad poured it in, it was pouring right back out to support their lifestyles.

The friends? Don't make me laugh. A cow has more friends in a river full of piranhas.

The reality was, that was the good side. Things got even uglier. Dad gone on ‘work’ trips all the time with assistants half his age, Mom sipping mimosas until it was acceptable to switch to chardonnay, both of them treating me like an unwanted puppy demanding attention. I swear, neither of them had ever given me as much attention as they did when I jumped off their merry-go-round.

And I don’t regret it. I only regret not doing it sooner.

I hadn’t even meant to go so far when the whole mess had started. I’d let them control me, had gone along with their plan to marry me off to the son of one of Dad’s closest business associates, Robert Gunze II.

No, not a junior.

That was far too proletariat.

The marriage would have been essential to my parents, who would have gotten access to both the business connections and the society connections they’d long cherished.

So I’d dated Robert and had been told that he was my fiancé though he’d never proposed.

And I had accepted that it was to be my fate. Until Robert—

No, I'm not going back to that night. The important thing is that he crossed the line and I'd figuratively shoved him back over it and vowed to never let it happen again.

I'd told Dad what Robert had done, expecting him to be as shocked as I was, but he'd been on Robert's side, horrifically asking me what I'd done to force Robert's hand.

When I'd said that I wasn't marrying that asshole, Dad had gone nuclear, angrier than I'd ever seen him as he ranted about working so hard to make this deal go through and how he wouldn't let his mouthy daughter ruin the whole thing.

*Deal.*

Not wedding, not marriage.

A deal.

That's all I was to him.

Numbers in an account ledger, a contract to be closed that fell through.

It's all I still am. A failed business deal.

But that moment, something in me had snapped and I knew I was done.

Done doing as I was told, done trying to make them

happy, done being *that* girl. I was determined to set out on my own, no more of their judging, no more smothering.

Just freedom to create my own life. Mine, not someone else's.

And I have.

I packed up and left for Europe, with no plans or ideas of what I would do when I got here.

It wasn't always easy, and at first, I wandered aimlessly, drifting from one tourist spot to another.

But slowly, my trek turned into a journey to find out who "Carly" was.

And when I let my joy, my humor, my sense of adventure free, I found a life more vibrant, free, and fun-loving than I could've ever imagined. It's had tears, but also lots of laughter.

I've felt cold wind chill my spine as I shoveled for my dinner and swam in the Mediterranean without a care in the world. I've gone to bed with a stomach sloshing with good food and wine, or savoring a simple meal of cheese and bread.

Both are good, and both have made me a better person.

"You okay, *Tesoro*?" a soft voice asks from beside

me.

Jostled from my reverie, I look up from my empty cup to see Strega, the coffee shop owner and the maker of the best espresso I've ever had. And I've had a lot.

Ever since I settled in Florence two months ago, Strega has taken me under her wing. Right now, she's patting the wisps of grey hair escaping her bun and giving me an appraising look that misses nothing.

I give her a dimple-filled grin that belies the turmoil roiling in my belly. "I'm okay, just thinking about an unexpected trip I'm taking."

She purses her lips and wipes down the table next to me. "Trip? I thought you said you were going to stick around Florence for a while, let me fatten you up a bit. You're too skinny. You need some fettuccine in my famous cream sauce."

I smile. She's always trying to feed me, just like an Italian grandmother should.

"I would love nothing more than to stay here and let you feed me pasta until I'm too big to roll down the runway at the airport. But my best friend is making her big debut, so I need to be there."

"Wait, your trip isn't just a day trip to the



countryside? You're going home?" Strega's voice is harsher with shock.

Strega knows more about my family history than probably anyone else does.

Maybe that's weird, to have shared something so personal with someone I met just two months ago.

But Strega has a way about her that pries open your heart. I've seen it time and time again. People come in for a cup of coffee, and hours later, Strega is patting their back as they tearfully spill their guts.

It's basically verbatim to what happened to me. So she knows that stepping foot on US soil and risking running into my parents is basically my worst nightmare.

"No, I'll be in NYC, but I won't see my parents. Emma promised to keep my visit a secret." I bite my lip, still nervous.

I'm imagining some crazy scene on a sidewalk where I run into Mom and Dad, we all stop, mouths dropping in shock, but Dad recovering first because of course, he would.

Would he blow up at me, yelling scathing insults designed to hurt?

Or would he just grab Mom's hand and walk past

me, ignoring his only daughter?

I'm not sure which would hurt more, their scorn or their attack.

Strega sits down at the table beside me. “Okay, *Tesoro*. Here's what you do. You take your trip, celebrate with your friend, and do not under any circumstances contact your parents. No matter what happens. You have worked too hard. *Capisce?*”

I nod.

But Strega isn't done. “When you first came to me, you were like a lost child, wind blowing you as you tried to stuff as much experience into every day as possible to make up for what you never had as a girl. Like lasagna with beef, chicken, and sausage all jammed in with cheese in every layer. Lasagna is good—well, mine is, but you know that—but when you overdo it, you lose the specialness. That is what you were doing.”

She smiles, arms spread wide. “But look at you now. Instead of trying to do it all at once, you take every day for what it is. And that is where the real growth happened. You know who you are now and have a foundation that is pure, Carly, not those people who birthed you.”

She fakes spitting on the floor at the mention of my parents, and I love her that much more for being staunchly on my side.

“You’re right. I am so much more . . . me! And I won’t do anything to jeopardize who I am now. I like who I am, a badass bitch who controls her own destiny,” I say sassily.

Strega laughs but gently pops my hand as she chastises, “Bad girl, don’t use filthy language like that. Men don’t want a dirty-mouthed girl.”

I smirk. “Oh, Strega, you have no idea. Men love a girl who’ll say dirty things.” I waggle my eyebrows teasingly.

She harrumphs, as if she’s never said a few juicy things in Italian in range of my hearing. “Well, not any suitor worth your time. But at this point, perhaps it would do you well to date at all.”

“Not this again,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You know I just haven’t been ready.”

“Well, time it is a’passing, whether you are ready or not. Don’t let one poor Richard ruin your future.” She nods like she’s imparting great wisdom.

“His name was Robert, not Richard,” I correct. “And it wasn’t his bank account that made me end

it.”

Her smile is sly, and she grins. “I know. And perhaps I do not have a dirty mouth like some people, but I do know that Richard comes with a rather specific nickname in the US. As I said, do not let a *Richard* like Robert ruin your future.”

I laugh. She’s just irresistible. “Well-played, Strega. Fine, fine, I won’t let a dick like Robert have any effect on my life, dating or otherwise. But it’s not like men are just crawling out of the woodwork for me.”

She makes a dismissive sound. “You are in Italy. There is love everywhere, all around you, if you only open your eyes. And we know real love, not all that screeching and playacting like those idiots, the French.”

I nod my agreement, knowing that though I still have doubts in her wisdom, it will do no good to argue with her. She’s right about many things, so she assumes she is correct about everything. I wish it were so about my heart, but I think I’m destined to be alone, at least for now. And I’m mostly okay with that. Though a girl could use some *Richard* now and again, I think with a laugh I hold in.

“I will, Strega. I promise. If only I could keep my eyes open,” I say, looking pointedly at my empty

cup.

She takes the hint and gets up to refill my coffee. “Decaf for you this time. It is late and I don’t want you jittery during your performance.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Bah, you will thank me truly when you don’t fall on your head on one of your crazy kicking things.” She flicks her fingers like they’re kicking legs. And with that dismissal, she resumes flitting around the room to care for her other customers.

I take a sip of my decaf coffee, which tastes like the bitter elixir I love, but without the caffeine, what’s the point? I decide to head over to Ponte Vecchio and get up, heading to the door.

I look back, waving to Strega and not watching where I’m going. I slam into something rock-hard and solid, and I lose my balance, falling to my ass on the floor.

A large shadow looms over me. Like a cartoon, my eyes scan from booted feet, up black denim-clad legs that go on for miles, to a broad barrel chest, and finally, a scruffy jaw that’s flexing in anger at my accidental bump. I meet the man’s eyes, cold and dark beneath floppy blond hair.

“Holy shit!” I declare, more in reaction to the

man's appearance than the fact that I found myself suddenly on the floor. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going."

*Kyle*

I pull over to the curb, double parking like just about everyone does here. As long as you don't block someone in or stay there for more than a half-hour, nobody says anything. That should be plenty of time since I'm meeting with my informant in just ten minutes.

I take a steadying breath, reaching out a thick finger to the picture taped to the dash in front of me. I trace her beautiful smile, remembering what it felt like to touch her skin and wishing I'd been able to change her fate. If only I'd known the predator lurking in her midst, the dark intentions he'd had for her.

My sweet, innocent love didn't deserve her fate. Though she was the one who took her last breaths and whose heart stopped beating, mine did too that day. My heart shattered to jagged pieces and I haven't had an easy breath since that moment.

The only thing I feel now is dead inside, numb. I know there's an ocean of pain buried deep, but I refuse to let it bubble to the surface. Not while

there is still vengeance to be had, retribution to be dealt, and revenge to serve.

I kiss my fingertip and press it to the picture, my print a visible mark on the shiny surface and a symbol that I will always love her. But there is work to be done.

I scan the street in front of me and use the mirrors to scope out behind me. Seeing nothing amiss, I get out of the car and head toward the coffee shop across the street.

*Be discreet, the message from Raul had said. Dress plainly and sit in the corner table by the window at Strega's at 6 PM. I will meet you there.*

I've never been to this café, though it looks like one of thousands scattered across Italy with small sidewalk tables out front under a green awning. Through the windows, I can see warm lights and an older woman, round and grey, working her way among the few customer-filled tables.

With one last look up and down the street, I make my way to the door. A shiver of vulnerability races down my spine, and I wonder if there are eyes on me despite my surveillance of the street.

I rush inside for cover just in case. I didn't make it this far by ignoring my instincts.

I'm barely two steps in the door when there's a slam to my chest. I have a split-second reaction of fury, thinking someone has set me up and I've walked right into a trap. But in the next instant, I realize a small woman has run into me and basically bounced off my body, landing haphazardly at my feet.

She's sprawled out, legs askew and purse contents scattered. But as much of a mess as she appears, her words are more surprising. Even here, a tourist-heavy part of Italy, New York-accented English is rare.

"Holy shit! I'm so sorry! I wasn't watching where I was going."

I still give her no more than a cursory scan, considering whether she might be a threat, not with her diminutive size but perhaps as a spy herself. One can't be too careful, something I learned the hardest way of all when I lost *her*.

I quickly but carefully brush my T-shirt off and then along my shoulders, feeling for any trace or bugs. But there is nothing, and something in the woman's narrowing eyes makes me ashamed that my first thought was to check myself and not her.

"You okay?" I ask.



“Uh, yeah. Sorry again.” She reaches out to gather her things, and I squat down to help, keeping an eye on her even as I hand her the tube of lipgloss, wallet, and tampons. Yeah, not just one, but two that have rolled a bit further away.

She blushes furiously, scrabbling forward to grab the goods from my hands. I’m not sure why, but I try to put her at ease. “Nothing to be embarrassed about. Just shows you’re prepared. Like a Girl Scout.”

She snorts, the sound wild and unladylike. “I’m the furthest thing from a Girl Scout you’re ever going to find. That’s for damn sure.”

Her answer isn’t what I expect.

Even in this moment, I recognize that she’s got an expensive but scuffed and worn Louis Vuitton wallet stuffed in a standard canvas sack street market bag. The sunglasses perched on her head are designer too, but her highlights are woefully grown out. And though the words she says are crass, there’s an air of education about her.

She’s a study in contradictions, and that makes me nervous, unsure about her intentions.

Even so, I offer a hand to help her stand, which she takes after the slightest hesitation. Pulling her to her

feet, I realize just how small she is, barely coming to my chest, though at 6'6", that's not unusual for me.

She looks up at me through the fringe of her bangs, her eyes wide like she's looking at a *Jack and the Beanstalk* giant come to life. It's a look I've seen most of my adult life.

But it's when she looks at me that I notice how large her eyes are, like they're almost too large for her face but making them all the more enchanting because of it, the spattering of freckles across her nose, fairy dust on silk, and the full lushness of her lips.

Time freezes, stretching and pulling us together though we're already standing almost body to body. I'm shocked, a feeling of warmth coming to life inside me, running out in rivers through my being. I've been dead inside so long, I forgot what being alive felt like.

It's overwhelming, painful, in a way.

It's followed by shame. I cannot be attracted to this little thing in front of me. I would not dishonor *her* that way. I promised her forever, and though we might not have said vows, I meant them long before I gave her a ring.

I step back, breaking the current of electricity.

“Sorry,” I say gruffly before inexplicably adding, “Have a nice night.”

The last words are awkward as fuck to my ears, more syllables than I’ve spoken to a stranger in ages, and I don’t remember the last time I wished someone a nice day or night.

But as I put space between us, I see confusion rushing through her eyes too as she breathily murmurs, “You too.”

From across the room, I hear a loud voice call out, “Carly! Do not think of skittering out of here without something to tide you over tonight. Silly girl.”

The voice tapers off to a stage-whisper as the grey-haired woman I saw earlier continues to herself, “Thinks she can work all night doing her acrobatics with only coffee for sustenance. Thinks I know nothing, but Strega knows all. She should listen to me.”

The woman in front of me cringes, her shoulders jumping to her ears and the pink tint covering her cheeks again. “Strega! I promise I won’t starve if you don’t feed me. I’m not some stray cat.” She rolls her eyes like we’re sharing a private joke, but

she turns, going over to the counter dutifully while an important fact burns itself into my mind.

Carly.

The name rolls across my tongue silently. But as I walk to the table by the window, I let any thoughts of the small, attractive nymph go, needing to focus. Raul should be here any second.

I glance up and down the street outside, shrinking closer to the wall out of habit. I do not like the openness of this position, noting every vantage point on the surrounding rooftops. Though sniper fire doesn't seem to be the standard MO of whomever I'm pursuing, I'm well aware that desperate times can call for desperate measures.

After all, I am a desperate man.

Finally, the door opens and a familiar face appears, Raul coming over to sit across from me. He doesn't seem as uncomfortable as I would be sitting against the glass, a clear shot a boot camp soldier could make with a toy gun. He's not stupid, so I decide he must feel safe here, in this café, this town, this country. A lucky man if he believes that to be true.

“What do you have—” I begin to ask, but he sets a piece of paper on the table between us, sliding it my way. Glancing down, I see it's a check made out

for the amount I paid to hire him.

“What’s this?” I say in confusion, angry flashes of light already sparkling in the periphery of my vision.

“Deal’s off. I did some digging, found out enough to know that you need to let this go. It’s too big, too bad. If you stay on this mission, you’ll wind up just as dead as she is. And while you might be willing to go that far, I’m not. Deal’s off.” His words are fast but firm.

And before I can argue, he’s up and walking away from me.

I jump up too, following him out the door. He said what he found scared him off, and I need to know what he discovered. Bad enough to give him second thoughts is probably exactly what I need and a sure sign I’m on the right path.

I chase after him, calling out, “Wait. Fucking tell me—” But he only moves a little faster. With my giant strides, I catch up, shoving him into an alleyway between two buildings. It’s a tight fit with my size, and I hold him against the crumbling brick wall, my hand at his throat. I’m not choking him, but I’m damn sure encouraging him to be still and cooperate.

He struggles, his fingers digging into my forearm futilely. “No, fuck, Kyle! You’re gonna get yourself killed and me along with you. Let it go, man. Let her go!”

I press a little tighter, lifting him up onto his tiptoes. “What did you find?”

He stutters a bit but finally starts talking. “Her boss. She was asking questions. She was the only one who knew him like that.”

I pound his back to the wall, refusing to accept what he’s saying. “It wasn’t like that. She was mine.”

He nods, his chin digging into my hand, but I don’t let go. “I know, but she—”

My vision goes red. How dare he insinuate something so grossly wrong about her. She would’ve never betrayed me that way. Though she did love her boss, it was more of a father-daughter relationship than anything else.

“Let it go. She’s dead. Anna’s dead,” he pleads.

But the words, especially *her* name on his dirty lips, flips a switch in my head, in my heart. And before I know it, I’m shaking him like a ragdoll, the pressure at his neck getting firmer and tighter until he slumps.

I drop him to the ground at my feet, hoping I haven't killed him. I don't need that hassle. "Fuck!"

I follow him down, searching his pockets and grabbing his phone to look for clues to what he might've found out and not wanted to tell me. I find a folded piece of paper with a name on it.

*Nathan Stone.*

I know that name, or least I knew Michael Stone. Anna's boss. This is what Raul found, what scared him off. It has to be. I shove the paper into my pocket, pushing Raul to his side so he doesn't choke if he vomits before he comes to. It's not common, but some folks are weird when they regain consciousness.

It's then I hear it . . .

A gasp.

I turn and it's her. Carly. She's standing at the entrance to the alley, her mouth wide open but her hands clasped over her lips.

Before the shock can unlock her legs, I take the three strides to her, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her against me. I turn, shoving her against the wall and holding her hostage there. Her eyes are pure terror, a weak cry coming from deep in her

throat.

“You saw nothing,” I say harshly. It’s not a question.

She nods, but I can see the questions, the urge to scream. I grab at her bag, the same one I helped her repack earlier when the contents scattered on the floor. Finding the wallet, I open it to see her ID.

“Carly Edwards. New York City, New York. You’re a long way from home, aren’t you?”

Something in the snide question gives her a boost, her chin raising defiantly. I can’t have that. I need her weak in this moment, fearful of me, of what I’ll do if she tattles on what she’s seen.

I growl, the sound low and feral, and she shrinks. “I know who you are. I know where you live in the US, and I recognize that hostel key.” The threat seems almost enough, and then I add, “And it seems the café owner, Strega, is rather fond of you too. I’d hate for anything to happen to either of you.”

It’s then that she gets it. I see the decision in her eyes. “You saw nothing. Understand?”

Finally, she speaks, and though it’s quiet, I hear her. “Is he dead? Did you kill him?”



It's on the tip of my tongue to lie, to use the horror she would feel at that to terrorize her into keeping her mouth shut. But that's not what comes out of my mouth.

“No, he's unconscious. Not dead.”

Her relief is palpable. Her agreement is nearly complete, and she nods slowly. “I didn't see anything.”

I let her go slowly, willing her to not make any sudden moves. She moves just as carefully, but I'm surprised that when offered the chance, she doesn't make a run for it. Instead, she moves to Raul, bending down to place two fingers to his neck to confirm what I've told her. Smart girl.

She nods and brushes off her knees as she stands up. “I'm leaving first. Do not follow me.”

Her audacity at issuing orders amuses me on some level, but I dip my chin, agreeing. She steps out of the alley and onto the sidewalk without giving me her back, and then like a mirage, she's gone.

I count to ten and then follow her out of the alley. I look left, scanning as far down the sidewalk as I can, but she's nowhere to be found. If she's as smart as she seems, I'll never see her again.

# Chapter 5

## Emma

Driving higher and higher into the hills of The Hamptons, all I can see are trees and fences. Obviously, there are houses behind each run of trees because every once in a while, the fence style changes, denoting the different estates.

Claire and I grew up wealthy, but this is on a whole different level of money.

I slow as I round a turn, noticing that the brick fence pillars are now marked with a scrolling letter S, just as Claire said they would be. I follow the street to the servants' entrance, turning in carefully and stopping at the callbox.

With a press of a button, a disembodied British accent resonates crisply from the speaker. "Stone Manor, may I help you?"

"Yes, Kitty Williamson from Mostest Hostesses as requested, sir."

The congenial tilt to my voice is one of practiced comfort, the professional courtesy I learned at

Mom's side through years of her parties.

But even saying the stupid name Claire gave me makes me roll my eyes. And 'Mostest Hostesses' doesn't exactly help either.

As the gate buzzes and begins to open, I roll my window up and drive forward, mimicking myself with a Kardashian-worthy snide repeat. "Kitty Williamson, Mostest Hostesses, sir. Ugh! Claire, you owe me one."

She can't hear me since we'd decided a wire was too risky, but I'm still putting it out in the universe because I know how big of a request this was for her, and I'll be collecting on this debt for sure. Sister or not.

The tree line clears, and suddenly, I can see the house. No, not house. That is a fucking mansion. Or what's bigger than a mansion? I can't think of a big enough word, but I know that this home qualifies.

It's stunning and classic, red brick soaring three stories high with white Attic-style columns reaching to the roof.

From the outside, it looks as if there are distinct wings within the house, a central and two side sections, each with turrets and chimneys rising from the roofline.

Driving around to the side, since servants definitely don't warrant a front-door entry at a place like this, I can see more columns on the back of the home, but instead of going to the roof, they end at a large second-floor balcony that overlooks the ocean.

I have a flash of what this life must be like. Days spent lounging by the pool or breakfast on the balcony as you watch the tide come in, soft breezes and blue skies over manicured grounds.

Even bitter New York winters are probably tempered by roaring fires, cable-knit sweaters, and snifters of warm brandy while surrounded by leather and oak paneling. It sounds picturesque, but I know there's a dark side to the fairy tale.

There always is, and Claire made sure I knew what I was getting myself into before letting me go tonight, reviewing the risks and players with me until I could quote her words back to her without any mistakes.

I park my Lexus in the lot, noting that the other cars all seem to be nice and new too. I guess being a Mostest Hostess pays decent money, enough for the other girls to drive as well as I do, thanks to Mom and Dad's twenty-first birthday gift.

I love my Lexie. She's my baby, and I'll throw down on anyone who even threatens her.

With a final deep breath for courage, I assume the mantle of Kitty Williamson, secret spy on a mission for the FBI. The hostess part comes naturally, but being on the lookout for the list of things Claire wanted me to keep an eye on is less so.

I'll have to be careful, conscientious, and maybe a bit daring.

Excitement and fear rush through me in equal measure.

I walk the few steps to the side door of the house, which opens as I approach, revealing an older, grey-haired man in slacks and a dress shirt with a bowtie.

Everything about him, from his dress to the way he holds himself, his face carefully neutral, screams formality, and I fight the urge to curtsy.

“Miss Williamson, do come in,” he says, his accent revealing him to be the disembodied voice on the callbox.

“Thank you . . . ?” I let the sentence hang, inviting him to tell me his name as I step inside the entryway to a sort of mudroom. If you can call something the size of a one-car garage a mudroom.

His smile is slight. “Mr. Prescott. I have worked for the Stones for two generations, and it is my

pleasure to oversee tonight's party preparations.”

He manages to say it without sounding self-important, a feat in itself. But then he does a pointed scan of me from head to toe and his judgement oozes through the moment.

I'm suddenly glad that I had a closet already well-prepped for a mission like this.

My dress is designer, from last year's Nanette Lepore collection, but it fits me like it was custom-made to highlight my curves without going past the line of propriety.

My sky-high heels are perfectly polished black leather, so supple they beg to be touched. And my hair and makeup are on point, a chic chignon and red lips to go with a subtly finished face.

“Quite lovely, Miss Williamson,” Mr. Prescott decrees. I dip my chin in thanks, and he orders, “Follow me to the parlor.”

My heels click along the marble floor as he leads me down a hallway to a closed door, which he opens with a flourish, indicating that I should enter. I do as instructed and discover a formal living area, a parlor indeed.

Inside, several other women already wait patiently, most standing so as not to wrinkle their dresses but

a few perching on chairs with demurely crossed ankles.

I'll give Mostest Hostesses credit. While I'm sure a few of these girls are available for more than just parties, and a few are definitely gold diggers, they all look the part of a young, beautiful society lady perfectly.

"Miss Kitty Williamson," he announces, pulling my attention back to him. With a nod, he closes the door behind him, leaving me in the parlor.

I smile politely at the gathered women in greeting. Moving toward my left, I make a casual beeline for the one friendly face in the room. I offer the blonde a hand, giving her my best smile.

"Kitty Williamson."

The blonde offers her hand in return and we shake. "Maritziana Popova." She also has an accent, but it's harsher, maybe not quite Russian but somewhere close. "Are you from Mostest as well?"

I smile hugely, glad that my cover is holding water. "Yes. It's my first time with them, though, so I'm a little nervous, even though I've attended many fancy parties."

Maritziana laughs, a small tinkling sound. "Then you'll do fine. It's truly just looking pretty and

being entertaining. I suppose you can carry an intelligent conversation?”

I wink, whispering, “Well, so far, so good, wouldn’t you say?”

She laughs again, though this time it is larger, fuller, and I suspect closer to her own natural laugh. “Indeed, Kitty. I think you will do just fine. Let me introduce you around.”

She does, quickly making the loop of the room, introducing me to the other hostesses. All are stunning beauties, dressed to the nines in gorgeous cocktail dresses, some more aggressively flashy than others but each sexy in their own way.

Some seem coolly unaffected by the opulence around us, while others are nearly giddy.

I try to take advantage of the time working the room, looking for clues or some tiny detail that might help, even in this public space. But other than noting that it is pristinely cleaned and generically decorated with the utmost care, I find nothing.

A few minutes later, the door opens, grabbing everyone’s attention.

A tall blond man walks into the room, seeming at gross odds with his surroundings in his jeans and



white sleeveless T-shirt, his hair mussed.

But even given his appearance, he carries an air of authority, obviously a man accustomed to delivering orders and having them followed without question.

Instantly, I'm thankful for Claire's constant tutoring as I recognize Caleb Stone, brother to Nathan and secondary target if I'm unable to get close to Nathan, the primary target.

"Hello, ladies," he says, his deep voice filling the room as he flashes a charismatic smile that I bet would get him inside quite a few sets of panties in the room if he wanted. "Glad you could join us tonight."

His words hold a hint of promise, like he could make reading *Hop on Pop* sound like a sexual proposition, and I can see the women around me shifting slightly in their heels, the flush pinkening their cheeks in delight.

I can't deny that he's a sexy man, handsome in a rougher way than I'd expected from his picture. His muscles, chiseled jaw, and sparkling eyes are so much more apparent in person. But beyond the sex appeal, there's a carefree wildness, and I think he seems like the type to squander a family fortune, like a frat boy grown up but still expecting life to be

handed to him in a way that only growing up with money can provide.

He continues on, not wanting or expecting anyone to speak back to him, like he's used to being the center of attention.

“The party tonight should be one for the record books, definitely one you'll be thinking of for years to come. Thanks to me, of course.” He flashes a cocky smirk, flirting with everyone in the room all at once.

I have a moment of disdain, even though he's obviously joking around to keep things light, but I manage to corral my eye roll.

“Seriously, all we need is a little entertainment. You entertain us,” he says, moving closer to trace a thick finger along a brunette hostess's nose.

I can see her breath hitch even from here as her mouth drops open, and I vow to myself that I will walk out of this room if she sucks his finger right now.

But with a raised eyebrow, he moves on to the next girl, promising heavily, “I'll entertain you.”

And then finally, he takes Maritziana by the hand, spinning her in place like they're dancing, though there is no music playing. “And we'll all have a

great time.”

It’s a ridiculous display of ego and playfulness, making me somehow dislike and like him.

My smile is lighter now, less harshly judgmental of Caleb’s seemingly playboy ways. I guess I’ve just seen too many instances of rich bad boys for the fantasy to hold any water anymore.

But I seem to be the only one on the fence, as all the other hostesses are eating out of his hand. I wonder if that’s truly the case or if they’re just better actresses than I am. Either way, I’m going to have to step up my game.

Caleb is slowly working his way around the room now, giving each girl a moment of his attention, when the air is broken by a harsh sound.

A man clearing his throat at the doorway draws everyone’s attention, and you can feel the cold freeze rush through the space as we take in the man standing there now.

Nathan Stone.

He’s gorgeous, and I wonder if Claire purposefully showed me bad pictures of him and Caleb. Because standing in front of me isn’t a man but a fucking god.

He's tall, broad-shouldered in his double-breasted worsted wool suit, but tapered in a way that tells me the wool covers lean muscles.

His hair is much darker than his brother's, dark brown but bordering just on black, and I vaguely wonder if it's because he spends more time indoors or if his brother's is highlighted.

Nathan reminds me of an Old Hollywood movie star, a handsome mix of Robert Redford and Marlon Brando with a new-age twist of Henry Cavill all rolled into one.

I think tabloids would call him dashing, but when his piercing blue eyes land on Caleb, who has jauntily thrown his arm around a redhead, any guise of softness is obliterated.

He barks, "Don't scare them off with your theatrics before the party. No games tonight, despite your not agreeing with this."

Hmm, that is interesting and maybe something I can use. This is Nathan's party and Caleb doesn't want to do this. Then again, maybe I should have figured that out from his clothes.

I get it.

Been there, done that, man, and it seems he's being instructed to suck it up and take one for the team

the same way I have dozens of times. Maybe I can use that to get in with Caleb or to connect with Nathan, if possible.

Either way, it's an opportunity to get information for Claire.

Caleb whines in an over-exaggerated voice, "Aww man, the party was just getting started. Don't ruin our fun." His last words are to the redhead beside him, but she along with everyone else is giving Nathan her undivided attention.

Ouch, that's gotta sting. But before I can make any idioms, Nathan's eyes pass over each of us, and he speaks again.

"You are here to do a job. Be hostesses at my party. Be entertaining and beguiling. No sexual favors are expected, and in fact, I prefer that you not use my party as a hunting ground."

My eyes narrow at his tone, which borders on disrespectful, like he assumes these women are considering just that.

Then again, I had the same thought when I walked in, so I can't fault him too much, but I'd never say it aloud.

He continues on his curt speech, like he's done this dozens of times before, pacing the room and

circling us like a wolf eyeing a pack of tasty sheep. I've never felt more like prey.

I'd thought Mr. Prescott's gaze had been penetrating as he evaluated me, but it was nothing compared to Nathan Stone's.

"Line up," he says, and though we all shuffle to follow his order, inside I'm chomping at the bit to tell him that this isn't a cattle call.

He approaches the first girl, the redhead Caleb had been hanging on, and he takes her in, from toes to frosted tips.

"Name?" She answers, confidently telling him but crumbling slightly when he responds, "You are not to speak to my brother again tonight."

He continues down the line, asking each girl their name, complimenting some and correcting others. My eyes widen as he tells one hostess, "Remove the pads from your bra. This isn't a strip club."

Mr. Prescott trails along behind Nathan, holding out his hand to the hostess and taking the pads with a promise that they'll be waiting for her at the end of the night.

When he finally gets to me, he pauses, gazing into my eyes. I see his eyes narrow, the faintest of crow's feet lines popping at the sides of his eyes as

he stares me down. I have a moment of utter fear, certain that he knows I'm here under false pretenses because his gaze is like the eye of Sauron. It sees everything. He must also see the terror in my eyes, but he smiles, as if he likes that I'm afraid of him.

“What's your name?”

“Kitty. Kitty Williamson, sir.” I say it with certainty and pride, though I don't know why I added the 'sir' to the end. It just slipped off my tongue. But at his raised eyebrow of approval, I think I made the right move.

“Kitty? And does the kitten have claws?” he asks darkly.

Is he flirting with me? Or is this a test? He certainly hasn't asked anything like this to the other girls.

I'm not sure to be honest and the uncertainty makes my heart race. Actually, I think *he* is making my heart pound, not the questions he asked. His powerful command and sexy appearance are playing tricks on me. I'm certainly no innocent virgin, but I've never felt a primal pull to someone the way I do right this moment, as if the two feet separating us are way too much and I need to do something to get closer to him. Though I wonder if the excitement of the ruse and at potentially getting

caught isn't a part of the tingling delight I'm feeling.

Deciding flirtiness is warranted in the situation, I play back, tapping my red lip with an equally red fingernail. "I do, though I prefer to use them for midnight back scratches."

I curl my fingers, scratching at the air between us and knowing that he'll see my slight cleavage as he looks at my fingers. "Though I have been known to be less than friendly with them a time or two."

I make a tiny hissing noise befitting a pissed-off kitten.

He chuckles slightly. "Very well. I'll keep that in mind. Would you do me the honor of escorting me this evening?"

I don't let the shock show, but somehow, I think he knows. "I would love that, sir."

He offers his bent elbow, and I slip my hand through, resting it lightly on his forearm where I can feel the corded muscles there. Even through the British tailoring, I can feel enough strength there to know he could crush walnuts if he wanted. Or me. He could crush me with barely any effort.

As he speaks to the rest of the room, I find Maritziana's eyes. She no longer looks quite so



friendly, unfortunately, and I assume I've scored some sort of prime position that she had her eyes on.

“Ladies, have a lovely evening. Grant, please see them into the ballroom.”

The butler opens the door, and the group follows him out, disappearing in the distance and leaving me alone with Nathan and Caleb.

Claire's warnings war in my mind with joy over having completed step one of the mission, getting close to Nathan. *Being his escort is bound to get me some intel*, I think triumphantly.

But I need to be careful, I remind myself, picturing Anna's face, frozen in death. Death that might have been ordered by the man at my side. Oh, God, what have I gotten myself into?

A small shudder runs through me, and Nathan peers down at me, patting my hand politely. “Are you okay, Kitty?”

I nod, but any answer I might have been about to give is interrupted by Caleb's jovial outburst. “What the fuck, Nathan? You cockblock me with Red but then just claim one of the other girls for your own?” I'm thankful for the blasé tone of his words, because if he'd been serious, I'd have been

even more nervous.

Nathan smiles, and I can get another read on their relationship. It's one that Claire and I have had for most of our lives . . . maybe all siblings do.

“Because I'm not worried about my restraint and control, but I am always worried about yours, Mr. Impulsive. Tell me I'm wrong.”

Caleb's arrogant smirk says that Nathan isn't wrong. “Can't help it, man. I've got what the girls want. A good, fat—”

Nathan cuts him off, sliding his eyes to me. “Wallet.”

Caleb laughs and points at Nathan. “Yep, you know it.” He throws up a two-fingered wave. “Later, man. Gonna go get tidied up. Much less fun now that Red won't be invited to my shower. See you at the party. Try not to piss off the Russian or get yourself killed.”

I flinch, and Nathan pats my hand serenely again, noticing my concern. “No worries. He's just mouthing. You're perfectly safe with me, as are the rest of my guests.”

Even though I know that's not remotely true, hearing his reassurances calms me somewhat and I let him lead me down the hall to the party.

It's already in full swing when we enter, though it's not a rip-roaring house-smasher to begin with. The other hostesses are scattered throughout the room, partnered off with small groups of men and women who are talking casually, just enough to balance out the gender see-saw and making sure there isn't too much testosterone in the air. Music is playing in the background, but no one is dancing considering it's old-school Sinatra crooning '*Fly Me to the Moon*' over the surround sound system. Waiters are passing trayed *hors d'oeuvres* as they move unobtrusively around the room in head-to-toe black.

The ballroom itself is stunning, set up for a soiree more than a gala, though I could see fancy gowns swirling over the marble floor. But tonight, there is a variety of seating areas, plush couches and cozy armchairs set up on Persian rugs, giving an air of intimacy to the formal space.

*It's mighty Roman*, the academic in my mind whispers, and I have to hide my chuckle. It does look mighty Roman, like someone had taken the idea of a Roman dinner party, an evening of entertainment thrown by a senator and updated it to the twenty-first century.

Nathan is quite obviously the man of the hour, smoothly gliding from one group to the next, with

greetings and conversations that make me think he's had his fair share of practice at things like this too.

I'm surprised. I figured from what Claire said that he'd be rougher around the edges, but if he's even half as adept with a rifle as he is here, I'm sure the battlefields of the world are glad he's gone. They're safer now.

Through it all, he takes me with him, including me in the conversation and laughing at my light jokes, even teasing me here and there. It feels oddly comfortable, like there's a knowledge between us that's developed over time, not just two people faking it for the duration of a party.

If I'm honest, I can see the dark charisma lurking under the polite façade Nathan wears. It's not a slick charmer persona like Caleb has, single-minded in its purpose of pursuing pleasure.

Nathan is colder, pragmatic, but the magnetism is there, pulling me in all the same. Like a spider to the fly, he's creating a sense of safety, of connection, of desire.

Though that may be just on my side as he's been nothing but professional. But every time he touches the small of my back, directing me this way or that, a buzz runs through me. And once, when his touch

was the slightest bit low, I had hoped he was going to cup my ass. But he hadn't, and I'd mentally yelled at myself for being a stupid hormone-controlled idiot and forced myself to refocus on Claire's assignment.

So far, I've got nothing though. Beyond a bunch of names, some minor squabbling between the Stone brothers, and a peek behind the veil of Stone Manor, I'm drawing blanks on intel.

The air in the room changes. A big, burly beast of a man enters loudly, asking, "Where's Stone?"

Even if Claire hadn't shown me Nikolai Romanov's picture, I would've known not to mess with this man. There's a brashness to him, from the suit that's just a touch too loud to be considered polite or fashionable to his eyes, just a bit wild, and his carelessness for societal norms bordering on uncouth even though he's rather attractive in an odd way with high cheekbones and full, dark hair. But mostly, you can sense the danger rolling off him. No, he's a man I should leave alone. Definitely.

But I'm disappointed when Nathan doesn't lead me over for an introduction, knowing that though my mind screams no, this is exactly what Claire sent me here for.

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Kitty. I need to speak to Mr. Romanov.”

He lays a chaste kiss to my cheek, more French goodbye than personal, but my cheek burns where his lips touched my skin. And a dark, deeply sensual space in my core clenches as well, wanting more of his kisses.

Suddenly bereft, I make my way to the bar, ordering a tonic and lime. As I wait for the bartender to make my drink, my eyes scan the room, following Nathan and Nikolai. They’re sitting in a vignette across the room, and though their conversation seems friendly enough, Nathan has a slight tension to him that wasn’t there earlier.

I need to know what they’re saying. It’s the whole reason Claire sent me to this party. The reason I’m undercover as Kitty the Hostess. But how can I do that when Nathan so obviously dismissed me?

An idea strikes, and when the bartender delivers my drink, I ask for another. Taking a chance, I order a scotch this time, and when he pours me a few fingers’ worth, I take the glass, carefully and slowly making my way closer to Nathan and Nikolai. I stand to the side, taking advantage of a large potted plant and feeling like Veronica Mars.

“What is it you want, Stone?” Nikolai sneers. And

just like that, I'm a successful undercover agent for my sis. Infiltrated, eavesdropping, intel gathering genius. Score: Me – 1, Nathan and Nikolai – 0.

# Chapter 6

## Nathan

I have to remind myself that this meeting with Nikolai is the entire purpose of this party. My thoughts are still across the room with Kitty, wondering who she's speaking with now that I've let her alone. From the moment our eyes met in the anteroom, she's called to me like no one ever has, her hourglass curves sexy as fuck. More importantly, I could see a spark of intelligence in her eyes, and I liked the way she wasn't scared to sass back when I challenged her.

An instant attraction pulled me to her. But that's not who I am, so instead, to satisfy the need to have her close, I've forced her to be by my side all evening instead of mingling like the other hostesses. She's been charming as we've worked the room together, softening my brash manner of speaking so that each conversation has played smoothly, with each of her additions giving me insight into her brain and the way she thinks.

I've taken every opportunity to touch her but it's not enough. I want to feel her skin beneath mine,



see her mouth O in pleasure that I'm giving her, experience her giving herself to me completely, and know her inside and out, body, mind, and soul.

Honestly, I'm surprised I haven't blown out a leg seam with the intensity of my fantasies.

But it is not the time. She will be fine. I have to trust that because I need to give my full attention to the man in front of me. Nikolai Romanov, the man who has what I need, and I must find his price to get my way.

As much an uproar as he caused coming into the party, like a bull in a china shop, I have to remember that he plays that part happily, loud, boisterous, party-loving, and wild until it no longer suits him.

It's a façade, a way to look like the innocently brash fool, lulling those who have a little knowledge but not a lot of wisdom into a false sense of security, dismissing him. And then he can be scarily precise and cruel, more punishing than anyone currently in the game. Perhaps even more so than me, but not this time.

“Nikolai, thank you for coming. Please, sit,” I say, gesturing to a sofa that would afford him to have his back to the wall. I assume he is like me, unwilling to put himself at disadvantage,

particularly when on another's turf.

“Da, yes . . . you wish to get the business out of the way before partying. Such an American,” he scoffs, his accent thick and gruff, even as he follows my lead and sits down. “In Russia, we do not jump in with both feet, as you say. We prefer to build camaraderie first. Makes the request more palatable that way.”

It's a power move and we both know it, but right now, he does hold the power. But he doesn't know what's in my pocket. He thinks he holds all the cards, but I've learned in both mercenary work and business, it's best to engage the enemy only when you've got the advantage. Sun Tzu might be old, but he spoke truth.

I incline my head, acquiescing for now. “Certainly. If you'd prefer some merriment before we get down to business, that can be arranged.” I raise a hand, motioning Maritziana this way. I detected a Russian accent when she introduced herself earlier and think that perhaps a fellow comrade would put Nikolai at ease.

But as she gets closer, Nikolai grunts. “Nyet, no, let us do this and get it out of the way. Vodka!” he barks at a passing waiter, who scurries off to do Nikolai's bidding. I wait the moment it takes for the waiter to return, watching as Nikolai takes the glass

and raises it high, not waiting for me to mirror him. “*Za Vstrechu!*” he chimes and then takes the large shot in one gulp, sighing happily. “Good vodka.”

I do not speak Russian, but I recognize enough to know that though he toasts our meeting, his lack of courtesy in letting me return the toast before we drink tells me that he doesn’t see us as equals in any way.

I sip my own drink, tasting the subtle flavor before pointedly setting it on the table next to Nikolai’s empty glass.

“What is it you want, Stone?” Nikolai asks, all semblance of politeness vanquished from his tone. This is the hard businessman he is known to be and the man I need to deal with.

“So many things my mind can’t even hold them all at once, but only one thing that I desire enough to invite you into my home, to hold a party in your honor in the hope that you would give your blessing.”

I’m laying it on thick, but I’ve studied Romanov’s style, his strengths and weaknesses, and his ego is one that appreciates a stroke. He needs to play the big man upon high, so this is my best shot at getting my way. But I bow down to no one. It’s merely a tactic.

“And what is that?” he asks with narrowed eyes.

“Something that will cost you nothing. I respectfully ask for safe passage, that is all,” I say, downplaying how important this favor is to me. I don’t want to divulge too much, expose a weakness, or tell such a dangerous man that I am following in my father’s footsteps in a search for a rare and valuable stone.

After all, I’m not sure who killed my father. Maybe it was Nikolai himself and I am walking into the same trap, though I don’t think so. The Romanov specialty is drug trafficking, and gemstones, whether black market or otherwise, aren’t really their thing.

Except for Mother Romanov.

That woman loves her diamonds. Pink ones, to be specific. Rare and unusual in nature, gem-quality pink diamonds make her a very happy old woman. And making his mother happy is one thing Nikolai Romanov loves to do. That is why Caleb went on that last mission for me, all the way across the globe.

Nikolai’s patience begins to fray at the edges, and he leans forward, rumbling. “Safe passage where?”

“I would like to go on a vacation of sorts, in honor

of my father,” I say, playing on his family values and twisting on his sympathy. “He asked that his ashes be scattered in several locations across the globe, ones that meant something to him, either in life or in death.” The lie rolls off my tongue with practiced ease and I think that my father would be proud, though making him proud was never something I aspired to do.

“And one of the locations is in South America. Brazil, to be accurate. Now, before you play coy and act like you have no influence down there, we both know you do and why. I could’ve simply flown in and made my trip as quiet as possible, risking my own life, but more importantly, risking your appearance of control. But I did not wish to do that. I would like us to be friends, colleagues, perhaps *tovarisch*,” I say with a salesman’s smile.

I give him a chance to digest and continue. “So I chose to do the respectful thing, especially since you are in town for your own business, and ask for your permission, your word that my group would have safe passage through the rainforest to the Carajas Mountain caves, that I may perform the rites my father wished, and then safe passage out of the forest and country.”

I make sure I cover all my bases, because I know Nikolai would take special delight in killing me as I

arrived at the airport to depart, saying that my safe passage was *to* the caves, not *to and from*. He's conniving that way, detail-oriented in a way I can respect.

Nikola considers me for a moment then laughs, loud and uproariously. "You want me to let you into my territory to toss about your daddy's ashes?" He doesn't bother telling me that he has no pull in Brazil, since we both know he has the cartels by the balls, but he asks the question like it's ridiculous, like he wouldn't ever consider granting permission, which is the reaction I'd expected from him. He laughs so hard, one of his guards comes over to check on him. But Nikolai waves him off. "Nyet, go . . . enjoy the party."

I watch the guard walk away, noting that the other Russians are all partying pretty hard, slamming drinks down, and several of them are dancing with the hostesses now as the music has changed. Tuning in, I hear an old club hit proclaiming, 'It's getting hot in here,' and pray the hostesses remember my orders to not give any sexual favors to the guests.

With a sigh, I see Caleb dancing with the redhead, but before I can think to give him shit, his eyes meet mine and he winks. My brother may be crass and uncouth considering our similar upbringing, but he's got my back, and though he's dancing, he's

watching me, protecting my back.

I lift my chin and remind myself that if things end safely, I'll overlook it if Caleb wishes to . . . release some tension.

“That pathway you want access to is one of my most used routes for a reason, and we both know it, Stone. The forest is dense there, the hikes dangerous, and police patrol is nonexistent, making it the perfect highway for me. Letting you use it, come in with your money and daddy issues, sets a poor precedent and I won't have it.” His words are sarcastic and biting as he sneers. “Hell, the only ones who could guide a group in and out would be my men, since they've excavated and created the pathways in and out.”

I smile, not giving in that easily. “If that's the case, I'd like to amend my request to include the use of a quality guide during my group's trek in and out of the cave system, and still safe passage for the entirety of the trip.”

“You are not listening. No, permission is not granted,” Nikolai barks. “Will never be, though I appreciate the formal request and the party.” He nods to the merriment happening around us. His voice drops, quieter and more solemn. “I am sorry you will not be able to fulfill your obligations as the oldest son, but I cannot give you what you want. I

understand and respect family, but no.”

I’d expected it to go this way. Actually, I’d expected Nikolai to be considerably less congenial about my request, so I smile calmly.

“You understand family and know that sometimes, we must do things we do not want to do for them. Yes?”

Nikolai dips his chin and I drive my point home. “I know you do not wish to do this, but sometimes, family comes first and we must do unpleasant things for them.”

Nikolai leans forward, his flinty eyes hard. “I do not like the sound of this, Stone. Be careful,” he warns.

“Your mother, she is rather fond of pink diamonds, I understand. Ones from Argyle Park in Australia, specifically, and only those of gem quality, of course. Very difficult to find. Yes?” I ask conversationally.

“*Da*,” he says suspiciously.

“It seems I have come into a rather large number of these rare pink diamonds, enough to potentially strangle the market. Enough for your mother, the sweet woman, to not be able to get another pink diamond. Ever.”



My look is pure malevolence, and my voice drips with venom as I offer, “I’m sure she could settle for a lab-created one. She’d be fine with that, right?”

Nikolai’s lip curls furiously. “And where are these diamonds?”

With a smirk, I pull the small bag from my inner chest pocket and Caleb magically shows up at my side, providing backup and demonstrating that he was solidly aware of the progress of my meeting, though from the sheen on his forehead, I suspect he’s been dancing this entire time.

I pour several of the pink beauties into my palm, offering them for Nikolai’s visual inspection. His eyes widen in surprise, the reflection of the light glinting from the raw stones to the dark depths of his eyes.

“Please, choose one of your liking. Have it evaluated, appraised, do whatever tests you’d like for authentication. Keep it as a gift—these are just the babies—and then decide if this is something you can do, unpleasant enough but simply one of the considerations we must give to make our families happy. I’m sure Mother Romanov would approve.”

Nikolai sits forward, picking up a three-carat stone from my palm and holding it up for examination.

Subtly, I hold my breath, knowing this is the do-or-die moment. I think the stones are enough sway, but he could surprise me and still say no.

In the moment of anticipation, there's a sudden noise to my right as a tree falls over, revealing Kitty. "Oh, my God!" she proclaims, the horror written plainly on her face. Both Nikolai and I jump to our feet, years of fighting putting us both in ready mode instantly.

I'm so surprised to see her, having been worried about her mingling with the party, that Nikolai jumps to the conclusion I should have first.

"You are eavesdropping! Sneaky whore, come here," he snaps.

Kitty pales, her lipstick the only color on her face. I have the wherewithal to pour the stones back into the bag and tuck it away, but then she is beside us, cowering in fear. And my hackles are raised.

I don't know what she was doing, but I don't like her terror. I need some answers.

"What are you doing, Kitty?" I demand, my voice harsh and biting.

She shakes a bit. "Nothing, I just . . . you said to give you a minute, so I was waiting. For you." She looks up at me, and I can see honesty in her eyes,

but there's something else. She pushes the drink in her hand toward me. "I got you this."

Nikolai's fury is rolling off in waves, though his cold demeanor is what is truly terrifying. "Nyet, she's is spying, eavesdropping as we discuss business. What did you hear?" he challenges.

"Nothing," she says, but even I can hear the lie in the word. She was listening, and my first instinct is to eliminate her because of it . . . but something in her eyes stays my hand.

Nikolai looks at me, not so influenced. "She must be dealt with. There is no telling what she has overheard, and more importantly, it is about respect."

He spits the word like it means something great to him, though I know he truly means fear. "It is your territory so I will defer and let you handle it, or I would welcome the honor to take care of her myself."

But his eyes flick to Kitty, tracing down her body as he leers at her, and every cell in my body wants to gouge his eyes out for daring to look at her. He goes as far as lifting his hand, running the rough back along her jaw. "Yes, I will kill you, but I will make your last moments sweet. I promise you that, whore."

Rock. Hard place. And I'm stuck in the middle.

I don't know Kitty, certainly don't trust her, but I can't let Nikolai take her, knowing the ugly fate he'll give her. Not when there's something buzzing here between us.

But I have questions, so many questions. Perhaps I can get those answers in a way that doesn't result in Kitty's death at Nikolai's hand.

Her eyes are pleading with me, her breath jagged, but when a small whimper escapes as she waits for me to declare her fate, my mind is made up.

Stupid or not, I jump in.

With a put-upon sigh, I glare at Nikolai and then to Kitty, standing tall and letting every bit of power I wield into my countenance.

I scold her, "What are you doing? I told you to give me a moment and I fucking meant it. You will be punished for your disobedience, Kitty." I sound like a disappointed father, like a dark romance movie version of a Dom, but the act is enough to get my gist across.

Her eyes flash fire for a moment, but then she sees my demand that she go along with this fantasized kinky tilt to our nonexistent relationship.

She demurely says, “I’m sorry, sir. I was only trying to be good and wait nearby for you to be ready when you wished to return to the party.”

I swear I can hear the quiver in her voice and the urge to curtsy, like some days-past princess. It gives me an idea, a dirty and delightful one.

“Your desire to be close to me has resulted in your interruption of an important meeting. Kneel and apologize.” I’m pushing it, but this needs to be good or Nikolai might just kill her right here and now. He’s done much worse for far less of an infraction.

Beside me, Caleb’s eyebrow lifts, but that’s it. I’m sure if we were in private, he’d be laughing his ass off and asking me what was running through my head, but with Nikolai here, his eyebrow is his only betrayal of his inner thoughts.

Kitty stumbles as she hesitantly tries to lower herself in her heels and dress, and I fight the desire to help her as her right knee smacks into the ground. Punishment should not be easy or kind.

She drops her chin, speaking clearly to the floor. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“And to Mr. Romanov.”

She glances up, eyes meeting Nikolai’s boldly. “I am sorry, Mr. Romanov.” Her chin droops again as

she waits for my next order, and I can see her pulse racing in her neck. Though we are role-playing something well beyond our limited interaction, I find I rather like her at my side on her knees.

If only it weren't under such fearsome circumstances.

Finally, I look back to Nikolai. "My apologies. Kitty is my girlfriend, a rather new and untrained one at that. But be certain that she heard nothing, and if she did hear anything, she heard *nothing*." I emphasize the last word, and Kitty swallows loudly and nods silently.

Nikolai's look is one of calculation as he appraises the situation to see if I'm telling the truth. "Girlfriend or no, you should kill her. Some are simply untrainable, only good for a hole to fuck. And those are easy enough to come by." He grins, baring his teeth toward Kitty, but her eyes are still downcast so she doesn't see his leer. "Ha, I made an English joke. Come in a fuck hole. Funny, yes?"

I huff a humorless laugh and lay a hand on Kitty's head, possessive and protective at the same time. "Yes. But I do care for this one. She has . . . special talents. My apologies again, but I will deal with her as I see fit. I promise you there will be a significant punishment for the disrespect." I choose his word intentionally, to show that he has been heard.

He hums, and I'm not sure if he's agreeing with my plan or disappointed that he didn't get to kill Kitty tonight. Knowing him, it could be either one.

“As to our other business, please take the sample as a token of my friendship. Complete your due diligence to confirm what I'm saying is true, and then we should meet to discuss terms of my safe passage and your receipt of the remainder of the offering.” I keep the terms vague, still not sure what's going on with Kitty but needing to finish this meeting on a positive note.

“Da, I will take a sample,” Nikolai agrees, holding out his hand.

Caleb interrupts, holding up a hand. “I think the rather large one you already put in your pocket should suffice. A second should not be necessary for testing.”

Nikolai smirks at Caleb and withdraws his hand, putting it in his pocket. “You cannot blame me for trying.” He turns to me, chuckling. “It is good to have a brother to watch for you.”

I agree, even if Nikolai's being sarcastic and Caleb's often a pain in the ass. “He is rather helpful on occasion.”

Nikolai sobers. “This business, it is not done. I do

not like your methods, will likely not give you permission, but I will take this sample and consider. Perhaps, we should meet again? The three of us.” His eyes drop to Kitty where she still kneels, and then he squats down, getting on her level, and I think for a moment that he is going to threaten her again, but he looks up at me. “I have found a new hobby, *tovarisch* of mine taught me. Eating sushi off a naked woman. You could be a beautiful serving platter while we eat. Isn’t that right?”

He makes it sound like that’s a fun evening even as my gut twists in revulsion. Not that seeing Kitty nude and revealed piece by piece wouldn’t be exquisite erotic and culinary torture, but to think that a pig like Nikolai would be there as well twists my guts into a ball.

I don’t answer right away, and Nikolai looks back to Kitty with a smug smirk, whistling. “Or maybe you’d prefer to sit at Nathan’s feet and eat from his hand? Woof-woof.”

I know that she’s reaching her limit, can feel the coiled tension in her about to erupt, and I don’t put it past her to attack Nikolai, not knowing the depravity of what he would do to her in return. I clear my throat and pull his attention back to me.

“Dinner would be an honor. I do prefer to have Kitty sit with me though. I’m afraid this display was



rather personal and not our usual style.”

The deference is smooth, even as I agree to a dinner I would prefer not to have. But it does placate him, and what’s more, it seems to intrigue him, a rare feat with a man as ungodly as Nikolai who has seen and done damn near everything.

“Mmm, pity. There may be more to be done on this deal than I expected. I’m sure you would do just about anything to honor your father.”

This time, his smile is pure evil, and I know that while I’m likely going to get my way, it’s going to be costly and I may have to do some things that I’m not comfortable with. Considering what I’ve already done in life, that’s a lot.

I only wonder if I can come out the other side uninjured and with the stone that is my true reason for wanting safe passage through Romanov’s lands in Brazil. Caleb might think following in Dad’s footsteps is foolish, and Romanov might find it dangerous, but I can only hope that I can find the thing that will make this all worthwhile. A diamond that holds the answer to so many questions.

Because by finding it, I will find those responsible for Dad’s murder. I’m sure of it. And I’ll make them pay.

“Within reason,” I agree, though Nikolai and I both know that reason left the equation long ago. For us both.

“I am here for a few weeks. We will do dinner and discuss this plan of yours,” Nikolai says, sliding his hand back in his pocket. I can tell that he caresses the sample stone he slipped there in the confusion of the falling tree. The tell shows me that as invested as I am in the outcome of this potential deal, he is equally so.

With a nod, he moves toward the door and his gang instantly follows, stopping mid-sentence and mid-dance to shadow him, the command to roll out not even needing to be voiced. A few of the hostesses look frustrated, but they’re professional enough that nobody does more than pout.

As soon as the Russians exit, Caleb turns to me, keeping his voice low but angry. “What the fuck, Nathan?”

“Not here,” I growl, my eyes cutting to the guests we still have present. Not all of them are fully aware of my business dealings.

I offer a hand to Kitty, helping her from the floor, but when she tries to pull her hand away, I hold tighter. “Oh, no, Miss Kitty. We have much to discuss, regardless of whether you want to use your

claws or not. Come with me.”

She freezes, but when I take firm steps toward the door, she comes along, Caleb bringing up the rear like he fears she’ll make a run for it. I fear the same if I’m honest, because I know if she even makes a single step toward the door, things are going to get ugly.

Safely enclosed in my office, I give her a tumbler of scotch without asking if she’d like it. I figure the best-case scenario is that it’ll steady her nerves which are obviously jangled, and worst-case scenario, it’ll loosen her lips to encourage her to tell me everything.

She takes it without complaint, swallowing it in one go instead of sipping as I’d expected. Her manners, or lack thereof, surprise me considering how demure she’d been earlier. I suspect there are more layers to Kitty than one would first think. The thought intrigues me and makes me uncomfortable, considering what she just overheard.

“Tell me what you were doing. What you heard,” I say firmly.

She shakes her head and sets the tumbler on my desk. “I told you, I was just waiting for you. I didn’t hear or see anything.”

I have to give her credit. She's a good actress, but the fact that she fell the moment Nikolai was looking at the stones tells me she likely leaned forward to get a better look herself. And that means she's lying right now. Bold-faced lying.

I tell her as much, evaluating every nuance of her flawless face as I do. "Did you get a good view of the stones? Or did you fall before you could really see them?"

She shrinks under the fierceness of my gaze but then gathers herself, trying to argue her case. "We already did this. I thought you believed me based on that humiliating display you made me put on. Can I just go now? Let's just pretend none of this ever happened."

The hope is obvious in the depths of her blue eyes, but I need to squash it with the hard reality. "What we did back there, the humiliating display, as you called it, just saved your life. Because make no mistake that Nikolai would've killed you without a second thought. He is a cold-blooded monster clad in human skin. So, you're welcome for my saving your life. But now, you are left with me. And while I'm definitely the preferable option—I am at least a human being—I am not without my own methods for dealing with lying spies."

Her breath hitches and her eyes widen, and for the

first time her feathers are ruffled. “What? No. I’m not . . . what are you talking about?”

I sigh, frustrated with her, but also with my body’s own reaction to her discomfort. I’ve never wanted to pat someone comfortingly as I interrogated them, that’s for damn sure.

“What. Did. You. Hear?” I demand, my voice loud and booming.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Caleb’s eyes tighten, but he says nothing. He doesn’t like treating women like this, and neither do I, but we both know it has to be done in this instance.

Kitty winces but then looks at me haughtily, like no one has ever dared to yell at her. It makes me want to wipe the pout off her face and teach her some manners.

“Is this the part where I keep saying *nothing* or the part where I tell the truth?” She says ‘nothing’ like I did to Nikolai when I promised she’d keep her mouth shut no matter what.

“Truth,” I say, curious whether she’ll tell it.

“I heard it all,” she confesses boldly. “Safe passage to Brazil to spread Daddy’s ashes, pink diamonds for Mother Romanov, neither of you wanting to do it but sometimes having to do hard shit. Bad things

for good reasons. That about sum it up . . . *sir?*” She tosses in that last word with so much attitude, she’s daring me to go through with the promise to punish her. I swear she is.

For the first time, Caleb swears and runs his fingers through his hair. “What are we gonna do, Nathan? She can’t go walking around knowing all this shit, man. Want me to call Jake?”

Kitty looks fearful for the first time, and maybe she finally gets the depth of danger she’s found herself in. I take the moment to evaluate. Could she actually be a spy? If so, she’s a pretty crappy one considering the fall from her hidey-hole spot. Could she have just been waiting on me as she said and gotten curious?

I consider his suggestion, knowing that it is the best and most assured way out of this mess. But there’s another problem. “If I kill her and go to this dinner meeting with Nikolai without her, he will question my judgment, my veracity, my power. And I need him to trust me, at least until I get to the caves and search them.”

Caleb knows I’m right, judging by the way he’s grinding his jaw like he used to when he had to work his way through something particularly disgusting to eat in some godforsaken village in the middle of nowhere. Finally, he says what’s really on

his mind.

“Or you just give up on this stupid idea and let it go. Like I’ve been saying all along, there’s nothing there, Nathan.”

I’m not getting into this argument again and choose to stick with the matter at hand instead of rehashing old disagreements. Especially with a new guest in attendance.

“No, I think I’m going to keep her instead.” I smile at Kitty and blow her a sarcastic kiss. “Looks like I just got myself a new girlfriend, Brother.”

She shakes her head instantly, arguing, “No, no, no, no. Did I happen to mention *No*, like as in *Fuck No*? Because just in case I didn’t . . . no.”

Every word out of her mouth makes me more certain that I’m doing the right thing. She’s feisty, sassy, and smart, and I like that she is unafraid of me, even when I truly hold her life in my hands.

And no small part of me wants to turn every one of those noes into moaned yeses as she writhes on my cock. I don’t know what she’s doing to elicit that response from me so strongly. I’m more of a hit it and quit it kind of guy, but she makes me want long, repeated sessions. Her on her knees again, me pounding into her mouth. It makes me feel weak.

She makes me question my strength.

“Argue all you wish, but the fact is, Nikolai has you in his sights now. He sees you as a loose end, but while you are with me, he has some degree of reassurance that you won’t interfere with his business. If he sees you without me, he will almost assuredly kill you just in case to prevent you from speaking to anyone of consequence. You do not have to like it, don’t even have to like me, but for your own safety, you will pretend to be my girlfriend. And I will do you the courtesy of being your boyfriend to save your life. Again, you’re welcome.”

As I speak, her jaw drops incrementally as the full scope of the situation truly hits her. I can see the moment it all sinks in and she realizes just how deep the shit she’s in goes. “Fuck. Fuckity-fuck, fucking fucksticks.”

It’s not quite up there with George Carlin’s *Definition of Fuck*, but her vehemence and machine-gun repetition are almost amusing. She’s shaking her head, eyes scanning the air in front of her unseeingly as she tries to find a way out of this, but there simply isn’t one. She comes to the same conclusion a moment later and gulps.

“This is the only way I don’t die tonight, isn’t it?”



I nod victoriously, though I'm not sure why her conclusion to the same one I'd already reached makes me happy.

She crosses her arms over her chest sullenly, and I can see the resignation wash over her. But then she pastes a fake sunny smile across her face, and acid saccharin drips from her words.

“Well, it looks like we're dating then, honey. But if you think I'm doing that humiliation thing for you again, you're fucking crazy. I'm not a Labradoodle.”

Our eyes meet, and though there is all sorts of stupidity tied up in this plan, I can't help but feel that same pull to her that I did earlier. There's something about her that draws me in.

Caleb interrupts the moment growing between Kitty and me, clearing his throat. “I'd like to go on record by saying that this is the stupidest thing you've ever done, Nathan. And you've done some stupid shit.”

The thing is, I'm not sure he's wrong.

# Chapter 7

## Kyle

The slip of paper is stuck to my dash next to Anna's picture. I don't need it. I could probably duplicate Raul's chicken scratch writing considering how many hours I've spent staring at it over the last week. But I want the reminder right in front of me.

I already knew Anna's boss, knew that they'd been as close as a father and daughter could be, even though they had no blood relation. No, Michael's only blood had been his two sons, Nathan and Caleb Stone, both soldiers and both eschewing their father's formidable company to carve their own ways.

I could respect that had they stayed the course.

But I've been looking into Nathan Stone since seeing his name on that slip, researching what's happening with the family business in Michael's absence, and trying to find any clues about what happened to Michael and Anna.

What I discovered was that once Michael was dead, Nathan stepped right in and took over. Like he was too good to work at his father's side but quite content to be the big boss. It reeks of entitlement, a privileged man finally getting his big boy toy to the tune of a billion-dollar business.

It took me three checks of my figures before I accepted the truth. One-year projected profits—over a *billion* dollars.

People toss around the words billion and billionaire like they're nothing these days, but if you look back in time, you realize the first American billionaire only became that in 1916. Even when I was born, there were fewer than a hundred billionaires on *Forbes'* famous list. Now . . . Nathan Stone plays with it like Monopoly money.

It seems like quite the payoff for losing a father he wasn't particularly close to in the first place, and in fact, he seems to have actively hated him in his younger days. Nathan's teen exploits weren't hard to find online. He'd been in the paper multiple times, usually for winning some award, but there were a few smaller less than flattering police blotter reports too.

Seems he liked to speed around town quite a bit in fancy cars, and then Daddy paid off his tickets. Even doing that for Nathan didn't curry him any

favor, judging by the photos of the two of them together, both Nathan and Michael looking awkward and uncomfortable at any contact.

But after high school, Nathan enlisted in the Army, a surprise considering the golden ticket life he was living. I would've expected a fancy Ivy League degree, bought and paid for, of course, or an Academy slot if he wanted to put on a uniform and go play general.

But no, I found his enlistment papers and some public records of his service with commendations for marksmanship, but after a single four-year tour and an honorable discharge . . . nothing.

He became a ghost. For five long years, there is no record of Nathan Stone. Not a single social media post, news article, photo with his spotlight loving father, charitable contribution in his name, police report, or service record. Nothing, absolutely nothing.

And that is suspicious as fuck.

What was he doing for five years? Plotting his father's murder? Or something more mundane like hiding out in a beachside shack after his service?

I smirk to myself. Nathan is definitely not the beach bum type. But is he the patricide type? I'd love to

be wrong, but people have killed for far less than billions of dollars and control of an empire.

And if he killed his father to gain control, did he then kill my Anna to stop her from asking questions? To cover his misdeeds?

*Why didn't you just let it go? Did it really matter that much when Michael was already dead and gone?* I ask Anna in my head, knowing that questioning the choices she made is the weakest of moves I could make. But if she'd just left it alone, we'd be curled up on the couch tonight, whispering about the future, instead of the hell we're in now. Well, I'm in hell. I like to imagine she's in a better place, surrounded with love and light, even though all my faith in God died the day Anna did.

I sense someone approaching but studiously avoid the piercing gaze of the woman making her way toward me, hoping she'll just refill my cup and move on, leaving me to continue researching on my laptop and ruminating in my misery.

“I know you know I'm here. The polite thing to do is to make eye contact, say *grazie*, and smile. *Stronzino . . .* you are being rude,” she admonishes.

I look up. “Strega, thank you for the coffee.” She just shakes her head and walks away, muttering to herself. I don't smile since I never do anymore. Not

since Anna.

A tiny voice inside my head whispers, *You smiled a week ago, right here in this very café . . . for Carly.* A slash of guilt cuts through my gut, knowing it's true. I even laughed two days ago when I followed Carly from Strega's café to a sidewalk well-known for buskers.

My plan had been to simply observe her to ensure she was staying mum about what she'd seen. I'd been shocked to my core to see her perform, doing wildly acrobatic martial arts moves choreographed to music she played on a Bluetooth speaker. She was talented at playing the crowd, skilled with fighting, and magnetic as people, young and old, stopped to watch her.

I hadn't been able to take my eyes off her, her lithe body small but powerful, her dark hair pulled up, highlighting her cheekbones, and the fireworks in her eyes obvious even from my perch across the plaza. She'd been having fun, and it was beautiful to behold, like an echo of something I once knew.

It'd started out as a mission to be sure she was keeping her mouth shut, and I'm doing my best to keep it framed that way in my mind. Because though a tiny piece of my heart knows, I'm not ready to admit that I'm sitting in Strega's café today to keep watch over Carly for personal

reasons.

I can't, *won't* betray Anna that way.

But Carly lit a spark inside me I thought was long-dead, and I'm greedy, wanting just one more hit of her warmth. I haven't been warm inside for so long. Over a year is forever to be adrift without anyone, anything to moor you in place. And like an addict fighting for sobriety, Carly has become my new drug of choice.

I warred with myself about approaching her, finally forcing myself away with a reminder of Anna, of everything I lost. But I'm still battling the urge, which is perhaps why I've given in and come to the café again. Though I told myself it was for surveillance, I know deep down that it's for more. It's for hope, the smallest seed of it, dirty and scratched but glowing with potential in my soul.

I take a sip of coffee, relishing the caffeine nectar even if I wish it didn't come with expectations of common civil courtesy. The door opens, and before I even look up, I can feel that it's Carly. My stomach gives birth to butterflies, and an instant later, ugly guilt. This is wrong. She is not Anna, and I will not besmirch the love we had by chasing light from someone else. It's a dishonor to her, to what we shared.

Struck by shame, I scrunch down in my chair, hoping that by some trick of magic, I can make my huge frame disappear ever so slightly.

She scans the room, her eyes narrowing dangerously when she spots me.

I'd expected her to be afraid of me after what she saw in that alley. Most people are scared of me just based on appearance, and adding in that she saw me choke Raul out, I'd think she'd startle and run. What I didn't expect was for her stomp her way over like a pissed-off Chihuahua, teeth bared and fists clenched.

“Are you done yet?” she demands, seething with anger.

Carly

Need coffee. Now.

It's been a long day. I did a scout trip over to one of the fountain areas to see if it might be a better draw for my performances and get me a little more bank for my time. It'd been an epic failure financially. Sure, I'd made several folks smile, and a whole school group on a field trip had stopped and watched me for almost ten minutes, which is a definite win because I love showing folks that



dynamite can come in small packages.

But overall, I'd worked my ass off for almost three hours and only had twenty euros to show for it.

So now, instead of taking a much-needed early bedtime tonight, I'm headed over to my usual spot to work again. I've got another three hours of performance ahead of me, but I'll make ten times the money, which is motivation enough.

Well, it will be after I get some coffee and a sandwich.

At Strega's, I automatically look around to see if he's here. The beast from the alley.

I've seen him at least twice since then, though he's trying to hide. But he's big enough that that's not really possible. He sticks out like a sore thumb, so huge and brooding that people on the sidewalks give him wide berth, and in crowds, people tend to scoot away from him.

Or at least they did when he showed up to watch me perform.

I'm not stupid. I'd known it wasn't a coincidence. At first, I'd thought he'd changed his mind and tracked me down to hurt or kill me as a way of ensuring I'd keep my mouth shut. But he'd stayed back and merely watched. I even caught a small

laugh and a few claps, which maybe he'd only been doing to fit in, but I prefer to think they were genuine reactions to my show.

Now, when I see him sitting at Strega's, at my café, like it's no big deal, I'm done tiptoeing around this. If he's going to hurt me, he can damn well try, and I'm going to make sure he has to earn it. If he's not, then I'm through with his stalking around, both of us pretending I don't see his big ass in a city where he towers over practically everyone.

I stand as tall as my 5'2" frame will let me and head over, making sure my face shows that I'm ready for whatever confrontation he wants to throw my way. I'm not stupid enough to think that my black belt means I can take on a behemoth like him and win, but I'm not some silly girl who screams and runs at every threat. I face shit head on and deal with it.

At least *now* I do.

I learned the hard way what letting things go will get you, and it's nothing good, for damn sure.

“Are you done yet?” I bark out, trying to sound tough but somehow managing to sound more like a helium-huffing Miss Piggy.

His lips twitch and I think he's trying to hold back a

small laugh. And that makes me even angrier.

“I said, are you done following me around like a stalker? I told you I’d keep my mouth shut, and I will. Especially since I saw that guy you knocked out walking around the neighborhood, and he seemed fine enough. So if he’s not chasing you down, I’m not gonna worry about it. So are we done here?” It’s a verbal dump of information, rapid and clipped, as I challenge him, but I don’t care. I’m going to say my damn piece.

I think he’s going to argue, act like I’m mistaken about seeing him, but he doesn’t deny that he’s been following me.

Instead, his eyes flick to the chair across from him at the table. I don’t think he means it as an invitation, but I take it as one anyway.

I turn the chair around backward and straddle it, glad it’s a narrow seat so my little legs still reach the ground. I just want more between us, need to be able to make a fast escape if it’s warranted. And having my toes dangling off the ground like a little kid is not in those plans.

*This is stupid, Carly. So fucking stupid. Should’ve run while you had the chance because this is a game you’re not prepared to play.*

The voice in my head isn't wrong. I like to think I'm strong, independent, maybe even a tiny bit badass, but the monster in front of me is like nothing I've ever seen.

Still, if he'd wanted to hurt me, he's had ample opportunities and ones much better than sitting in the middle of Strega's. I'm not one of those girls who thinks that because she had one godawful boyfriend, her radar is off. Especially since I didn't pick Robert—my dad did. Nope, my guy-dar is still doing okay, so I'm trusting my instincts here because I'm inclined to poke the bear and see what happens.

“What'd you think of the show?” I ask, genuinely curious but also to let him know that I saw him there. It's a calculated first move, less angrily impulsive and more strategic.

He grunts, not answering for a beat too long but finally sharing, “It was good.”

It's the smallest morsel of conversation, barely a compliment, but it feels huge. Like he just gave in on something internal that was holding him back. I'm not sure what it is, but I can feel it all the same. But poking is one thing. Scaring him off is another. Though the idea of my scaring him is laughable, I play it safe.

“Thank you.”

Silence reigns between us, his eyes ping-ponging from me to his coffee to the laptop. If I didn't know better, I'd think I make him nervous.

Needing to fill the space, I ramble on. “I started karate when I was eight and did it all the way through high school. It gave me something to do to channel all my energy and pissed my parents off more than a little that I was this messy, sweaty beast of a girl, not the demure princess they wanted me to be.”

I can feel the smile stretching my face as I think back to the multitude of times my mother would beg me to do dance instead, saying how it would be so much more useful to know how to do a foxtrot or a waltz or a tango. And of course, all young ladies did ballet. It taught ‘poise’.

Honestly, I took glee in her confusion over how I could be so coordinated on a mat but so klutzy on a wood floor. Never mind that even then, the clumsiness had been exaggerated, my own small rebellion to get me kicked out of ballet class and back to the karate I loved. But Mother had never known that.

“I did a choreographed piece a few times and loved it, so when I needed cashflow to subsidize my

Euro-vacay, I tried doing the numbers on the sidewalk. Now, I perform several nights a week and love it because it's mine, you know? Plus, I get days to sightsee and hit up all the tourist traps, and I keep in good shape. Best of all worlds. Routine but no strings, independent but still get to connect with the audience. Plus Europe, of course!" I finish with a gleeful proclamation.

He blinks at the onslaught of words I just flung his way, and I can't decide if he's really wishing I would shut up or if he wants me to keep talking. He tilts his head, speaking in a low voice.

"I can't decide about you. You saw me damn near kill a man, and you understandably freaked. But now you sit here, talking like we're old friends. What's your play?"

I blanch, surprised that he's being so blunt. "No play. Just making conversation. Adding a touch of humanity to the boogeyman who's stalking me through the streets of Italy, you know?"

"That what you think I am? The boogeyman?" His chuckle is dark with violent promises. "Little girl, I'm way worse than that, worse than anything you could imagine," he says, like he's trying to warn me off.

But there's something in his eyes, like he needs me

to get up and leave, but all the while, he wants me to stay. Like it's a test.

So I tackle the test head-on.

“Is that supposed to scare me? Because if you were going to kill me, you already would have. So you can chill with the Big Bad Wolf routine, Stretch. Let's start somewhere easier. What's your name? Otherwise, I'll gonna have to stick with Boogeyman, and you seem a bit averse to that.”

He wants to test me? I'll test him right back. See how monstrous he really is. It's just his name, but it symbolizes so much more and we both know it.

I wait patiently to see if he gives in.

He gets up, silently stuffing his laptop into a bag and tossing it over his shoulder. He doesn't say a word as he walks away, making me the winner of this game of chicken. But how come it feels like a loss?

I'm sitting alone at the table, and Strega finally makes her way over, filling my cup. “Kyle is such a nice boy. Needs better manners, but he is kind. You could do worse than a giant of a man like that.”

I grin at Strega's one-track mind that's always trying to partner me off, and I learned his name another way, though I do wish he'd told me himself.

I let the name roll off my tongue to taste it.

“I don’t think Kyle’s a nice boy at all, Strega. But maybe that’s what I like?”

She huffs, rolling her eyes as she flits away to start a fresh pot. She starts muttering to herself in Italian, her voice mock-pained as she does. “American girls, Italian girls . . . all only want bad boys.”

I’m laughing because honestly, I don’t know what I like in a man. I never had the option to choose for myself. Yes, a ‘good man’ would be nice, but isn’t everyone allowed that one bad choice, if only to learn from? I don’t know.

But what I do know is that I’m not scared of that monster, even if I probably should be. Instead, I’m intrigued and want to know more about the hulking, brooding giant.

And with a small smile to myself, I know whose face I’m hoping to see in the crowd at my show tonight. And whose I’ll be picturing between my thighs the next time I need to let my fingers do the walking.



# Chapter 8

## Emma

By early morning, after a night more full of staring at the ceiling than sleep, I'm wishing the whole party was just a surreal nightmare. There's no way I went undercover to a party, ended up chatting up a crime boss and a *high-value target*, as Claire called Nathan, got busted, and am now *dating* the guy I'm supposed to be spying on.

It's like some movie, not my life.

But it *is* my life.

Rolling over, I snuggle in under the quilt my mother bought for my thirteenth birthday. She didn't make it, of course, but she had it made from some of my favorite T-shirts and jumpers from my childhood, so every square holds a memory from my earliest days. More importantly, this quilt has been with me through teenage angst, tears buried in the stitches, through cozy nights with hot cocoa with marshmallows and holiday movies, and even through my happiest days where it was the joyful hug I needed.

But right now, it's a barrier, keeping the reality at bay and letting me pretend, just for a moment longer, that last night was just some crazy dream.

Even that comfort is breached when I hear a banging on the door. With the trademark knock, I know it's Claire and that there's no way I can avoid the truth anymore.

"Coming. Hold your horses, Claire. I'm coming," I holler, and the repeat of the knock stops mid-rhythm.

Before I even get the door open, Claire bursts through. "I brought coffee. Tell me everything."

*Jeez, Claire. Why not 'I'm from the government, I brought coffee, and I'm here to help!' It'd be more quippable.*

It's the barest of bribes and a definite order broadcasting that Claire's in full business mode, bossy as ever. "Won't you come in?" I ask sarcastically, but I grab at the coffee. She relinquishes it and follows me to the couch, where I sit and curl my legs underneath me.

She sits at the other end, turning toward me with her own coffee in hand. Despite the casual posture, she looks professional in her dress pants and blouse, her hair pulled back and her makeup

tasteful.

In contrast, I'm messy-haired and bare-faced, still in an oversized T-shirt nightgown and socks. Even more of a discrepancy than our dress, though, are the looks on our faces.

I'm trying to keep a cool neutral look, but I imagine my sister can read me like a book, the same way she could when we were kids, because her eyes are boring into me like she can read my darkest, deepest secrets without my saying a single word.

Of course, the fact that I'm having a hard time meeting her eyes and instead seem intent on studying the texture of the plastic lid to my coffee cup probably has something to do with it, too.

“Spill it. Everything big and little. Tell me everything.”

I decide to take her at her word and tell her every detail, hoping that something will be helpful, maybe something she can use to catch Nathan or Nikolai and get me out of the fake dating setup I know she's going to hate.

“So I go in, and Nathan has an honest-to-God butler. Isn't that crazy? But he seemed nice enough, kinda super Alfred-ish, dry and British. The brother, Caleb, came in before the party, kind of a

jokester, I guess, a shameless flirt. I mean, the dude showed up in a sleeveless T-shirt sporting biceps and tats and all sorts of bad boy machismo. By the way, it seemed pretty apparent that Caleb wasn't onboard with whatever *mission* Nathan hoped to accomplish with the party."

She interrupts, asking why I think that, and I rehash the conversation between Nathan and Caleb. "Then Nathan asked me to escort him to the party."

I drop that bomb, waiting for her reaction with bated breath.

"What? Oh, my gosh, that's great!" She offers a fist, and I bump it as she continues, "Then what?"

But when I explain about standing nearby, her smile turns into a frown. "Were you careful?"

"As much as I could be, but you told me to get info, so that's what I did." I tell her about Nathan's story about spreading his dad's ashes and the pink diamonds and how it seemed like a good old boys' bartering more than anything else. "It mostly seemed like a you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours deal . . . diamonds for access."

She hums, thinking, and that's when I tell her about getting caught eavesdropping. "Holy shit, Em! Are you okay? I mean, you're sitting here, but holy

shit.”

I glare at her. “Nikolai wanted to kill me on the spot, literally.” I let a bit of guilt bubble up inside her before dropping the real bomb. “But Nathan stopped him by saying we’re dating.”

Her eyebrows jump together in confusion. “Why would he do that?”

I shrug. “Honestly, I’m not sure. He seemed really interested in me from the beginning, and he totally saved my bacon with Nikolai. After that, he took me to his office and asked me what I’d heard. When I told him everything, he said that we’ll have to go through with the fake dating or else Nikolai will likely come back to kill me just to cover his bases. Nathan doesn’t want to look wishy-washy either. So I’m going to dinner with the two of them next week.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not, Emma! What the hell?” Claire screeches. “Going on a date with a thug like Nathan?”

“It’s not like I had a fucking choice in the matter. You’re the one who asked me to go there. Look, I got some good info for you, and you told me to get close to Nathan if I could. Guess what? I did!” I argue, even though I’d spent hours last night alternately wishing for a way out of this whole mess

and telling myself it was a dream anyway.

In the morning hours, when all my defenses were down and I had to be honest with myself, I'd also felt a secret thrill at the dominating way Nathan had spoken to me, even if it was mostly a cover story. I've never been into anything like that, and judging by the slight smirk on his face, it was out of his box too, but it'd been fun to pretend.

Or at least it *might've* been if there hadn't been the threat hanging over my head. A picture of me on my knees with Nathan feeding me his cock flashes through my mind, but the momentary fantasy is cut short when Claire interjects, pulling me back to reality.

"I just meant for the party, Emma. Not to be his fake girlfriend because you almost got yourself killed," she says vehemently. "Maybe this was too much? I thought it'd be easy, safe."

I think she's saying the last bit more to herself than to me.

I shake my head and down some more coffee. "Claire, you asked me to do this and I did. And as wild as it turned out to be, it was a success. I got you a bit of information and made the connection you told me would be your best-case scenario. Maybe I can get you even more info if I go to this

dinner.”

She rubs at her cheek the way she’s always done when she doesn’t like something, but I can see the hunger in her eyes warring with her desire to protect me. It’s the role she’s always played, the big sister protector even when I didn’t need protecting. Though this time, I truly might. But as much as she’s done for me, I’m willing to risk it for her.

*And for yourself*, a small voice whispers, and I know it’s true. There’s a part deep inside me that wants to know more about Nathan, that isn’t reconciling the man who saved me with the one who’d kill a pregnant woman for asking too many questions.

Claire bites her lip, and I think I’ve won her over, but her conservative rule-following nature takes over. “No, I can’t let you do this, Em. Maybe I should’ve listened to Matt and left the Stone thing alone. I just couldn’t, but I shouldn’t have asked you to do it in the first place, and I’m sorry for getting you mixed up in this. But it stops now. No dinner, no seeing Nathan again. He doesn’t even know your real name, right? So just let it go.”

Dawning realization of how deep I’m in strikes. He doesn’t even know my name. It’d felt almost like his calling me *Kitty* had been a nickname of sorts, like a term of endearment.

But no, to him, that's my actual name. And it's a lie, which feels wrong somehow, though playing a role is nearly second-nature to me by now after years on the stage. But this doesn't feel like a role, even though that's how it started. For better or for worse, it's something that morphed as soon as he put his hand on my head. It's become . . . I'm not sure how to describe it.

But something else in what Claire said comes into stark focus. "What do you mean, Matt told you to leave it alone?" Matt is Claire's partner at the FBI, and they've successfully worked together for several years. I've met him a few times, and he seems like the least-likely agent ever, which is probably what makes him so good. He comes off as a bit of a bland nerd, more IT than 9mm, and he's a bigger rule follower than even Claire is. And I hate to say it, but the most memorable thing about him is his red hair. Past that, he's just . . . nice.

Claire stands up, rolling her eyes and huffing. "I wanted to send someone in undercover, felt like we had enough to warrant a closer look and could potentially get some decent intel. And Matt agreed. We went back and forth, dissecting and discussing it from every angle before going to the Assistant Director. I thought our plan had merit even if it felt too dangerous."



“What happened?” I prompt, thinking that she should’ve shared this information when she asked me to go undercover.

“The AD basically said that though Stone is probably dirty, he’s just another corporate monkey, no worse than any other.”

“Any other?” I ask, and Claire nods. “As in?”

“As in half the Dow Jones are breaking laws on the regular, but we don’t have the manpower to do anything about it, so we only go after the ones who do the really evil shit. I figure Stone is one of those, but the AD hamstrung me. I’d told Matt I was doing something anyway, going off-books, but he tried to talk me out of it.” Her eyes bug out in shock like she still can’t believe Matt hadn’t gone along with her special brand of crazy. I think of the three of us, he might be the only sane one to step away before the shit hit the fan.

“I’m confused. I thought you said the rumor was that Nathan was a bad guy and a likely murder suspect? It sounded like you believed it.”

“I do. We know Stone is up to something. I just couldn’t let the opportunity pass, but I never would’ve asked you if I’d known it’d end up like this. I shouldn’t have asked in the first place. I was desperate and it was stupid and reckless of me. And

that was when it was mingling at a party and keeping your eyes and ears open. You're in Stone's sights now, and worse, in Romanov's. A private dinner is too risky. No, Em."

She shakes her head like her word is law. And usually, I'd bend to her will. Hell, I remember countless times I've done exactly as she said just because she told me to, whether it was climbing a tree, the dress I wore to my senior prom, or her advice for my first kiss.

But not this time.

"I'm doing this, Claire." My voice is just as certain as hers.

Her eyes narrow at the challenge. "Why? What are you getting out of it?" Her jaw drops, and she stares at me in shock. "You like him! Holy shit, Emma! Don't be blinded by his charm and good looks. He's dangerous, and his money and power make him even more so. This isn't some fairy tale with a happily ever after. It's the fable with the lesson about staying away from the big bad wolf. Stay away from him or maybe you'll be the next woman to end up dead."

I rise from the couch, walking around my coffee table to stand in front of her. "That's not fair. I'm not some stupid girl who thinks she can fix the bad

boy, even if this one is more Italian suit than leather jacket. I get that he's dangerous in a way I don't remotely understand. But you asked me to do this because you think he should pay for what he's done, and that's still true. If I can help that happen, or at least get some information about what did happen to Anna, I'm going to do it. For you, and for her. Besides, just because he doesn't know my real name doesn't mean a man like him with unlimited resources can't find out if he thinks I could be a threat."

She clucks her tongue. "You could be right. But high and mighty words aside, you're doing this for you. You might be an actress, able to fool audiences into believing you're something you're not, but I can read you. I've always been able to read you, and this has nothing to do with Anna or me."

Her head shake isn't one of disagreement but of disappointment this time, something I don't know I've ever felt from her. We've always been on the same side, but this time, even though she recruited me to the game, we're on opposing sidelines. Still, I think we're still hoping for the same result, the truth about Nathan and about Anna.

She's just hoping Nathan's responsible while I'm hoping he's not.

Downing the last of her coffee, she walks to the

door, stopping before turning the handle to look back at me. “This isn’t over, and I don’t want you to go to this dinner. But if I can’t stop you, I still want you to tell me everything. Every. Thing. Understood?” Standing in the doorway, she sighs deeply, her voice haunted. “I hope you know what you’re doing. Don’t get yourself killed, Emma.”

The way she says it, like I’m halfway dead already, sends chills up my spine. And with that, she’s gone.

# Chapter 9

## Nathan

She's a no-show.

I guess a small part of me expected it, even wanted her to fight this a little. I wanted her to show a bit of spine, a bit of bite, maybe a little sass I could punish her for in ways that would leave us both glad she'd fought me.

When I'd called the number I'd insisted on getting from her, I'd half expected it to be a fake or for her to ignore the call. But it'd been her sweet voice that answered, giving me a shade of hope that this would be easy. However, when I demanded her presence at dinner tonight, I was taken aback by her laughing refusal.

*“Look, I agreed to dinner with you and Nikolai to save my life, not some private tete-a-tete with you. So, a polite decline. Just let me know when and where Nikolai plans his dinner, and I'll meet you there.”*

*My returning chuckle had been dark, none of the*

*airy casualness she had. “Honey, that’s not how this works. You’re going to dinner with two of the most dangerous men you’ve ever met. You think Nikolai is going to be fooled again by some faux kinky bullshit? No, don’t flatter yourself. Tonight is a business strategy session so we’re both prepped for a dinner and show with Nikolai. And if you’re good tonight, I’ll feed you. If not, well I guess we’ll have to see.” I’d let the threat hang, hoping she’d fill in some ugly conclusion herself that would push her over the line to giving in.*

*I’d heard her swallow thickly, felt her resistance even through the phone, but she’d yielded reluctantly. “Fine. What time?”*

But now eight o’clock has come and gone, and Kitty is still not here thirty minutes after my requested arrival time. My pacing has given way to sulking as I sit in the corner of the leather couch in my front room, nursing a tumbler of bourbon.

I take another sip, letting the vanilla and spicy notes of the Blanton’s Original wash through me, easing the knot of fury tightening in my gut.

Where the fuck is she? I am not a man accustomed to waiting for others, and in fact, I do my damndest to make sure they don’t wait on me either. Timeliness is paramount, something I learned from watching my father’s complete disregard for

others' schedules. He always ran on his own timeline, regularly forgetting meetings or skipping appointments if he became lost in his adventures.

So Kitty's tardiness, and by now absence, triggers those same buttons of my youth, waiting at the dinner table for a father who never showed and belittled his son's feelings of disregard when he did manage to make a school function.

It was a lesson the military strengthened. As they say in the Army, 'five minutes early is just on time. On time is five minutes late.'

I can hear my CO ranting about timeliness as well and how the lack of it is disrespectful to your senior ranking officers. I may not be a military man any longer, but the disrespect is the same.

I won't allow it. Not when the risk is so great to us both.

I pick up my phone to call her, my anger already poised to boil over, ready to unleash on her at her disobedience, when the doorbell rings.

I get up, nearly slamming my tumbler onto the wooden coffee table before me, and stride to the front entry hall. Grant walks in from the kitchen, a man on a mission, as always, but I intercept him.

"I've got this one, Grant," I say, my voice clipped.

He dips his chin in deference, slowing down. “Of course, sir.”

He doesn't disappear, instead standing back with his hands behind his back, ready to step in if he can be of service.

I swing the door open, the words already rolling from my tongue. “It's about damn . . .” But I falter at the sight before me, and my next word is a bare whisper. “Time.”

Kitty is resplendent in a blush-colored dress that hugs her every curve. The dress is almost demure, with a high neck and long hemline, but its slim fit leaves nothing to the imagination, and I fight the urge to order her to twirl for me just so I can glimpse the fabric slipping over the apple of her ass. Her hair is down, honey-blond curls tumbling loosely, and her eyes are smoky, dark with questions her shiny lips don't ask.

She looked gorgeous at the party in sexy cocktail attire, but there's something very enchanting about a formally dressed Kitty, all elegance and refinement.

I realize I've been staring a beat too long when she clutches her wrap to her arms. “Uhm, are you going to let me in or not?” There's not a hint of apology at her tardiness, just saucy brattiness daring me to



shut the door. But she's got the upper hand, at least for now, since she knows I want her here for this meeting, and apparently, she's not one to let me forget it.

"Come in." The order is harsh and brusque, stern in response to her sass. I know I'm not de-escalating the situation, but I'm angry and I won't hide it when it is so warranted. I watch as she enters, rewarded with the view of her backside I'd wanted. But I keep my face neutral, not letting her have the victory.

Grant steps forward, taking her wrap and purse, disappearing silently like the ghost he's trained to be.

With the soft click of a brass door latch, we're alone, our eyes on one another, and it feels like lines have been drawn. But we're both toeing the chalk, washing it away with every glance, every sigh, every concession as we pull together, orbiting ever closer even as we fight the magnetism.

That she is so easily able to play me startles me, and I knowingly break the connection. Giving her my back, I walk into the living room where I awaited her, gesturing toward the wet bar.

"Would you like a drink before dinner?"

She follows but answers negatively. “No, thank you. Can we just get this over with? Tell me your game plan, I’ll get on board, and we can go back to our regular lives until dinner with Nikolai. Then nobody has to die, *especially* not me, and you save face with the scary mobster.”

It’s not a bad plan. In fact, it’s the one Caleb told me was my best bet if I was going through with this, and rationally, I agree with him. And with Kitty. But nothing about the way she makes me feel could be described as rational.

I meet her gaze, my voice dropping to a commanding growl. “This will take however long it takes. You’re playing a dangerous game, kitten, and impatience will do you no favors.” She bites her lip, looking scolded, and it softens my anger, but only slightly. “But if you want to get this show on the road, let’s eat.”

I pass through to the formal dining room, seeing the large table is set for two, my place at the head of the table and Kitty’s to my right. Soft candlelight already glows from the tall candles in the middle of the settings.

“Sit,” I offer, pulling out her chair for her and then pushing it in once she sits.

Her awe as she looks around the room is obvious,

her jaw dropping and her manicured finger running along the heavy handle of the knife on her right.

If it were anyone else, I'd take it as a threat, and perhaps I should consider that Kitty might be the most dangerous person I've ever dined with, not because I think she'll stab me with a knife more suited to butter than gutting someone, but because she brings things to life inside me that I do not have the time or inclination to pursue, but here I am, regardless of any choices I might have rationally made.

“Let me get our dinners,” I say, not waiting for an answer. In the kitchen, I pull two plates from the warming drawer, thankful for the kitchen staff's stellar service. My chef could work in a three-star restaurant in town, but I pay her well enough to stay here, cooking for the occasional party but more frequently, for me and the other staff. And of course, the hours beat the hell out of anything she can do in a restaurant in NYC.

Using a white linen cloth, I carry the plates back to the dining room and set one before Kitty and one in front of my own chair, laying the protective cloth aside.

“Should be warm still. Chef doesn't believe in microwaving things so she left them in the warming drawer, though that was nearly thirty minutes ago.”

It's an accusation, sharp and biting.

Kitty's lashes flutter at the dig, her eyes searching the plate and then lifting boldly to meet mine. The air is charged, and I wonder if she's going to sass back again at being called out on her tardiness.

I can see the argument ramping up in my mind, already planning my words and wondering if she fights fair or hurls barbed insults.

Her narrowed eyes search mine, the fire in their depths hot with fury, and her intake of breath makes me think she's preparing to yell, but then she blinks and it's washed away so completely I almost think I imagined it.

Instead, she quietly says, "I'm sorry I was late. I should probably lie and say I got held up in traffic, but the truth is, I wasn't sure about coming. You're not exactly my normal dinner date type. But I should've called. I'm sorry."

The words suck the air out of the room, changing everything from adversarial to cooperative. I think we might actually get out of this with both of us alive and my gaining access to the caves if we can truly work together.

"Apology accepted. Thank you." I uncork the bottle of wine, a fine Aussie Shiraz to go with our

dinner, pouring us both a generous glass and then lifting mine in toast. “To unintended meetings, successful partnerships, and everyone getting what they want.”

Kitty raises her glass, but I see the flutter of her pulse at her neck at my words and wonder what exactly it is that she wants. The image of her on her knees flashes in my mind again, but I force it away in favor of work, foregoing pleasure for business like time after time before.

We clink and take a sip of the delicious wine before Kitty looks at her plate and asks, “What’s for dinner?”

I look down, barely able to take my eyes from her. “Chef said beef marsala, garlic broccoli, and her secret potato mash recipe.” I shrug. “The potatoes are one of my favorites.”

Kitty smiles at the small share, forking a small dollop of the creamy fluff. “What makes the recipe so secret?”

I don’t answer, wanting to see her face when she tastes them for the first time. Her eyes fly open wide and she talks around the mouthful, “Oh, my God! These are amazing.”

She takes another bite, less dainty this time, and

continues talking while savoring, “Mmm, there’s cream cheese, isn’t there? And garlic butter. I could live on these.” I think she’s telling the truth, judging by the way she’s shoveling them into her mouth. If she went any faster, I’d recommend getting her a serving spoon, or maybe a ladle, to save her time.

I grin, picking up my own fork to enjoy the dinner as well. Eventually, she moves on to the beef and broccoli, but after the mashed potatoes, we’ve transitioned to more casual, even friendly conversation, and I vow to thank Chef again for her magic way with food. Guess that James Beard Award wasn’t for nothing.

“So if we want to fool Nikolai, we need to be as in-sync as any real couple, know all the idiosyncrasies and the answers to any questions. Open book, deal?”

I offer the deal, knowing I won’t return the full picture of my life but hoping I can give her enough to draw her truth out. Because I want to know her, every little tidbit and detail, to save and savor for after this mess is cleaned up and she’s gone.

“Deal,” she says, opening the door to the devil. “Shall we play Twenty Questions? Or Truth or Dare?” she asks playfully.

“While daring you to do things might be the

highlight of my night—hell, maybe my life—for tonight’s purpose, perhaps we should stick with twenty questions. See what kind of trouble we can get into that way,” I say flirtatiously, an edge of sex deepening my voice.

Kitty smiles and lifts her eyebrows, although I think she’d have preferred Truth or Dare for the same reasons I’m avoiding it.

“Okay, easy ones first. Favorite color, food, song, movie, and why.” She ticks off each item on a finger. “My faves . . . color, light yellow, not canary like Big Bird but soft like baby blankets and flowers. Food, new one just now, these mashed potatoes, but before that, a fresh blueberry muffin with applesauce. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. Song, Alicia Keys’ *Empire State of Mind*, not the one with Jay-Z but just Alicia, because I used to sing it and tell myself I was going to move here. It’s like my anthem rally. Movie, *Tomb Raider*. Long story, just trust me that I don’t have some weird Angelina Jolie thing. Your turn. Give me all your basics.”

She throws all that out there like it was on the tip of her mind, and I wonder if that’s the case for most people because I don’t function like that. Not at all.

“Okay, color. Well, I guess for clothing, I’d say dark grey or black. For other things—”

Kitty tsks, interrupting but smiling congenially. “Not like that, just what’s your overall favorite color in the world? The one that makes you smile and catches your eye every time.”

And suddenly, I know. Looking her in the eyes, I answer truthfully. “Blue, not quite bright like sapphires, but not as deep as navy. Somewhere in between, with flecks of brown.”

It’s obvious to us both that I’m describing her eyes, and she blushes, her hand covering her mouth, but I saw the smile.

“Flatterer. What about the rest?” she encourages.

I grin, tapping the edge of my plate with a finger. “Food’s easy. These mashed potatoes, though I have a favorite breakfast, dessert, and so forth. It’s hard to decide on just one thing.”

“Ooh, now that’s a compliment to your chef. Song?”

A playlist runs through my mind, and I almost name two other songs, one my favorite car jam and one my most-played calming classical symphony, but I settle on something else.

“*Started from the Bottom* by Drake. I used to sing it with my squad, so it’s got good memories. Movie, uh . . . *Die Hard*, I guess? I don’t really watch



movies or TV that often, but I watch *Die Hard* every Christmas so I guess it's a favorite."

"Your squad?" she asks, and I have a moment of mentally kicking myself for exposing that much.

"I was in the Army for a while. My squad worked well together, and we had some fun even in the godforsaken places we were stationed."

"How was the Army for you? You don't seem like the type to take orders and obey commands." Her words are light, but the huskiness betrays her true meaning, her true desire to have me tell her what to do even as she chafes against that same desire.

"I didn't if I could help it, but I recognize the importance of having someone ultimately responsible for the mission. Sometimes, it was me. Other times, someone higher than me or someone with a different skillset. As long as it was a success, I was okay with that."

"This mission with Nikolai, are you ultimately responsible for that? Or is someone else pulling the duty card on this one?" she pries, taking us back to the elephant in the corner. The axe over our necks begins swinging again, Nikolai's threat echoing in my head.

"This one's on me. Nikolai has something I want. I

have something he wants. It's simple supply and demand, bartering one valued item for another." I lift my shoulder dismissively like it's an easy equation, not one with a multitude of moving parts and considerations.

"You make it sound so easy, but our dinner tonight says it's not," Kitty points out. "That you wanted to have me over, go over our stories, tells me that you're concerned."

"I'm not concerned per se," I lie, "but I like to be prepared for every foreseeable outcome. This was something I did not see coming. I don't like that, and I'm rectifying it as we speak."

"So that you can sprinkle your dad's ashes in some remote cave?" she asks, and I can tell in her voice that she doesn't believe that story at all.

Problem is, if she doesn't believe me, Nikolai probably doesn't either, and I need him to think that's all my trip into his territory consists of. If he thinks there's something more, something I'm not telling him, he'll shoot first and ask questions later.

I nod, and she demands, "Tell me about him, your dad."

Normally, I would never share a single thing beyond the bare bones of what could be found

online. Life is safer when you neither confirm nor deny any bit of information.

But something has changed between us with the chit-chat and banter, the wine loosening our tongues, the charge between us making me buzzy with the desire to continue our conversation at almost any cost. Talk about damn near anything or nothing at all.

I recognize the oddity of it and council myself to tread carefully, speaking in broken sentences as I pull my thoughts together.

“My dad was a workaholic of the worst kind, obsessive and passionate about his work. Often to the detriment of me and Caleb, who would go weeks without seeing him. But we had Mom, and she was better than any two parents could be. Then she was gone, and we didn’t have one remaining parent. We had none because Dad was still always gone. Jetting here, working there, and we spent our time in this big house with the nannies and staff. Grant, the house manager you met? He taught me to ride a bike, drive a car, and helped me get ready for my first date. He’s been more of a father than my own dad was, and even he kept me at arm’s length, always professional.”

I clear my throat, the emotion thick in my chest and head, and it takes me a minute to realize that Kitty

isn't saying anything.

I chance glancing at her and can see the shine of tears in her eyes. I don't want her pity so I wrangle the story back to more generic ground.

“Anyway, Dad owned the company, and I got plenty of jokes about a guy named Stone owning a gem dealership. When he died, I took over as majority owner. Caleb has a share as well. Dad kept the company small. Whether intentional or not, I don't know.”

I pause, knowing that's not quite true, and Kitty picks it up. She looks around us at the fancy house, fine china, and even down at the antique Persian rug beneath us. “He kept the company *small*? Then how'd you do all this? Should I assume he did some deals with rough men like Nikolai as well?”

I chuckle. She's smart as a whip. “Small is relative in the gem industry. We were already a large market share, but Dad controlled the contracts to keep them, and him, off the radar. It's a lot easier to do things when you don't have to file with the SEC. But I've grown it into one of the largest gemstone companies on the globe, providing stones to all the major jewelers.”

There's pride in my voice, hard-earned and rough-scrabbled success from my own decisions, my own

guidance. People may think I'm some rich brat who was handed a fully-formed company that I barely have to steer, but they couldn't be more wrong.

I was handed a roughshod shamble of a company that barely skated by on legalities and made most of its income in underhanded dealings at my Dad's leadership. And I'd spent most of my youth pointedly ignoring any business lessons he might've tried to pass along to me, running away to the military and staying away long after I was out. But I'd learned quickly and well when I took the reins.

Through my own brains, the lessons the Army taught me, and a little bit of what Dad soaked through my skin over the years, I've built a juggernaut and I'm damn proud of it.

It might still be too much information, too personal, but most of it is publicly accessible and I'm sure she's Googled me by now. I know I Googled Kitty Williamson as soon as she'd left.

Problem is . . . she doesn't exist. Well, unless she's a remarkably well-preserved seventy-two-year-old from Charlotte, North Carolina.

“Now Kitty, tell me all about you.” It's a demand, abrasive and forceful, but one I leave intentionally open-ended to see if she'll volunteer the truth.

I can see the very real flush of her cheeks, but I do wonder if her answer's going to be fake, just like everything else she's told me. Her mouth may lie easily, but she can't be feigning her body's reaction to me. I'm certain of that.

She smiles, but it's strained, and she stammers for a moment before answering. "I don't know where to start."

Her guardedness disappoints me after I shared so openly and honestly, though with a strategic ulterior motive to put her at ease. The anger our easy connection had doused returns hot and fiery in my gut at her sidestep.

I reach across to grab at her wrist, holding it tightly and pinning it to the table, knowing things are about to get bumpy and I don't want her running out of here in avoidance of the situation. Something tells me she might, and I won't let her go. Not until I get some answers.

"Why don't we start with your real name and how you got into my party when you don't work for Mostest Hostesses?"

Her eyes flare wide in shock, and then I see the fear flash through them.

*Busted, Kitty.*

# Chapter 10

## Emma

*O h, shit.*

I know my eyes are wide as saucers because I can see every hard line in the set of Nathan's mouth as he glares at me accusingly.

This is salvageable. It has to be, because if I can't save this, I'm afraid the talkative fun we've been having is going to be the last happy memory I'll ever have.

If Nathan finds out just what I'm up to, I'm afraid I'll end up like Anna, even if I'm less inclined to think he had anything to do with her death than Claire is. But I admit that my judgment is pretty clouded already with Nathan's dark magnetism, his sexy smile that borders on a smirk, and the way he makes my pulse pound with every carefully chosen word.

I force my breath to slow, adopting a calm I don't truly feel. I laugh lightly. "Did you really think women working as paid hostesses for your parties

would give their real names? I imagine each of them has a life outside of being paid entertainment, even if it's not nearly as seedy as some might perceive."

I'm hoping the small slur will get him to give me a little leeway, a slight concession so that he doesn't jump back to full-fledged anger. But his lips don't even quirk, maintaining a hard-pressed look of bare restraint.

"Fair enough. But that didn't answer my questions. What's your name, and why has Mostest Hostesses never heard of you?"

I bite my lip, trying to think. The name is an easy enough answer, but the rest is more complicated.

Nathan suddenly slams his palm against the table, the crashing sound startling me as he stands to loom over me, barking, "Tell me!"

I shrink into myself, looking at my hands in my lap, the words quiet but tumbling from my lips. "Emma Daniels. My name's Emma Daniels. I took Jessica's place because she had car trouble." It's as close to the truth as I dare get, as much as I can safely give.

If I tell him the rest, I won't leave here alive. I'm almost certain of it.

Nathan grasps my chin, lifting it to force my eyes to



his. He searches my face, lingering on my eyes so long I think he can see into my soul before finally moving toward my lips. Involuntarily, I lick them, letting them part on a breath. He bends down, in my face and in my space, and I'm not sure if he's going to kill me, yell at me, or . . .

He whispers my name, "Emma." It's more breath than sound, a pained hitch lancing through the syllables, and then he's on me.

His lips press to mine powerfully, demanding and taking. He tastes spicy and bitter like the wine, his mouth hot as he holds my chin in place, leaving me no chance to escape.

Not that I want to.

I want this. Whatever this is, whatever magic he's weaving, catching me in his web and holding me hostage. I want it all.

And he knows it as my back arches, pressing in my seat toward him, trying desperately to get closer. Just when I'm on the edge of my chair, he pulls back, leaving me wanting.

His smirk is full of cocky arrogance, his eyes alight with victory as he sits back in his chair.

He leans back, a king on his throne, and callously commands, "Tell me everything. The *truth* this

time.”

And though his demeanor would typically have me shut down immediately, knowing that he’s continuing to play me like a damn fiddle, I find that I want to tell him.

Guilt runs through me at the lies I’ve told, leaving ice in its wake. And I know that the non-truths were necessary, and I’ve shared more honesty than not, but still, the foundation is a lie, leaving the bricks crumbling where we quickly built something more.

I realize something.

He knew. From the moment I walked in this house tonight, he knew I wasn’t Kitty Williamson, wasn’t a Mostest Hostess. And yet he told me all those things about himself.

Does that make him shrewd or open? Is it strategic manipulation, underhanded maneuvering, or was it real honesty in the hope that I would return the same once he showed his hand?

I don’t know so I’m not sure how to proceed. I hear Claire in my mind, telling me to lie, stick to the script, and get the fuck out of here. Whatever I have to say to get out alive.

But I can’t quiet the hope in my heart that says

what I'm feeling for Nathan has to be real—crazy fast and scary on so many levels, including actual life and death—but potentially something big. The first small drops in a bucket that could be a torrential downpour if I'm willing to risk everything.

And I gave up sticking to the safe route years ago.

“My name is Emma Daniels. My favorite color really is yellow, and I do like Alicia Keys and muffins. That’s all the truth, and remember how I said I like *Tomb Raider*?”

He nods but is still frozen, not giving me an ounce of encouragement, but I can feel that he still expects me to divulge my every secret.

“I was a nerdy kid, spending my free time reading books about ancient civilizations, watching documentary-style stories about Greece and Rome. I liked *Tomb Raider* because Angelina Jolie was this badass brain, like I wanted to be. She was my version of a superhero, like Batman but with this huge library in her head. I majored in Ancient Civilizations and work for an archeologist, mostly doing catalog work and transcribing notes, but my favorite is the research I help him with. It’s grunt work. He’ll probably never take me into the field, but it’s like I can disappear into that world.” It’s a bit of a tumble of information but something I could

talk about for hours, days, or weeks.

Nathan's eyes narrow in suspicion, and he taps his fingers on the arm of his chair. "You're an ancient civilizations expert? That's the story you're going with? Why not go all in and just throw out that you're a fucking princess of a country I've never heard of too?" His sneer makes it obvious that he doesn't believe a word I've said.

It's a judgment I've gotten repeatedly over my life. Too pretty, too rich, too much of a woman to have a brain in my head that can hold more than silly facts about meaningless things. I guess I'd thought Nathan wouldn't be so backward in his thinking.

I adopt a fake accent and pitch my voice airhead high, adding a breathy giggle that I mockingly practiced once I started growing breasts. "Well, there is that too. Of course, I'm a princess. The only things running through my brain are designer clothes and vapid small talk about how *totes adorbs* I am. Like, oh my gawd, if you saw my little fur baby, Snuggles, he's just so epically amazeballs. Maybe you can tell me about the pretty, sparkly things you sell? What are they called again? Oh, yeah, diamonds."

I roll my eyes, finishing the melodramatic rant with a sigh. "Yeah, I lied to you, Nathan. But don't doubt my brains or my education. I worked hard for

both.”

His head lifts, and I wonder how often people talk to him like that. Well, his brother is pretty cavalier. Caleb looks like the kind to tell the Queen of England to fuck off if he felt the urge to.

“Fine, you’re right. It’s not like I’m a genius, but I do actually run a large company, not just tell people that I do.”

“And I do actually have a degree and work for an archeologist. My special area of focus is artifacts. You want to test me?” I offer as a dare. “Drag out one of your vases and I can not only tell you if you have a real Ming or just some knockoff, but I can tell you what century and maybe even what region of China it came from.”

That’s a bit of a brag, but Nathan has my fire up. Still, he studies me for a moment then hums. “No Mings here. Tell me about the Koh-i-Noor diamond instead,” he challenges.

I laugh, almost in relief. “Of course, you’d want to know about a gemstone.”

He shrugs and looks around his palatial dining room. “Well, I could ask about something else, but I wouldn’t know if you were telling the truth, would I? But I grew up with a dad who loved everything

about diamonds and listened to him drone on about them any chance he got. So if you make shit up about the Koh-i-Noor, I'll know it."

The threat hangs heavily between us, and I clear my throat, taking a sip of water.

I begin as if reading from a textbook, the words coming to me easily. "Koh-i-Noor is Persian for 'Mountain of Light', and the Koh-i-Noor diamond is a large piece, over one hundred carats in size. It was found in India, but between the various squabbles in the area, it passed through many hands before it fell into Britain's, where it became one of the Crown Jewels. It's currently showcased in the Tower of London, though both India and Pakistan want it back."

I stop when I see the look on his face. He's impressed, though the info is the barest of touchpoints on the drama-filled history of the stone. "Satisfied?"

His lips purse. "Maybe. Tell me more about you."

Deciding I must've passed that test, I move on, offering more. "When I was in college, I found a new love. The stage. I started acting, becoming someone different with every role. I did university productions every semester, and when I graduated, coming to New York City seemed like the best

opportunity. I'm actually starring in my first barely-off-Broadway play now." It's a brag but one that's well-earned from years of paying my dues and working my ass off.

He interrupts, the suspicion coming back to his gaze. "An actress?"

"An actress and an archeology assistant," I correct him. "A weird combination, I know, but somehow, it works for me."

I pause, a thought occurring to me for the first time. "I think I just disappear into both roles, into the past and into someone else. I never have to just be . . . me."

My breath stutters, that idea resonating deep inside and taking root. I thought I'd been growing, blooming where I was planted like some cheesy home décor plaque, but what if instead, I'm just a seed on the wind, blowing this way and that, always trying to find some semblance of steadiness to be myself?

It's a dark thought, cutting to my core. But now's not the time to delve into that clusterfuck. Maybe later, when I'm alone and can pry at the edges without an audience to see me analyze my own weird psyche.

For now, I need to focus because Nathan is looking at me like I just bared my soul. Maybe I did.

Almost as if he can sense my desire to leave the subject alone, he dissects the answer with surgical precision. “What’s wrong with being you?”

“Dangerous question. I could go on and on, but the real truth is, probably nothing. Just not that sweet little princess people expect me to be.” I throw his own words back at him, wanting him to know that they hurt.

He grins a small smile and lets it drop for now. “Touché. I’d bet you’re nothing like people expect in a lot of ways.” This time, it sounds like a compliment, and I flush with heat.

The moment freezes, and though I’m fully dressed, I feel completely naked when his eyes lock on mine. He reaches out, slipping a lock of hair behind my ear and then placing his hand firmly on the back of my neck to pull me toward him.

I think he’s going to kiss me, but at the last moment, with my lips already parted in anticipation, he veers to the side and whispers hotly in my ear,

“Emma Daniels, I think you are exactly who and what you are supposed to be.”



My name on his lips makes my body purr, but the reassurance is something I didn't realize I needed.

His pulls back and then, finally, his lips touch mine. He's gentle this time, hesitant like he's getting to know me for the first time. Maybe he is now that there's more truth between us.

I kiss him back, just as softly, wanting to know his truths too. All of them.

Not for Claire and not for Anna. For me.

Which is a scary thought, and so wrong when there are questions looming over him about what part he played in Anna's death.

His hands slip to my jaw, cupping my face as his fingers delve into my hair.

"I'd like to see you tomorrow."

It's not a question but an order. And with the doubts flashing through my mind, I know I need to back away from this.

For my own safety. For Nathan's too.

Because I can already feel that I'm torn between wanting to know the truth for Claire and hoping I can just pretend nothing bad had ever happened in Nathan's past. Maybe, killer or not, he can just be someone else for me. The same way I am someone

else on stage.

“I can’t,” I rasp reluctantly, my voice thick with desire and torn with hurt at the denial, not just for him but for me. “I have work and rehearsals. I’m not just at your beck and call whenever you want a date. Maybe call Mostest Hostesses if you need someone to accompany you somewhere?”

It’s a rude thing to say, especially when the smart thing to do would be to never mention Mostest Hostesses again. But it serves my purpose, driving a jagged wedge between us.

His voice is icy and hard, dominance laced through it like a drug. “It wasn’t a request, Emma.” He shakes his head, trying again. “This dinner with Nikolai is still coming, and we need to be prepared. We made some good progress tonight, but this could be dire for both of us. Failure simply isn’t an option.”

I hate it, but he’s right.

I nod, agreeing.

Though I don’t know who I’m doing it for.

# Chapter 11

## Carly

I haven't seen him in almost a week. Not at Strega's, not at my shows, not even around town. I considered that maybe he'd moved on. Transient tourists in Europe aren't unusual, though Kyle definitely isn't the typical tourist.

But walking the market tonight, I see his hulking form ahead of me. He hasn't seen me yet, and I take advantage, following him along the short aisles, watching him as he studies the loaves of bread like they hold the secrets of the universe.

Maybe they do. The best time to get bread is early in the morning, when you can normally grab a pastry along with your daily loaf, but later on, you can find wisdom in the scraps that are left over. It's almost philosophical, if I were into baking, but I'm more about eating the daily deliciousness.

The crowds part for him though he seems almost unaware of the stares his very presence brings. His height is unusual, but based on the wide-eyed looks from those around him, they're more conscious of

the dark aura around him. Ironically, the thing that puts them off is the very thing that draws me to him.

I get closer and closer, curious to see if he'll notice me, if he'll sense my presence the same way I'm aware of his. Twice, I think he sees me, but then he turns around and continues through the market.

Eventually, I can't hold myself back and I approach him when he pauses to check out some wooden carvings. I slide up next to him, bumping him with my shoulder.

“Hey.”

He looks down at me with a smirk, setting a wooden spoon back on the stall table. “Took you long enough.”

I pout playfully, trying to look hurt. “You knew I was following you? I thought I was being sneaky!”

He shakes his head and keeps browsing the woodwork. “Not sneaky at all. You might be good at karate, but you're no ninja,” he deadpans.

“Then why didn't you say something, Kyle?” I ask, a little hurt that he ignored me.

He doesn't answer that, instead focusing on the tidbit I let drop. “Found out my name, huh?”

It's a grunt, an accusation, but I don't let it hurt me.

“Yep, Strega's got a big mouth. It'd do you good to remember that,” I advise. “You sneeze, and she'll call half a dozen doctors for you before you pay for your cappuccino.”

He chuckles, but his returning threat holds more danger. “I think I'll tell her you said that next time I stop in for coffee.”

My jaw drops, and I can't help it, I punch him lightly in a rock-hard arm. “You wouldn't! Please, don't tell her I said that. Trust me, she's well aware that she's the world's worst gossip, but she'd be devastated if she found out I was telling people that!”

His brow furrows, and he actually looks confused. “That makes no sense. She'd be upset people were gossiping about her when she's a big gossip?”

I shrug. I guess for all of his toughness, Kyle doesn't quite understand the fairer sex. “Women's prerogative. We're all a little crazy here.”

He blinks like that's the craziest thing he's ever heard, and I rush to fill the silent space before he leaves again. “So, what are you doing wandering the market? Anything in particular you're looking for? Maybe I can help you shop.”

“No, getting some kitchen staples,” he says, lifting a paper bag at his side. “Just grabbing bread and I’m done.”

It’s a dismissal if ever I’ve heard one, but I’m not one for listening to things I don’t want to hear. Maybe it’s from years of tuning out my parents, but I readily tune out his easy rejection of my offer to help. “Good, then let’s grab a loaf of the crustiest, flakiest, yummiest bread in the market, made by a baker I happen to know. And then I’ll make you dinner. I’m quite the cook, and with a good carb haze rushing through your system, you’ll think I’m Gordon Ramsey! Fookin’ brilliant!” My impression isn’t that great, but I figure it’s worth a grin at least.

I realize after I’ve said it that I just asked him out, or well, asked him in? But I don’t care. I’m a big girl and can do scary things like that. Even if it was slightly unintentional. My heart whispers to my mind . . . *unintentional on your part, but I know exactly what I’m doing.*

Shock dots Kyle’s eyes for a moment before he shuts down, shaking his head. “No. Thank you, but I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

But now I’m like a dog with a bone. I argue back, “Did you hear a question from me? Because I didn’t ask one. We both need to eat, and it’s good manners to dine together. Very Italian, you know.” I

wink obnoxiously. “I’ll be gracious and allow you one choice—your place or Strega’s. She lets me borrow her kitchen sometimes, desperate times calling for desperate measures and all. Only possible deal-breaker there is that she will definitely eat with us and let her gossipy desires run wild as she asks you questions.”

“Inviting yourself to my place?” he growls.

I hadn’t quite thought that through before the offer jumped out of my mouth, but now that it’s out there, I want to go to his place badly. Not for anything sexy, although I wouldn’t be averse, but I don’t think he’s remotely in a mental place for that. But I’d like to just see his space, get to know him by seeing what books he has, what music he plays, hell, what his bed looks like, even if it’s not for sexy times.

“Well, you already know I stay at a hostel so that’s no good, unless you like shared kitchen spaces and a swarm of people crowding in to share noodles. I’m guessing you’ve got something a little less public considering” —I wave my hands around, gesturing to his frowning face— “you.”

“I don’t like people. Why won’t you just leave me alone?” He seems genuinely confused by my continued attempts to engage him.

“Look, you’re grumpy and violent, I get that. It’s probably enough to put off most folks, but in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not most folks. It’s like you’re a caged animal, fighting against the bars you’ve surrounded yourself with, but when someone opens the cage, you fight back from freedom too, because it’s scary as fuck,” I explain, keeping my voice low but calm, hopeful, and confident. “I’ve been there, done that, got the T-shirt and letter that I was disowned. It was hard and it fucking hurt. So when I see someone else going through something similar, I just want to help. Maybe that’s stupid, but I don’t think so. And it doesn’t mean you can’t do it on your own. It just means that sometimes when you’re laser-focused on getting out the muck, it’s nice to just have dinner with a friendly face. And it just so happens that I’ve got one of those.”

I smile big and wide, framing my face with my hands dramatically to soften the truth bomb I just dropped on him. “So, dinner at your place?”

I can see him struggling, wanting to tell me I’m wrong and to mind my own business and on the cusp of refusing my dinner offer. But then he gives in. “This is not a date. I don’t date. Ever.”

The words are grunted, more caveman than eloquent. But all I hear is him agreeing to let me



come over for dinner. And though I'd half-expected my armchair psychology to shut him down, it actually worked, which tells me that maybe he's not as put off by me as he'd like me to believe. But I'm not pushing him any further, not right now.

“Nobody asked you out, Grumpy Gus. I just want dinner without a whole hostel of people trying to scrounge my noodles.” I smile, though we both know I'm lying.

I want to have dinner with him. Not a date. That's fine by me too because I'm not looking for anything romantic either, but I want to just be with him, peel at his layers and find out what's buried underneath the stoic façade.

Because it is a façade. He's cold, rock-solid and powerful on the outside, but there's pain, passion, and life below the surface. I know the look, and I want to dig in and test it. Maybe test him and myself too.

“Fine. Dinner.”

It feels like a win.

Kyle

She crooks a finger at me, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. “Follow me to the best bread in all of

Italy.”

She sounds like a cheesy tour guide, but her antics tickle at something deep inside me that used to enjoy silliness.

Of course, that part of me died long ago. Even before Anna. It died when I saw just how bad people can be, like rotten fruit that spreads and feeds on the goodness in the world.

What’s replaced it is dark and pretty rotten itself. I shouldn’t spoil Carly’s innocent luminance with my foul and unworthy self.

But I follow her.

She waves and chats with vendors throughout the market like they’re old friends. Hell, maybe they are, I don’t know, but I don’t think she’s been in Europe all that long. Her accent and word choices are still American.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

She blinks, pausing next to a fruit stand. “In Europe or Italy?” But she doesn’t wait for me to answer, instead launching into a story. “Came after I graduated high school. Guess it’s been a little over a year now.”

I choke a bit and cover it with a cough, praying I

didn't just wander into trouble. "You're a fucking teenager?"

She smirks, amused that I'm bothered by her age. "No, I didn't come *immediately* after school, doofus. I'm twenty-two. How old are you, anyway?" She looks me up and down and I wonder what she sees.

"Thirty."

She lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug, unconcerned. "Not so much about the numbers. More about the life. I've met kids with old souls and elderly folks with young spirits."

She stops at a bread stand, picking a loaf and complimenting the dark-haired vendor on his selection today. "I hate that I missed the honey-crusted *cornetti* though. Maybe save me just one tomorrow? I'll be by before I head to work, I pinkie promise."

Her request is kind, not syrupy, and to my surprise, he nods, telling her he'll save her one. Italian bakers are not known for their patience.

As we walk away, I stop.

She turns back to me, eyes questioning. "How do you do that? Why do you do that?"

Her brow furrows. “Do what?”

“Just . . . that.” I point back to the bread vendor who’s watching us with a smile.

No, not us. Her. Watching *her* with a smile. I snarl at him, and he jumps, turning away, but I hear Carly’s laughter, tinkling and bright in the evening air.

“Mostly by not doing that. I just talk to people, smile, and be friendly, you know? I’m alone in a foreign country, have been in one of those cages I told you about for far too long, and now I want to experience . . . everything. So, I talk to people. It’s not rocket science.”

She smiles and starts walking again. And just like everyone else in the market, like everyone who sees her . . . I can’t help but follow.

It may not be rocket science, but I think it’s fucking magic. I shouldn’t want to be near her, should be running the other way as fast as my legs can carry me, but she’s magnetic, weaving some witchy magic that I can’t help but respond to.

Too soon, or not soon enough, I’m not sure, we come to my small apartment without my even realizing I’d led her here, and she calmly invites herself in. It’s stark and empty, more of a pitstop

than a home. She makes a cursory glance around and says nothing before heading straight to the kitchenette. Pulling the supplies we'd gathered out of the paper bag, she makes herself at home and gets to work.

Not knowing what to do with myself, I sit in one of the two chairs at the eat-in kitchen table and watch her for a moment. Her dark hair swishes as she moves, catching the dull light of the bare bulb and turning it into caramel. She's humming to herself, talking to the food like it'll respond.

"Oh, yeah, going to be so good!" she whispers to the pot as she stirs something I can't see but smells delicious. She moves efficiently, reminding me of her sidewalk performance act, graceful but crisp.

The space is so small, she barely needs to take even a step, but I'm still entranced, my throat going dry as her hips sway back and forth in a fetching rhythm, powered by some internal beat that makes my own pulse start to keep time with her.

"Tell me about your cage," I suddenly blurt out to keep my mind from going places it's not quite comfortable going yet. It's a bit out of nowhere, but she doesn't miss a beat, knowing that I'm returning to our earlier conversation.

"I grew up with parents who had certain rules and

expectations,” she says, her hips not stopping at all and still drawing plenty of my attention. “Lots of them. Do this, don’t do that. Be this, don’t be that. It was kind of like being a Barbie doll they played with. It was a pretty life. It’s not like they were beating me or locking me in closets. And on the surface, I mean . . . I had material things that most kids could only dream about. But I was trapped inside a cage nevertheless, just a golden one. It all came to a head shortly after high school.”

She disappears into the past, her eyes glazing as she stirs the pasta on the stove.

“What happened, Carly?” Her name tastes bittersweet on my lips. I don’t like it, but I don’t *not* like it either. Or more specifically, I don’t like the fact that I want to say it more, to growl it as those hips of hers do things that have my cock stirring in my pants.

I sit back, crossing my arms over my chest, needing to fortify the wall between us, praying for a little more control.

Her shrug is heavy, and her voice drops a noticeable amount. “Robert Gunze the *Second* happened.” She draws out the suffix and says it like the name should mean something to me, but it doesn’t, so I wait her out. “His dad and my dad worked out . . . a deal, I guess you’d call it, to

connect our families. All of a sudden, I was engaged to Robert and planning for a wedding with a guy I didn't even know."

"Like an arranged marriage?" I ask, my brows lifting. "Your parents do know this is the twenty-first century, right?"

She smiles, but it's sad. "For some of us, and not for others. But it was all I knew, all I'd grown up with, and it didn't occur to me to say no. So there I was, planning a wedding, and we're dating. It was all very *nice*."

"I'm guessing there's a 'but' in the story," I prompt, curiosity growing. I don't like the idea of her being married to someone—not someone *else* because that would imply that I want to marry her. And I'm definitely not interested in her that way. Not at all.

*Definitely not interested in matrimony, my traitorous cock says, but other things could be considered.*

Still, it calms down enough to let me listen to what Carly has to say, like it's somehow important to me.

"But then it wasn't. Robert was a bit of a douchebag. Monied, entitled, a brat type who'd never had to work for anything. I was too, to some degree, but I wasn't like him. I had morals, dreams,

and plans for life after I got away from my parents. I thought it was going to be better. But Robert had a cage too, although his is like a soulless black hole. And he wanted to force me into it, make me fit the mold of who he wanted me to be. It was ugly and painful. I knew if I married him, I'd be locked away into that life forever.”

Her words are soft, and I don't think she realizes that she touched her cheek carefully when she talked about how painful it'd been. She might not have said it, but I can tell a bit of what she went through. It makes me respect the bright, open star she is now even more because I know how hard she worked for it and how easy it would've been to let the assholes in her past snuff her out.

“I'm sorry.” The words are useless and I know it, having had them said to me dozens of times. But I repeat them for the same reason, simply not knowing what else to say.

She waves her hands, like she's clearing the air of the moroseness of her past, and I see her will a smile to appear on her Cupid's bow mouth. “Past is past, and if it hadn't been that bad, I wouldn't be here.”

Here. In my apartment. Cooking me dinner.

A wave of warning rushes through me, but I try to



swallow the panic down.

Just dinner. Not a date. She's not Anna.

She plates the pasta, sliding a piece of the promised bread smeared with olive oil onto each of them before setting them down. "Voila!"

As she turns around to grab the bottle of wine and the plastic cups that are all I have, I grimace. Plastic cups, like my plastic life. Nothing real, nothing substantial, nothing pretty. Not anymore.

It's like a dark cloud over the whole evening.

She sits down, unaware of my change in mood. "Dig in."

I robotically take a bite, chewing though I don't taste a thing. "It's good," I say, more out of habit than manners. Honestly, it could be cardboard and ketchup, the way my mood's suddenly darkened.

"Now you. Your turn," she says, forking an obscenely large mouthful of pasta into her open mouth.

"What?" I ask, a little awed and a little grossed out.

"I just told you like, basically my life story, though I left out some of the juicier parts," she prods, grinning. "Your turn. This is reciprocal here, man. Give me something, anything. A tiny nugget at

least. Or you won't get this bread."

She grabs at the slice on my plate playfully. "And trust me, you *want* this bread."

And suddenly, this feels all too domestic. The two of us, her cooking us dinner, the conversation, though that hasn't exactly been comfortable.

But I have been. Comfortable with her. *Carly*.

Guilt slashes through me painfully as my eyes burn. It should've been like this with Anna. Shopping at the market, making dinner, and eating together before retiring to our bed. Anna had never been in this apartment, but I can see her image superimposed over the snapshots in my head of Carly moving about in the kitchen. The two women are nothing alike, but somehow, both draw me to them.

"Kyle?" Carly asks, her mouth full of another big bite. "Everything okay?"

I push my chair back, the legs scraping on the floor as I stand. "You need to go."

She sputters. "What?" She swallows thickly, trying again. "I was just teasing. Keep the bread, keep your story. What the hell?" She laughs awkwardly.

"I can't. I'm sorry. You need to leave." I cross my

arms again, rebuilding the wall I hadn't even realized had been crumbling.

Confusion mars her face, and I can see her search my face and scan my body, looking for some clue about what the fuck has set me off.

She doesn't find the answer, but she must see something in me that she recognizes. "Okay, I got ahead of myself. Too much digging, too fast. I can relate. I'm sorry for prying."

She stands carefully, like she's afraid I'm about to snap. Considering she's seen me nearly kill Raul, that's a reasonable concern. She still grabs the bread with a smirk. "But I am taking this."

She's manipulating me, softening the situation because we both know I'm overreacting. But I can't stop it, can't change it.

She picks up her bag from the floor by the door where she'd dropped it when we came in and steps into the hall. She turns back to me, still smiling somehow despite how weird I've suddenly gotten.

"If you need anything, or just want to talk, or want to *not* talk, I'll be at Strega's or the Ponte Vecchio. Or you can call me." She scribbles her number on a piece of paper from her bag and hands it to me.

She gives me a sad smile. "Thanks for tonight."

Sorry again if I pried too much.”

I nod once and shut the door, putting my forehead to the wood as I close my eyes and take a deep breath. The words force their way to air, choked and painful. “Her name was Anna. She’s dead.”

It’s more a reminder to myself than anything. My purpose is set, my plans made, all from one act that changed everything.

Shame floods my heart as I silently apologize to Anna again for not saving her.

In the morning, there’s a single slice of bread in the hallway with a huge bite taken out of the corner.  
*Carly.*

# Chapter 12

## Nathan

“So, how was your date with the hostess with the mostest?” Caleb asks, a grin visible even from behind his coffee cup. “She feeling the stupidity of wrong place, wrong time yet?”

“It wasn’t a date,” I say, though the truth echoes in my head that there was certainly more than a business meeting happening between me and Emma.

*Emma.*

Shit. I’m going to have to tell Caleb more of the details. I don’t keep secrets from him. It’s always been me and him, us having each other’s back even when it was sketchy as fuck.

His dimpled grin and raised brows make him look like the mischievous kid he always was, and I remember the time he’d been ‘seeing’ the head cheerleader at our private high school.

Normally, that wouldn’t have been a problem. Cute guy, popular girl. Unfortunately, the cheerleader’s

boyfriend hadn't felt the same way.

*Busting into the near-empty classroom long after the last bell rang, I barely have time to get the words out, knowing all hell's about to break loose.*

*"Goddammit, Caleb. Get it in your fucking pants," I whisper-yell. Two pairs of eyes flash to mine in shock. His . . . murderous at the interruption. Hers . . . embarrassed. Maddy hops up from her knees, swiping at her puffy lips, her lipstick smeared messily.*

*"What the fuck, dude?" Caleb asks, tucking himself away. He's not embarrassed, just pissed that I've interrupted what I think might be his first blowjob. "Can't you at least knock and give some warning?"*

*"Bryce is looking all over the fucking school for you. And her. Seems one of you has a big mouth about your little rendezvous. I can guess who."*

*Caleb looks to Maddy, who flushes bright red. "I only told Jordyn I thought you were hot. She must've figured something out."*

*Caleb looks pissed but says nothing. Firmly, I take Maddy's arm, shoving her toward the desk as I hear a yell down the hall.*

*"Get under that desk and keep your fucking mouth*

*shut for a change. If Bryce figures out what's going on in here, someone's getting in a fuckton of trouble. Newsflash, it won't be me and Caleb," I tell her directly, pointing at myself and then my brother.*

*Fire flashes in her eyes for an instant, but then she realizes I'm telling the truth. Caleb and I can lie our way through whatever shit show might ensue and come out the other side with each other as alibis. Worse comes to worse, we have each other's back in a throwdown as well. And two against one doesn't bode well for her boyfriend.*

*In any scenario, she'll be left standing in the cold, marked as either a liar or a slut. Bryce would never want anything to do with her again either way, and her standing in our school hierarchy would be fucked. Something she cares about but Caleb and I could give a rat's ass about. Her future is in her hands, or in her ability to keep quiet for a solid sixty seconds.*

*Angrily, she drops to her knees again, crawling under the desk and miming locking her lips with a key as she glares. Caleb nods once, his thanks unspoken but heard all the same.*

*"Now what?" he asks.*

*But the door opens, Bryce barreling in, sweaty*

*from practice and red with anger. Thank fuck Caleb has his dick in his pants already. I take a lesson from Dad's rulebook and go on the offensive, not letting Bryce get a word in edgewise.*

*"Hey, Rogerson! We were just talking about you and the team. I've got a hundred bucks on this week's game. You're gonna make us all winners, right?"*

*My face is a mask of congeniality, like we're way-back friends. I offer up a high-five, still rambling distractingly. "Saw your practice on Monday. Those throws are laser-precise, man."*

*The confusion is lessening his fury in increments and he mindlessly returns the high-five. "Uh, thanks. I'm looking for Maddy, have you seen her?"*

*The question is directed to Caleb, who thankfully has a poker face. "Who? Oh, is that your girlfriend? Cheerleader, yeah?" His act could win a fucking Oscar nomination.*

*Bryce nods. "Yeah, I heard she was hooking up with you." The anger is building in his tone again.*

*Caleb laughs like that's the funniest shit he's ever heard. "Seriously, man? Hell, thanks for the compliment, I guess."*



*Bryce grunts. “Huh?”*

*“So, you think a senior Varsity head cheerleader who’s dating the best quarterback this school has seen in a decade is hanging out with a sophomore?” Caleb explains. “Shiiit. No offense, man, but I wish. Shit like that doesn’t happen outside of movies, you know?”*

*He claps Bryce on the shoulder, and I can see the puzzle pieces clicking into place. The desire to not believe is quickly overriding whatever gossip he’s heard.*

*As Caleb leads Bryce out of the room, I glance back to see Maddy poking her head out from under the desk. Very clearly, I mouth out, “Stay away from my brother.”*

*Her nod is enough answer. Bullet dodged.*

At least it had been that time, I think as I come out of the memory. But Caleb and I have been through a lot of shady shit, both with women and with missions.

But the one constant? Each other.

“Caleb, I need to talk to you about something,” I broach carefully.

But he knows me, knows that tone and can read me

like a fucking Dr. Seuss book. Easily.

“Spill it.”

“So, between the party and the *date*,” I say, giving in because semantics are the least of our issues right now, “I did some digging. Something felt off about Kitty’s explanation, so I looked into her.”

He points at me, finding a chair and sitting down. One ankle rests on his other knee, the epitome of chill, but I know he’s fully engaged. “Smart. What’d you find?”

I sigh. “There is no Kitty Williamson with Mostest Hostesses. Dug all around, and nada, so I called her on it last night.”

Caleb sputters, out of his chair almost as fast as he’d gotten into it. “Dayum, right for the throat. What’d she say?”

“She said it was a pseudonym for the job and that she was covering for a girl who had car trouble.”

His eyes narrow, and I can see the wheels turning in his mind. “You believe her? Or want me to do some more digging?”

His words seem off-hand, but the double-meaning of whether I want him to investigate or actually dig a hole for her is intentional and slick. It’s one of the

things he's so good at, even if we've both left the grittier side of our mercenary work behind in favor of more above-board actions for the company. I wonder if Caleb misses living in the dark a bit, though, even if he does still do some grey area gigs for us.

"I've got it," I tell him decisively, not wanting to allow for any miscommunication where Emma is concerned. "We talked . . . a lot. Her real name is Emma. She's an actress and works as an assistant to an archeologist at NYU."

Caleb's lips curl. "How convenient. Lara Croft just happens to drop by our party."

I nod. "I know. She even admitted the combo was unusual and that *Tomb Raider* is her favorite movie." I let the acknowledgement marinate for a beat. "But I tested her and her knowledge seemed genuine. We're going out again today, more prep for the dinner with Nikolai, and I confess, I want to challenge her story more."

Caleb sets his coffee cup on the edge of my desk, leaning forward and staring into my eyes. "Why? Why not just wash your hands of her? Go to the dinner with Nikolai, or fuck, cancel the whole thing. Maybe this is a sign, a complication you need to be paying attention to."

Though I try to stay stoic, he sees the truth.

“You fucking like her!”

He begins pacing the room. “Goddammit, Nathan. First, the whole obsession with Dad’s papers, his maps and fairy tales. Then, you’re working with the Russians to fulfill Dad’s last mission, like it’s his dying wish. And now, some skirt has you following along like a fucking hungry dog on a leash. What the hell is going on? This isn’t like you, man. You’re always solid, tight. But you’re pussying out on me, and we can’t afford that now that you’re a big-shot businessman! Why can’t you just run the damn company and call it good?”

The accusation stings. It’s not like I wanted to give up the hard life, trade in my combat boots and M4 for a suit and laptop. The truth is, I’d rather be doing what Caleb is, wearing tank tops and getting my hands dirty still . . . but we all have duties.

“I’m not going fucking soft! But yes, I like her. There’s something about her that intrigues me.”

Caleb laughs darkly. “That’s why they call them honey pots. Her job is to entice you, whether that’s as a hostess or just as a fucking woman who sees a fat wallet. Seems like someone pretty smart told me that once.” He raises a brow, throwing my own words back at me. “But she’s not even the problem,

just a symptom. Nathan, this is about Dad. And you and me. We've got a good thing going here now. Why can't you just walk away from the whole damn thing about Dad's diamond?"

I shake my head, wishing I could explain this in a way Caleb would understand and accept. "I can't do that. I need to see this through."

Caleb shakes his head too, mirroring me in so many ways but on the other side of the field this time. It's uncomfortable, for us both, I suspect. "Dad thought he was some Indiana Jones come to life. Always chasing adventure and some treasure that probably didn't even exist. He lived in maps and history. Why do this for a Dad you didn't care about and who didn't care for us? I don't get it. Just let it go. All of it."

He plops into the chair, looking as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders.

But it's not. The responsibility is on my head. Always has been. To keep me and Caleb on the right path and out of trouble, to look out for us both. And just like when we were kids and I tucked him back in bed after a nightmare, I'm still the one looking out for us.

"I need to see what was more important than we were. Hold it in my hand, crush it, and destroy it.

And yes, I do feel some call to avenge him, but I need to see this through. Not for him, not really. But for us. I couldn't handle it if whatever led to his death came back to haunt us and got us—got *you*—hurt or worse. I need answers, and the only way to get them is to follow through with this.”

He sighs deeply. “I don't want to lose you too, Nathan. Losing Dad sucked, but I didn't really even know him. My childhood? I remember you. Grant some too, since he was always around, fussing about dinner and school. But mostly . . . you raised me, taught me what to do and not do, and made sure that I didn't end up a total asshole. Whatever shit Dad got mixed up in, I wish you'd stay far away from it.”

I can hear the brotherly love in Caleb's words, and I wish I could give him the peace he's seeking. “I hear you. And I promise to be careful. But this is me protecting you, and myself, and maybe even our company. We'll do this the same way we've done everything else, together, side by side. I've got your back and you've got mine.”

“And the girl? Emma?” Caleb asks, a smirk on his face that lets me know he's moving past the heavy shit for the moment and easing back to some brotherly teasing. “Do I get to have her back too? You can have the front,” he says, like it's a

concession. “Or do you want the old-fashioned spit roast?”

I growl, but it’s jokingly. “Fuck no. You’re my brother, but I’m not into that sharing shit.”

He laughs. “I don’t know. She seemed to jump right into the kinky shit at the party. Maybe she’d be into it?”

“No,” I say tersely. “She’s all mine.”

I mean it to sound salacious, but it comes out a bit more genuine than I’d intended. And possessive.

Caleb’s smile falters for a split second, but he recovers. “Just be careful, Nathan. With Nikolai and with Emma. I’m not sure which of them has you more by the balls. Enjoy your . . . *date*.”

“I hear you. And I will . . . be careful *and* enjoy it,” I tell him with a grin.



\* \* \*

My promise is still on my mind when my driver pulls up to the front steps of the MOMA. Out of habit, I scan the crowd of tourists, looking for outliers and analyzing threats.

But then I see her and everything else disappears.

Emma is standing near one of the columns, her blonde hair long and sunny against the yellow of her dress.

A smile curves my lips. Yellow, not canary, but buttery and soft. And I wonder if she wore her favorite color as a sort of armor for our date. A buzz of amusement hits me at the thought. Maybe she is just as affected by me as I am by her.

I climb out of the car, telling the driver, “I’ll call when we’re ready to be picked up.”

I assume he responds, but my attention is focused solely on Emma. I catch the instant she sees me, the look in her eyes changing from one of anticipation to one of excitement as she watches me climb the steps toward her.

“Hi,” she says demurely, but I know better. She’s not shy. She’s steel and fire covered in satin. And for the next few hours, she’s mine.

“Hello,” I say, taking her hand and planting a kiss to the back of it like I’m a gentleman, though we both know I’m not. “You look lovely.”

“Thank you. You look handsome too,” she says, looking me up and down. I came straight from the office, but my standard custom suit and silk tie seemed reasonable and I’d barely given them a



second thought. But now I'm curious what she sees as she looks at me. When her tongue peeks out to wet her lips, the flash of pink makes me want to chase it with my own mouth.

I offer her my elbow, my eyes barely flicking toward the entrance. "Shall we?"

Though she slips her hand around my bicep, she argues, "I was sure this was when you said to meet, but the museum is already closed." She gestures to the crowds continuing to pour out the main door.

My answering smirk makes her pause.

"What did you do?" she asks, surprise giving way to suspicion.

I lead her to the side, away from the central door, saying nothing to give away my little surprise. Instead, I leave that to the uniformed guard, who tips his hat as we approach. "Mr. Stone, right this way with your guest, please."

Emma's eyes are wide, her grip tight on my arm as she mouths, "Oh, my God!" But she follows my lead as we head into the museum.

The lights are softer, only half on in the hallways though the spotlights shine on the collection of items. The quiet is complete, our steps echoing around us.

It feels like a spell, like a dream. I suspect that for Emma, it may well be.

Her sass and fire are snuffed, overtaken by childlike giddiness as she lets go of my arm to rush from display to display. She tells me trivia facts about each item, information I suspect is well beyond what the plaques on the wall describe because she seems to be pulling from the library inside her mind.

Honestly, I barely hear the words because her beauty and excitement are enthralling.

We walk together, experiencing the museum in a way no one ever has before. Not because it's after hours and magical but because it's the two of us. Most women I've dated since taking over the family business have expected fancy cars, expensive restaurants, and paparazzi-dotted red carpets.

But not Emma. She wants none of that, just the opportunity to explore past civilizations and old art with me by her side. It's refreshing and makes me want her that much more.

“The monolithic art of the fifth century brought a whole new—”

Her words falter as she realizes I'm staring openly

at her. The heat burning through my body from seeing her has only intensified as she's passionately spoken nearly non-stop. Her intelligence is even sexier than her shapely body.

"What?" she asks, not privy to the train of my thoughts.

"You are captivating." I move closer, cupping her cheek in my palm and tracing along her cheekbone with my thumb.

One side of her mouth tilts upward, not quite giving into the smile, but her delight is palpable in the inches of space between us. "You are rather fascinating yourself, sir."

Her play with calling me sir like she did with Nikolai is both a reminder of just what's at stake and how far we're both willing to go.

I pull her to me, catching her weight against my own as I press our bodies together and grip her other cheek, cradling her face in my palms. Her lips part, letting me know she feels the same way I do.

I don't hold back, no softness or mercy given. I simply take her, roughly and savagely. As our lips press, our teeth clack once, but I still need more. I shove my tongue into her mouth, wanting to taste her, needing to devour her. She gives as good as

she's getting, rising up to her toes to gain better access and gripping my lapels for leverage.

Heat builds between us as her moan echoes through the quiet room. I'm one kiss away from bending her over the nearest bench and flipping her dress over her ass to get at her pussy when I hear footsteps. They're far away, but they're close enough that I won't risk it. I won't chance someone else, even a paid off security guard, seeing her that way.

Despite the public display at the party, I was telling the truth when I said I prefer privacy. I want her sounds, her passion, her complete submission to whatever this is between us to be mine and mine alone. Her pussy, her orgasms, her pleasure, I selfishly want them all.

So I pull back, breaths heaving, still sharing air between us. "We should go."

Emma nods, biting her lip, and I know that if I took her back to my home right now, I could have her.

But I will always wonder. As much as I can feel that she wants me, I don't want this to happen with Nikolai's threat hanging over us. I want it to be just the two of us when I slip inside her. Because I *am* going to fuck her, hard and raw and powerfully.

So, as painful as it is for us both, I have the driver

head to her apartment and force myself to stay in the car, not trusting myself to even walk her to her door. Her promise of “Dinner, tomorrow night,” echoes in my ears as I head home.

Alone.

# Chapter 13

## Emma

Stepping outside, I see that Nathan didn't use a driver for tonight. Instead, his Jaguar is parked by the curb and he's leaning against the front fender, watching me with total desire as I approach. It's like a car commercial if you skip the backdrop my neighborhood offers. My block's not ghetto by any stretch, but it's also not Nathan's kind of fancy.

The sleek black car suits him, aggressive but refined, befitting the manufacturer's name. He holds the door open for me and my breath catches as he sweeps around the front, highlighted by the headlights like a freaking model.

How did I end up here? And with him?

The rhetorical question resonates in my mind, reminding me that though I'm powerfully drawn to Nathan, there's so much I don't know. And even more that *he* doesn't know.

The ride is quiet at first, the radio playing RnB softly, but both of us are lost in our thoughts. I'm

nervous about tonight. Not because of Nathan but because of Nikolai.

Like Claire said, Nikolai is the impulsive one, a loose cannon who might decide that whatever I did or didn't hear at the party is reason enough to kill me, regardless of Nathan's vouching for me.

Why did I agree to pose as a hostess for a party attended by Russian mob bosses again? Claire's pleading face floats through my mind to remind me. Even with the potential for danger, I'd do anything for her. Well, almost anything, since she also begged me to skip tonight. But I just couldn't.

Nathan reaches over, taking my hand, and his warmth helps relax me the smallest amount. "You okay? What's going on in that brain of yours?" he asks.

I shake my head, deciding that truth's vital right now. "Not exactly okay. I'm scared. I don't do things like this. Dinner with a mobster? Lying like we have some relationship beyond what began at the party? Acting as if my life depends on it because it *actually* does?"

My voice has a hint of hysteria, my nerves fraying at the edges, and I take a couple of deep breaths, trying to regain control. It's not working and my chest hitches. Christ, I don't need to cry right now.

“Hey, hey . . .” Nathan interrupts, his thumb tracing calming circles on my hand. “We’re going to be fine. You’re going to be okay.”

His voice is steady, like he actually believes what he’s saying wholeheartedly. It helps, giving me an anchor to latch onto, even if that anchor’s a phantom itself. I look at him, willing his belief to come true, praying that he’s right.

He smiles softly. “Besides, I think we both know that there is more here than just some casual meet-and-greet in passing like everyone else at the party. I like you, Emma. And I’m pretty fucking sure you like me too. So getting Nikolai to believe that shouldn’t be difficult.”

His admission is bold and brazen, reassuring my mind and heating my body. I look down at our intertwined hands, his tan fingers linked through my pale ones. Swallowing my nerves, I look up.

“I do like you, of course. I’m just nervous,” I admit. “And kind of allergic to bullets.”

His lips quirk, and even with the seriousness of the evening’s plans, I can sense that he’s holding back a laugh, which soothes my jitteriness even more. “Well, for tonight, just follow my lead. It’s likely what Nikolai will expect after our little show before, and more importantly, I’ve got you.”



It's a promise, a vow to get me through tonight safely. I want to return the gift. "I've got you too. Whatever you need me to do so that you can work your deal with Nikolai. Being a charming hostess is certainly something I can handle."

I give him a wink, and with his charming smile, the knot in my belly clenches for an altogether different reason. Maybe we can get through this . . . together.

At the restaurant, the maître d' leads Nathan and me to a private table in the corner. Nikolai is already sitting there, but surprisingly, so is Maritziana. They look rather cozy, her blonde hair hanging forward, creating a curtain to hide their mouths, but judging by the crinkles at Nikolai's eyes, he's smiling.

*What the hell?* I mouth at Nathan, who shrugs.

He offers his hand, a smile on his lips but ice in his eyes. "Nikolai."

The men shake and then Nathan captures Maritziana's hand as well, lightly kissing the back. Nikolai does the same to my hand, but Maritziana moves in, air-kissing me on both cheeks. All very *cultured* . . . but about as authentic as a Chicken McNugget.

The four of us settle down, for all intents and purposes looking like we're on a double date. But this is a business dinner, a very important one for Nathan. And I'm going to do my best to uphold my promise and help him any way I can.

The waiter magically appears, and I bite my tongue as Nathan orders for me, reminding myself that he's playing a part too. At least Nathan's choices sound delicious, although we are in one of those places that could take shoe leather and make it taste good.

Before Nathan can begin discussions about their deal, Nikolai jumps in with a question. "How did you two meet?"

*Shit.*

My eyes flash to Maritziana, remembering that I told her it was my first time with Mostest Hostesses and wondering if she's going to say anything. Our eyes hold as Nathan explains, but her brows rise incrementally with his every word.

"At a local gala. Charity for the arts type deal. Kitty is rather well-versed in everything artistic."

When Nathan places his hand on my thigh, I break the staredown with Maritziana first, praying she'll keep her mouth shut and turning to offer him a sweet smile.

Nikolai's laugh is brash. "Oh, I'd hoped you might be able to direct me to one of the sex clubs in your fair city." He pushes his fingers into Maritziana's hair, gripping her neck, and the smile she offers him is pure sex. "I've heard many times that New York is one of those cities where you can get *anything* you want."

"I'm sure you are well aware of the many things New York City has to offer. As I explained before, Kitty and I typically prefer *discretion*." Nathan's request to let the kinky talk go is explicit. "Perhaps we could discuss business instead? I trust you've had an opportunity to analyze the sample you took?"

Nikolai grins like a shark that smells blood in the water. "*Da*, I have. But I wish to take you up on your previous offer. Merriment first, business later." Nikolai's look is shrewd, communicating clearly that he knows he holds the upper hand here.

Nathan's jaw flexes as he grits his teeth. "Of course."

His deference is cold but needed, considering the situation.

Nikolai turns to me, and I force myself to stay steady, fighting the urge to shrink under his hard gaze. "Kitty, so you are a patron of the arts?"

As we discussed previously, I look to Nathan, silently asking permission to speak. When he dips his chin ever so slightly, I respond.

“Yes, Mr. Romanov. I rather enjoy the beauty of the various types of artistic endeavors. In fact, Nathan took me to the MoMA just this week. It was rather special.”

The look Nathan and I share is one of connection, the evening at the museum playing out in both of our minds. The heat of the kiss flares to life in my mind once again, and I find it easier to let myself slip into the fantasy of tonight’s deception.

“Perhaps I should make time to visit.” Nikolai’s words interrupt our moment, and I turn back to see him watching us warily, his tumbler of vodka frozen mid-air as he takes in the intimacy Nathan and I were sharing with the intense look.

“You should. It’s quite remarkable,” I offer encouragingly.

Dinner continues, the four of us actually enjoying the food. But no matter how many times Nathan attempts to redirect the conversation to gaining access to the caves and the diamonds, Nikolai bluntly refuses to discuss it.

At first, I think it’s because Maritziana is here. The

more he does, however, the more I feel like a bug under Nikolai's microscope as he asks questions, makes comments, and watches, rapt for each answer and reaction.

Nathan deflects the inquiries as much as he can, constantly touching me to reassure me that he has it under control. Nikolai's questions even give us an opportunity to toss out some of the info we learned about one another during our twenty questions conversation, proving that Nathan was right to insist that we prepare for dinner.

Though it is rather awkward, it gives me a sense of being on the same team as Nathan, both of us elegantly fighting a mutual foe as we answer questions, sometimes even for each other, though I watch myself, working to maintain some degree of deferential submission as warranted by our cover story.

But the chemistry igniting between Nathan and me as we verbally play house is real. His touches move from his hand on my knee to higher along my thigh. My core clenches when his heated stare reaches into my soul as he talks about the first time he saw me.

"I thought she was the most beautiful creature in the room." And while I know he's not talking about our bullshit cover story but just a few days ago, it

feels real, so very real.

As we nibble dessert, Nathan reaches out to brush a bit of whipped cream from my lip. At first, I think he's going to offer his finger to me, but with the slightest lift of his lips, he sucks the cream from his finger himself.

“Delicious.”

Everyone at the table can tell he's not talking about the vanilla-infused whipped cream the chef is known for.

Nikolai's language has become coarser over the evening, not exactly vulgar but decidedly full of innuendos about Nathan and me. But with this, he crosses a line.

“Must be nice to have a pet that never says no, *da*? Anytime you want it, she just spreads her legs for you?”

He turns from Nathan to me, eyes bright, and I mentally try to tally how many vodkas he's had while we've eaten. “If he told you to suck him right now, you'd do it.”

He sounds delighted, though his words are harsh, even vaguely threatening, like he's hoping I'll put on a show for him on demand.

Nathan pulls me to his side, scooting my chair loudly in the fancy dining room, and growls at Nikolai. His face is etched in stony rage, and it's only the honest purity of his fire that stops me from doing something stupid and throwing what remains of my drink in Nikolai's face. Nathan's not just offended. He's genuinely *pissed*.

“It is *not* her job to mindlessly service me. It is my responsibility to care for her appropriately so that she willingly gives in to me. I have had to earn and deserve her trust so that she allows me any degree of control over her. It is much more nuanced than simply telling a dog to sit.”

His response is cold, even clinical, but somehow, his thoughtfulness in explaining how he takes care of me lights me up inside. It's not even a true representation of the depth of whatever relationship we're developing, but suddenly, it feels like it could be. Like it's as much of a promise as his words of protection in the car. And I have felt safe with him tonight, so perhaps we could grow into a relationship like he's describing. I've never wanted that before, but in this moment, I so do.

Nikolai sits back, rolling his eyes. “Fancy words. But the end result is still the same. Her on her knees. *Da?*” His grin is wicked.

I swallow, asking Nathan tightly, “May I be

excused, please?”

“Of course, Kitty.” Nathan gives me permission, but his eyes never leave Nikolai as they engage in some dick measuring power struggle.

I rise, and Maritziana does the same. “Me too. I need to powder my nose.”

Nikolai breaks eye contact with Nathan to give Maritziana a sharp look. “You are excused, Mari. But no powder.”

The tension between them pulls tight, and I’m confused for an instant before I remember just what Nikolai’s mafia does. It’s then that I realize perhaps Maritziana didn’t mean she intended to touch up her makeup but perhaps intended some other type of nose powdering.

We walk to the ladies’ room together, both closing the door as we take care of business. But as we approach the sink, I can feel her eyes on me. Drying my hands on a soft cloth, I give her my full attention.

“I was surprised to see you here tonight. Didn’t realize you’d even talked to Nikolai at the party,” I pry.

She flicks her hair back, obviously proud of herself. “I didn’t. But I talked to some of his men. And I



made sure they had my number if they needed company while they're in town. I went to a club appearance a couple of nights ago and Nik asked me to come to dinner.”

Her smile is brilliant and wide, like an invitation to dinner is a winning lottery ticket. But I can't help but warn her off a bit. “Be careful with him. He's a dangerous man.”

Her laughter tinkles against the tile, bouncing back to us. But then she scoffs. “You are soft, Kitty. Like most Americans. You think love is like a fairy tale, where Prince Charming rides in as a white knight and whisks you to a castle for a happily ever after. Life is not like that.”

I frown. “You don't think so?”

It's not that I disagree with her that life isn't like that. I know from my own upbringing that she's right, but I want to press her for more to see what the hell is going on here tonight. Because it feels like there's more than Nikolai wanting to simply test Nathan and me. I get the feeling this test is almost entirely about Nathan and has very little to do with me at all.

Her eyes take on a haunted look as she shakes her head. “In my home country, little girls do not dream of a life like that. They hope for stability and safety,

not luxury but a life of safe comfort. I'm one of the lucky ones, to get to come to America."

She turns to the mirror, slicking a fresh coat of red along her lips. "Nik is scary, but it is a good scary. A girl is safe with him as long as she makes sure she is safe *from* him. And I am."

She seems certain, but I can't help but challenge her. "You think you're safe from him. Do you know who he is? *What* he is?"

She looks at me like I'm stupid, then offers a patronizing pout. "Of course I know who Nikolai Romanov is. He is a prince in my country, well on his way to becoming a king. And by his side, I will be his queen. Can I tell you a secret?"

I bob my head, and she whispers. "I have that man wrapped around my little finger. But just as importantly, I am wrapped around his as well. It may not be your American fairy tale, but it is a Russian one. I know exactly what I'm getting into and have my eyes wide open. My question is, do you know what you're getting into with Nathan?"

I feel like I do, but I'm interested to hear her take on the whole situation because I'm in deep waters and working hard to keep kicking. "What do you mean?"

Her nonchalance is maddening, as if my life isn't depending on how tonight's dinner goes down. "Nik does not tell me such things. It is not my place, but Nathan is a powerful man. Where Nik uses his power like a club, wildly swinging this way and that, Nathan is much defter. He's dangerous, as you said. But in a sneaky, stab you in the back with his manipulations way. He is a knife fighter, engaged in a battle before you're even aware one is coming, and each slash is so sharp and clean, you don't feel them—until you bleed to death from the culmination of his every cut. Just . . . be careful, Kitty."

I want to dismiss her dark imagery, focus on how open Nathan has been with me, even when he knew I'd lied about my name. I want to think about how he makes me feel alive and sparkly and like he could consume my body with just his kiss.

And I do think of those things. But there's a tiny seed of doubt, an inkling that maybe I'm in over my head with this whole situation.

So I silently nod.

The walk back to the table lets the seed take root, but when I see Nathan's smile and the way he stands and pulls my chair out for me, it squashes the question ever so slightly. And his arm around my shoulders gives me even more certainty that

we're going to be okay.

Tonight and maybe even longer if my 'silly  
American fairy tale' comes true.

# Chapter 14

## Nathan

My Jaguar slips along the road, easily cutting through the dark. And though my knuckles are near-white with how tightly I'm squeezing the steering wheel, I am totally in control. Of the car, at least. Everything else is debatable. I wish I'd been able to control the conversation as readily, been able to avoid Nikolai's shit as easily tonight.

Several times, I'd wanted to tell him to shut the fuck up as he made lewd comments and pried for details he had no business knowing about Emma and me. More than once, I imagined smashing my fist against his face . . . or worse, ridding the world of his existence. The man's a pig, and I'd be doing everyone a favor.

"Thank you for going through all this to protect me. I'm sorry we didn't get the agreement you wanted from Nikolai," Emma offers, seeing my tension.

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, nodding tersely. "Nikolai is a smart man. For all his jumpiness, he runs his family business well. I

suspect he came in to our dinner tonight with an agenda, same as me. I had to let his play out before he would allow my questions.”

Her eyes flash and a smile spreads across her mouth. “You got permission?”

I sigh. “No. Not yet. But while you and Maritziana were in the restroom, Nikolai seemed more inclined to discuss it at least. He complimented the sample I gave him, said that the decision is pending though.”

It’d been a bit of a surprise that Nikolai had shared that he wasn’t making the call himself but was following up with his father. Nikolai runs so much of the family mafia himself these days that I’d hoped to keep this between the two of us.

Nikolai is a good businessman, sees the benefit in working together on both sides of the law with a variety of shot callers. But his father is old-school, insular, and believes that the family is everything to the point of eschewing outsiders outright. It doesn’t bode well for me, but I don’t tell Emma that.

“But more importantly, he believed everything about us,” I add, steering the conversation back toward safer waters. “I’m calling it a success on that front alone. And now that that’s done, or at least the immediate threat is no longer hanging over our heads, I can’t wait to get you alone.”

I smile at her, letting the flirtatiousness of the evening come back into my tone. Though it'd been a part of our cover, the touches and eye fucking were based on something much more real. So my honest desire is totally authentic, and Emma's response is instant, her cheeks pinkening and her breath hitching. But her smile is pure devilment as she winks and says, "Yes, sir!"

Her following giggle makes me smile too, but when I lay my hand on her thigh, all laughter stops. The time for laughter, for teasing, is over . . . and so is the time for pretending that this is just an act for her safety.

Her knees spread ever so slightly, giving me greater access, and I take advantage, running my fingertips up the soft skin of her inner thigh. With one hand on the wheel and one hand inching closer to her heat, I struggle to stay focused enough to keep us on the road when all I want to do is give her my undivided attention.

"Move your skirt for me. Let me see you."

There's no room for argument in my command, though we've only been playing at her giving me this control. But play time's finished, and we both know it.

She looks out the window, but only the night

reflects back, no headlights around us. And with a shy press of her lips, she lifts her hips against the seatbelt, shimmying her skirt up before sitting back down. Her bare ass against the leather seats gives me all sorts of filthy thoughts, as does the way the seatbelt is restraining her. It's normally so mundane, but as her hips writhe, the strap limits her sexily, pressing into her soft skin and highlighting her curves.

Sliding my hand back up her thigh, I tease along the edge of her panties, brushing the line where silk meets skin. I stay on the edge of where we both want to be for a breath, teasing us both as she grips her thighs, keeping her hands out of my way. Unrelenting, I trace her mound through her panties, feeling the wetness already drenching through and leaving no doubt that she wants this.

I cup her pussy, grinding my palm against her clit as I press the pedal ever closer to the floorboard and the speedometer creeps even higher. We're on the highway now, not much around . . . which is good for both of us.

“Do you think I can make you come before we even get home, kitty?” The pet name is intentional, not the lie she told me initially but a morph of it into an endearment.

Her gasp is all the answer I need, and I begin to



stroke her through the silk, letting the slip of it add to the sensation of my fingers swirling over her. Faster than I would've dreamed, Emma moans my name.

“Nathan—”

“Tell me, Emma. Are you going to come for me before I even get you undressed? Such a needy little responsive pussy,” I say, my fingers swirling faster and faster.

Her hands fly to my arm, holding on for dear life and holding me to her. Her pink nails dig into me even through the fabric of my suit. “Oh, my God, Nathan. I'm coming. I'm—”

Her mouth opens in a silent scream, her eyes rolling back in her head just as we reach my home. I slam on the brake and throw the Jag in park. The jolting stop bounces her out of her seat ever so slightly, and her back curves around my arm, her hips lifting for more. I help her ride it out, pulling every last bit of pleasure out of her orgasm.

When she sags, I turn the car off, getting out to stride around to her side. Yanking the door open, I unbuckle her seatbelt and lift her out, carrying her to the house in my arms.

Inside, the lights are low, just the ambient setting

that stays on all night for security, which tells me Grant has gone to bed. Thank fuck because the old man doesn't need to see what I'm about to do to Emma.

Setting her to her feet, I spin her in place to grab the zipper along her back. Making quick work of it, her dress falls to her feet and she steps out of it, standing proudly in her bra, panties, and heels.

I push her forward, glad she catches herself with her palms against the front door as I drop to my knees behind her.

“I want to taste that orgasm, drink it from your pussy, Emma.” She arches her back for me, granting permission, and I rip the silk from her body to get at her. “Fuck. So pretty and pink. You're fucking soaked for me, aren't you?”

She whimpers, and when I glance up, she's nodding in agreement.

The first swipe of my tongue along her slit is like a first taste of sugar, and I'm instantly an addict to her sweet flavor. I lick her over and over, wanting every drop and then circling and sucking her clit to get her body to pump out more for me.

But as she bucks against my mouth, riding my face, I can't wait any longer. The tension we've been

building, not just tonight but for days, is rising in me, and if I don't get inside her, I'm going to end up coming in my slacks like a fucking teenager.

And that's not happening. When I come, it's going to be balls-deep inside this sweet pussy.

I stand, turning her in place and capturing her mouth with my own as I rip off my shirt and tie as quickly as I can. Moving my hand to my belt, I tell her, "Take your bra off so I can see your tits."

She flushes pink, and I nibble along her jaw, wanting to feel that heat. But she makes fast work of the lacy piece and it's soon added to the sprinkling of clothes dotting my foyer floor.

"Gorgeous," I tell her, my eyes hypnotized by the full roundness of her breasts, her rosy nipples hard and begging for my mouth.

But I need to be inside her.

I rub the head of my cock through her folds, coating my shaft with her slick juices. But I catch her jaw with my free hand, holding her tight and forcing her eyes to mine.

"Are you sure, Emma? I need you to say it."

She nods, her words clear and strong even as she fights to catch her breath. "Fuck me, Nathan.

Please.”

And it’s somehow everything I’ve wanted from her, a complete submission to this unknown thing between us.

I surge into her, driving my fat cock into her balls-deep in one thrust. She cries out, her arms wrapping around my shoulders, pulling me to her, hungry for more.

I don’t give her time to adjust, immediately fucking her hard. She lifts one leg, wrapping her heeled foot around my hip, spurring me on.

Even as our bodies chase pleasure, our eyes meet. The fire burning there is more than mere lust, a connection growing and building right along with our orgasms. So close.

I lift her other leg, pinning her against the door as I rut into her. “Fuck, you’re so tight. Squeezing my cock with your velvet walls. I need to feel you come on my cock, Em. Do it for me. Come now.”

She follows my command, her pussy quivering around me as her cry echoes through the house. “Nathan! Oh, ohh!”

I let go too, roaring as my cock spasms and I pump rope after rope of my seed deep inside her. I keep thrusting until every last drop is either inside her or

dripping down, making us both messy.

Holding her to the wall, I kiss her lips softly. The monster inside me that demanded I take her is only momentarily sated, pushing us both to a level of closeness and satisfaction that demands more . . . soon.

Getting a good grip, I turn and walk toward the stairs. Emma hollers out a whoop, grabbing on tightly to my shoulders as if I'd drop her. "Holy shit, Nathan. Just set me down and let me walk."

I grin. "That sounds like an order and I'm the one giving orders around here. Especially seeing as you're the one currently impaled on my cock." I give her a good bounce, and we both groan at how good it feels.

She raises an eyebrow, and I can tell she's deciding whether she's going to play along. She quickly smiles, though, decision made, and teasingly says, "Yes sir. Whatever you want me to do." She points a manicured finger at me, her smile sassy. "Within reason, mister."



\* \* \*

Several hours later, I've discovered that Emma considers a great many deliciously wonderful things

to be within reason. After fucking each other to exhaustion, we've finally collapsed into my bed. She's curled up in front of me, my soft cock cradled between her thighs as we drift in and out of sleep.

I can almost hear her thoughts turning, though, so I trace a hand through her hair, petting her to calm her racing mind. "What are you thinking about so hard, Em?"

I feel more than hear her swallow. "Something Maritziana said."

"What did she say?" I ask.

"She asked me if I knew what I was getting into and I told her yes. But I feel like I'm in the deep end, like this is all over my head. Somehow, though, instead of feeling like I'm drowning, I feel like I have a lifeline. You. And that's scary and dangerous and wonderful and I don't even know what else. It's just . . . a lot all at once, and I'm not sure what to think about it all."

I can sense what the confession cost her, how scared she is that she laid it all out there so bare, so fast.

I press her back, encouraging her to roll over, to face me. I want her to see my eyes when I say this, but even then, she keeps her chin lowered, her eyes

to my chest.

I grip her chin. “Look at me, kitty. I’m just as surprised as you are by this but just as sure that if this is drowning, I will happily forgo air to share yours.”

And I devour her mouth once again.

She’s right, to be honest. This is new and dangerous and a bit scary.

But I told my brother I wasn’t a pussy, and I’m damn sure not going to start being one now.

Not when Emma is here in my arms.

She snuggles into me and I let her get some rest.

For now.

# Chapter 15

## Emma

I awake slowly, consciousness returning like walking through fog to see a cliff directly beneath my feet.

Except the cliff isn't earthen, a landslide-shaven edge.

It's physical, personal, and currently has a rather pleasantly well-muscled, if a bit heavy, arm pinning me down as he breathes against my neck.

Nathan.

Last night.

The memory hits me, driving any last vestiges of sleepiness from me, and I am awake.

Completely. The images freeze me in time and space as the reality of my not-quite-surreal dream life hits me.

After we finished our torrid, frenzied lust fest last night, my every defense had gone down, gauzy streamers that let my words through like a rusty



sieve. And those words had been truth, gut-churning and scary. I'd wished I could snatch them back as soon as they caught air.

But Nathan had taken them, not a care in the world at the irony that I felt like he was a lifeline to something safer when the truth is, I know he's by far the most dangerous man I've ever met. Including Nikolai.

Maritziana was right.

I am soft.

I am blind.

But I don't think I want to be anything else. Maybe I *can't* be anything else, at least where Nathan's concerned.

This fairy tale feels real, and maybe I can pretend to be this princess just a little longer.

*I will forgo air to share yours.*

It is the very definition of suffocating, smothering, drowning. It's a four-alarm clinger. But still, when Nathan offered his own confession in return for mine, I willingly held my breath and jumped off the cliff with my arms spread wide, hoping for the best.

As the darkness rushes up to me, eagerly taking me into its fold, I am rewarded, and Nathan takes me

in. I snuggle into his arms, drifting back off peacefully.

Minutes or hours later, I'm awakened by another type of need.

Though I am comfortable in Nathan's arms, his cock pressed against my ass like my big spoon, nature calls.

Delicately, I sneak from under the weight of his arm, slide to the edge of the bed, and get up, praying with every move that he doesn't stir.

I pause at the doorway, my bladder fighting with my desire to just look at him, relaxed and almost boy-like in his sleep with his hair mussed and his lips slightly parted, innocent.

Eventually, I lose the battle, and I quietly close the door to the attached bathroom behind me.

I take care of business, use a bit of soap from the counter on my face to sweep away the last bits of last night's makeup, and twirl my hair up into a messy knot on top of my head. It's not nearly enough, but the wild look in my eyes takes the focus from the mess of the rest of me anyway.

I offer the foolish girl in the mirror a smile when I see the red marks along the skin of my neck and collarbones, bumpy irritation from Nathan's scruff

and tiny bruises from his kisses.

“Girl,” I whisper to my reflection, “you look thoroughly and very pleurably freshly fucked.”

My first blush of embarrassment morphs into pleased satisfaction as I brush my fingers over the marks, still grinning. A sign of his possession, of his loss of control over himself, of his utter control of me.

A manic giggle escapes, and I shove my fist at my mouth to hush myself from laughing too hard.

I grab a robe from a hook behind the door, a flash of jealousy at who might’ve worn it last soothed when I smell Nathan all over it, the sheer size reassuring me of the ownership a moment later. It’s his, and that makes me wrap up in its largeness even deeper, taking the musky notes of him into my pores.

The deep breaths bring another scent to my nose, and all girlish fantasy is left behind in my absolute sudden desperation for coffee. I’m an addict and I’m well aware, but I’m not giving it up.

Death or coffee . . . I choose death.

I quietly slip through the bedroom and out the door, wandering down the hallway toward the delicious aroma. I pass a room with an open door, more

office than guest room, and almost as if she can sense my obscene lack of interest in her mission, Claire resonates in my head.

*Go look in there and see what you can find.*

*Drugs, gems, black market, Anna.*

I glance up and down the hallway, seeing no one and nothing to stop me. As if telling me he's okay with it, Nathan even snores from behind the bedroom door. It's an absolute freebie of an opportunity.

But something stops my hand from even leaving my side to reach toward the doorknob.

Instead, I continue toward the coffee, knowing full-well that my choice speaks loud volumes as to where my head is at with this whole mission.

Claire is going to kill me, but this is my life we're talking about.

And even if it's dangerous, I want the fairy tale. After all, what good fairy tale doesn't have a little bit of danger in it? Hansel and Gretel had the witch, Jack had a giant, Snow White had bewitched apples, and Little Red Riding Hood had to deal with a wolf with very large . . . things.

But they all got their happy endings, and I want

that too.

I want it so bad I can taste it, just like the coffee pulling me further down the hall, down the stairs, and into the kitchen.

I hadn't considered that someone had likely made the coffee. I guess I figured Nathan just had a fancy coffee pot that started on a timer.

But no. Instead, there's someone in the kitchen, and before I know it, I'm through the door, the wood swinging shut behind me.

“Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone would be in here,” I say, startled. *Shit, I'm in a fucking bathrobe and nothing else.*

To make matters worse, it's not Grant's haughty but slightly rheumy eyes that turn to look back at me. That'd be way too fucking easy. No, it's Caleb's intelligent glare that greets me.

“Well, I do live here.”

My eyes widen, and I hurriedly pull my borrowed robe a little tighter, cinching the belt in place. “You do?”

He smirks and points at me though he holds a wide green mug in his hand. “No, but you'd think you, of all people, would be better at knowing when

someone is lying. *Or acting, Emma.*”

My arms cross over my chest, my hips rocking to the side, and my eyes narrowing. I’m a study of posture posing to show my emotions, just like my improv professor once gave us a painfully long lesson about.

My snark, anger, and defensiveness are so obvious, they could be read from the back row of the highest balcony.

“So you know who, and what, I am. Is that supposed to be an accusation, a warning, or what?”

Caleb snarls, moving closer, halving the distance between us and almost coming into my personal space bubble, obviously trying to intimidate me.

I lean back but refuse to take even a small step backward. When Nathan is this close to me, his dark heat calls to me, wrapping its silken tendrils about my body and soul.

Caleb, for all his charming good looks and frat-boy sense of humor, feels jagged and icy, dangerous in an entirely different way.

A way that’s perhaps more threatening than even Nikolai.

“I don’t like liars,” Caleb says softly, his voice even

and laced with danger. “I don’t like women who worm their way into places they shouldn’t be. I don’t like questionable motives, especially when they concern my brother.” His every word lashes at my skin, the insults hitting home just as he intends.

“And you think I am all of those things?” I ask it as a question even though the answer is obvious. “I lied, but I’m not a liar. I am in a place I shouldn’t be, but it’s just as much a surprise to me as it is to Nathan, and it sounds like to you too. My motives . . .”

I pause, remembering the stalled moment in the hallway. Opportunity presented, but I chose not to follow that path.

“My motives are simply to be close to Nathan.”

It’s the truth, both at the start of this mess and now.

He snarls in my face, looking me up and down angrily. “Bull fucking shit. Is this about money? If it is, name your price and I’ll have it to you in an hour. Then you can just walk away. Leave my brother the fuck alone.”

I flinch as if he’d slapped me and then bow up to battle the utter disgust in his eyes. “Fuck you! I’m not a whore.”

His grin is feral, but he doesn’t raise his voice. “Oh,

but aren't we all whores for the right price? And I do recall that your first visit to this house was under the guise of playing *hostess* for the right price. That ended with you on your knees."

He glances down at my legs, exposed only minorly because of Nathan's oversized robe, but for all its coverage, I feel naked under Caleb's gaze. "I'm merely asking what your price is now. And know that I already figure it'll be a higher rate than your hostess fee. I'm prepared to make it worth your while to get the fuck out and never come back."

Every word is filthier than the last, making me feel like a dirty slut. And not in a fun, naughty way but in a degraded, shameful way that infuriates me.

A flame burns hot and white in my core, incinerating the insults into ash that I fling back.

"I am not a fucking whore," I say again, this time with more attitude. "So put your fucking checkbook away before I shove it up your conceited ass."

I whirl, intending to stomp my way out of the room and already letting a good bird fly as a parting shot.

But I run into a problem, a brick wall blocking my dramatic exit.

Nathan.



“What the fuck is going on here?” he yells, all peace and boyishness wiped from his face as his brows knit together and his chest heaves beneath my hands.

I didn’t mean to. I wasn’t trying to look like some romance novel cover girl feeling up some muscle model or something, but they just landed there when I ran into him. Still, they stay there because the hard planes of muscles tempt me even in this ugly moment.

Caleb, true to his laissez-faire attitude, merely shrugs and rolls his eyes. “Just negotiating price points to get your animal problem to go. Isn’t that right, *Kitty*?”

I look back, stabbing daggers into him with my eyes, and with a smirk, he dramatically corrects himself. “Oh, my apologies. I mean Emma. That’s what you’re going by *today*, right?”

Fight or flight. I’d already tried flight and ran into Nathan, so fight seems like the next logical step. It’s all I have. So I turn back to him, crossing the few steps between us to stab him in the chest with a fingernail.

“You want to play semantics, Caleb?” I ask, accentuating every other word with another jab of my finger. “Fine, as it seems you’re well aware, my

name is Emma. I'm an actress and an assistant. I came in as a hostess named Kitty Williamson. I am not a whore, have never traded sex for money, and have no interest in starting now. And cherry on top, I like your brother."

The recap is snarky, the last words more heartfelt even though I wield them like a blade. It even shuts Caleb up, who takes a step back as I glare at him. "Satisfied?"

Nathan looks between the two of us in shock, answering for Caleb. "I think you've answered all the relevant questions quite nicely."

But Caleb isn't done, not by a long shot. Taking a breath, he recovers his mojo, and his face hardens again. "To be fair to your honor, as it seems to be a sticking point for you, I'm not offering you money for sex. I'm offering you money to *not* have sex. I'm offering you money to *go the fuck away*."

He smirks at me, but before I can even work up a single rebuttal, Nathan lunges at him, wiping the cocky arrogance from his face with a shove that sends him into the counter and spills the bit of coffee left in his mug.

"Leave it, Caleb," Nathan growls, his eyes flaring dangerously. "For once, fucking leave it alone."

In a flash, it's on like *Donkey Kong*.

I've never had brothers, just Claire and me, and while we definitely had some hair-pulling catfights as teens, we never tore into each other like this. Nathan's lunge gave him the advantage initially, but Caleb returns with a scary fury.

The punches fly toward each other's guts, both of them avoiding the other's face mostly, but the amount of beef slamming into every other surface of the kitchen turns the whole room into something akin to a UFC Octagon.

And I'm for damn sure no ring girl, cheering on the madness. Instead, an embarrassingly constant stream of exclamations and screeches comes from my mouth as I beg them to stop.

But they don't hear me because mixed in with the fighting, they're mouthing at each other. It's an argument in two forms, punctuated with cabinetry and kitchen appliances rattling in between.

"What the fuck, Nathan? This right here is what I was talking about!" Caleb stutters around punches as he gets Nathan in a headlock.

But Nathan battles back, sweeping against Caleb's leg to make him unbalanced. If it weren't for the granite countertop, Caleb would go tumbling, and

he just catches himself with a forearm.

As Caleb releases Nathan's head, he battles back verbally. "Just leave it, Caleb. I've got it under control."

There's a run of snuffed grunts as they push into one another, and then as if by some gruff agreement, they reverse and push off one another, catching their breaths in great gulps of anger and oxygen.

Caleb's laugh is bitter. "You always do have it under control, Brother. Until you don't, and then I save your ass. What the fuck makes you think this will be any different?"

Spittle flies from his mouth, a small split in his lip bleeding bright red even in the ruddiness of his face as he pounds his chest.

Their eyes meet, fire and ice, and the moment stretches out between them. It's almost as if they have an entire discussion, silent memories sweeping in the tension-filled air, and I wonder what fights they're remembering.

How true is it that Caleb saves Nathan, or how often does Nathan save Caleb? I suspect they've always had each other's back, trading barbs with each other but never letting anyone else say a

negative word without repercussions.

I'm the same way with Claire. I can bitch about her when it's warranted, and trust me, I have. But if anyone tried to step to her, they'd be facing a total tag team, both of us ready to lay the smackdown on whoever had the nerve to say something bad about her.

Finally, Nathan holds up a hand, trying to call a temporary truce. "You've saved my ass more than once, Caleb. I won't ever dispute that. But I'm good. I promise . . . I'm good."

Caleb puffs up, eyes flicking from Nathan to me and back. I can almost feel the barbs he's about to unleash and prepare myself for the words again.

Whore.

Liar.

And while there may be a kernel of truth to them, they don't mean what Caleb will undoubtedly intend when he hurls them at me. And I don't want them echoing in Nathan's ears again. Not when we're so freshly figuring things out and the world feels so dangerously, deliciously full of possibility.

But Caleb keeps the cuts to himself, instead just threatening, "You're compromised, Nathan. By her pussy, by Dad's mess. And before you know it,

you're going to be so compromised that even I won't be able to pull you out of the giant shitstorm you're brewing for yourself. And then I'll be . . .” He doesn't finish, just tapers off, and then he spins, stomping out the door.

Nathan's chest is heaving, and I'm about to go to him when he lets loose a guttural cry of anguish, his fists crashing down into the granite countertops of the kitchen as he roars to the ceiling.

It echoes off the kitchen tiles, bouncing back at me like a whip, and I gasp as my hands cover my mouth.

But when he drops to his knees, butt sitting back on his heels, I do rush over.

Grabbing his face in my palms, I whisper soft reassurances to soothe his pain, not really sure how an argument got so heated, why it hurts so much. Nathan fights free from my hands though and shoves his head into my lap, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist, his cheek on my thigh.

Shocked to my core at the brokenness in this monster of a man, I don't know what to do. So I pat his head, my fingers running through his hair almost as if he were a child.

“It's okay, you will work it out. You're brothers.

It'll be okay," I repeat, as if the words will come true if I say them enough.

His response is quiet in comparison to the tension in his body which screams. "We've never fought like this. I mean, we've thrown down, of course. We've done more than our share, but not this. It's always been him and me against everything and everyone else. I've fought for him more times than I can count over the years."

He quiets for a moment, and I wonder where in the past he's gone to in his mind. "We're the team, but he's not with me. It's not about you. It's about the whole thing with Nikolai, with the trip. You're just a symptom of the real problem."

"What's the real problem?" I ask gently.

He slides around, getting his legs underneath him before slumping to his butt, his forearms resting on his bent knees. He looks at me for a second but then looks up, like he's looking for some divine guidance, which I hate to tell him is not exactly forthcoming when shit is this wild.

For a moment, I expect him to say that he's the problem. Nathan definitely seems like the type to take everyone else's problems and internalize them.

"If you want to understand Caleb, if you want to

understand me . . . you have to understand our father. He was an asshole who scarred Caleb in a way. And because of what our dad put us through, Caleb doesn't trust anyone, not even me. Not in some things, anyway."



\* \* \*

Leaving was awkward, but I knew Nathan needed some time to process.

Quite honestly, so did I. We'd gone from a terrorizing dinner to firework-inducing sex to quiet confessions to bomb-dropping fights.

It's been less than twenty-four hours, but it's been a rollercoaster and I'm more than ready to get off and sleep for a few days.

Of course, Claire is having none of that. In fact, it's like she's lying in wait for me, and as soon as I walk in my apartment, my phone starts going off like she has some telepathic radar that I'm alone and she can invade.

*On my way over:*

Oh, hell no. My thumbs are flying on the screen before I can even think.

*Not now. Sleep. We'll catch up later. 'K?*



She doesn't respond, so I say a quick prayer that she's given her tacit agreement and head to my bathroom and rinse off with a quick shower before putting on sweats and a tank top.

Plopping on the couch, I stare into space, trying to process everything that's going on in my life, hoping that sleep will visit if I stay still enough.

*Bam, bam. Pause two three. Bam, bam, bam.*

Motherfucker.

She didn't.

When the pattern repeats, I get off the couch with a huff, ripping the door open.

“Not now, Claire. I said later.”

My sister stands there, not even bothering to look chagrined or remorseful at ignoring my request. “Don't even start with me. You go to dinner with a mobster on the FBI's most wanted list, disappear with no contact for the night, and then try to blow me off when you get home. Sleep later, bitch.”

Without another word, and giving zero shits who might have heard her, she shoves her way inside.

Her partner, Matt, follows along behind her, not quite like a trailing puppy, but he at least shrugs apologetically before settling in on my couch to

watch the show.

They're both dressed for work, not quite casual, not quite formal, but somewhere in between. Claire's in slacks, a slim-fit button-up, and flat boots, and Matt's in khakis and a polo.

No shit.

He looks like he's here to fix my computer, and Claire looks like she's here to string me up by my toes, though that has more to do with the look on her face than her wardrobe.

“So tell me everything.”

I sigh, going into the kitchen. “Coffee?”

The offer is to both of them, but it's mostly because if I'm going to get into this with Claire, I need reinforcements. And maybe a paring knife.

Matt smiles, but Claire snorts. “Get on with it. Work and talk.”

She's bossy, just like she's always been. That's what big sisters do. I have a flashback of Nathan and Caleb fighting and try to imagine Claire and me having a big knock-down, drag-out fight these days.

Looking at her, I can't imagine it. For one, she'd kick my ass and never break a sweat. My sis is a machine, a fully-trained FBI agent who could

probably kill three men with a fucking pencil if she tried.

Me . . . well, as I pour three mugs of coffee, setting one down for Matt on the coffee table, I've handed out pretty much my deadliest weapon. With a small smile, graciousness pounded in my habits by my mom, I step back. "Enjoy."

I hand Claire's to her, but she sets hers down on the table without even taking a sniff. I wish she'd kept it in her hands because at least if she was holding hot coffee, she couldn't get after me too much.

That white blouse isn't made for coffee, that's for sure.

Not that I think she's going to fight with me like the guys did, but she's been known to gesture a bit too much to prove a point. And I'm expecting her to have several points to prove during this conversation.

I take a sip, letting the burning caffeine wake me up and prepare me for what I need to tell her. "Okay, so dinner with Nikolai last night. We went to Romano's and were surprised that Nikolai brought a date, Maritziana. She's one of the other hostesses. They seem to have hit it off. Dinner conversation was more about Nathan and me. Nik seemed to get a kick out of taunting us."

I frown, knowing that's not really helpful to her anyway.

“And what about their deal? What they'd say about that? Do you know what Nathan's up to? Because I'm damn sure it's not about spreading Daddy Stone's ashes.”

She looks to Matt, who nods his agreement with her assessment. He's quiet but watching shrewdly, carefully taking in every word I say.

I shake my head, glad that so, far we're sticking to dinner. The hard part's later, I'm sure. “I didn't hear any of that. They talked business when Maritziana and I went to the ladies' room. I don't know, though Caleb said something about ‘Dad's mess’ this morning.”

*Shiiiiit.*

I definitely didn't mean to say that.

Not surprisingly, Claire gloms onto it like a dog with a juicy steak. “This *morning*? Is that why you didn't call me back last night? You spent the night there, with Nathan?”

She's pointing at me and pacing, and the theatrics I feared start happening right before my eyes. I haven't even confirmed what happened yet.

“Goddamn it, Emma! What the hell are you thinking? You know this is dangerous. You can’t just treat it like . . . like a dating service!” she hisses.

I puff up, just like Caleb did earlier, the irony not lost on me even as I spout off. “Wait a fucking minute! You asked me to do this, and because you’re my sister, I did. You started this whole ball rolling downhill. I’m just trying to ride it and survive. Because in case you forgot, Nikolai is a scary guy and has his sights on me. I think those were your words, right?”

“I think you’re riding more than the ball I got started,” she says under her breath. It’s snide and hurtful and true enough that it stings deep.

Matt interrupts, so calm and collected he might as well be watching ice melt. “Did you sleep with Nathan Stone?”

He asks it like the answer doesn’t matter in the least, but Claire looks me in the eye, knowing it matters a whole hell of a lot.

“That’s private, and I don’t have to answer that,” I say, but it’s answer enough in itself.

Claire curses and starts pacing again, ranting and rumbling so much I can’t even catch every word.

It's like she's going through her casefile about the Stones, looking for something to convince me.

*. . . Black market gems. Cocky asshole. Dead Dad. Dead assistant. Mob . . .*

The words Nathan said flash back to me, but I already know everything she's muttering because I've already heard them all, twice. First from her before all this bullshit started, then again when Nathan confessed so much of his past to me.

I don't know everything, but I know enough. I feel it when I'm with Nathan, down to my core. He's had a rough life, some shady dealings, and done some sketchy things, but . . .

"Holy shit . . . you have feelings for him," Claire says morosely when she sees my soft expression. "I should've seen this coming. He's charming and good-looking, but I really thought you were smarter than this."

The insult cuts deeply, especially because it's from her, one of the smartest people I know.

But I don't deny her conclusion. "Claire—"

But she cuts me off, in full-on big sister mode. "Nope, I'm not letting you do any more. You're not going back there, not going to see him again. You said Nikolai believed you, so you're not in danger

anymore. You're walking away. Now."

I can see why she's a good agent. Her forcefulness makes me want to agree to anything she says. But more than an agent, she's my bossy sister, and I've got decades of experience in ignoring her, even when she gives good advice.

I take a deep breath and look her directly in the eyes. "No."

"No?" Claire asks, her voice dropping to an outraged whisper. "What the hell do you mean, no? I said you're not going back. Besides, you think he's going to just forgive and forget that you've been lying since day one? Your name, your story, that you're there for the FBI? No way, Em."

"Claire—" I repeat, and she hears the argument in my tone, already reddening to match my flush.

She shakes her head, her hair waving behind her like a freaking shampoo commercial, but the light in her eyes is a lightning storm, not studio lights but just as bright. "I can't. We're not going to have this conversation right now. Sorry."

Before I can say anything, she walks out, the weight of the world on her shoulders.

It's not nearly the big blow-up Nathan and Caleb had, but the same disappointment was woven

through my conversation with Claire.

There was the same edging past the boundaries of expectations and acceptance. It makes me wonder if Caleb and Claire are right or if Nathan and I are.

But when I search my heart, I know the answer. It may be crazy. I really don't know him, but there's something between us.

I have to see if it's real.

I want to explore this thing. I need to tease at it with Nathan and enjoy the excitement of fraying away the tidiness of my life. Even if it is dangerous.

Matt takes one last sip of his coffee before setting it down and standing up, brushing his hands off on his khakis. "I'm not getting in the middle of sisters. I'm not that stupid. But she was scared to death all night, thinking you'd gotten yourself killed at dinner with Nikolai and feeling guilty that she started this. Just think about it, Emma."

My gut drops. It hadn't even occurred to me to call or text her last night. I was so swept away. My heart clenches in guilt.

But only for not reaching out to her, not for feeling . . . whatever it is.

"Matt, I'm not going to change my mind. It's made



up.”

He nods, pursing his lips. “She’s worked up, but she’s not wrong. Nathan Stone is dangerous. So saying that . . . it’s not just wrong, it’s stupid. You need to haul ass for the horizon like there’s no tomorrow. It’s a dicey situation but can be done carefully. We can help you do that. Let us.”

His every word is oatmeal, bland and uncaring. The weather man has more pep when he talks about a mild fall day. But it’s soothing in a way after Claire’s tirade. He’s the Yin to her Yang.

He heads for the door, but before he can leave, I call out, “Why did the mission get a red light?”

Matt turns back, and his eyes narrow. “I don’t have reservations about Stone. The man is dangerous, and most likely a criminal. But we had nothing real against him other than gut feelings. It was a fool’s errand to even take it to our superiors, but we’d hoped uselessly. Beside the fact that you’ve put yourself in danger, this was a terrible idea. Protocols are meant to be followed, upper ranks to be obeyed. Claire was wrong to involve you and she is paying the price. Don’t make her pay the ultimate price if you don’t back away.”

And with that, he’s gone.

# Chapter 16

## Nathan

My phone dings and I look down to see Emma's name on the screen.

*I need to see you.*

I chuckle. *Missing me already?*

*Yeah, but we need to talk.*

*That sounds dire.*

*Hopefully not, but this morning . . .*

I see the bubble of dots that's supposed to show me she's typing, but then they disappear and I wonder what she was going to say and why she changed her mind.

This morning was intense and weird, and I hope that my fight with Caleb and whatever shit he said to her, didn't scare her off.

*Come to my office?*

*On my way.*

The half-hour wait until she gets here feels like an eternity. But even though I'm waiting so impatiently, virtually staring at the city below like I could figure out which ant-dot down there is her, I'm still surprised when my assistant comes in, catching me slightly off guard.

"Miss Daniels to see you, sir."

I turn, running my hands over my shirt and nodding tersely. "Of course. Show her in."

Emma comes in bare-faced with her hair pulled up, in casual sweats, layered tees, and tennis shoes. She's a vision of loveliness, and my heart speeds up looking upon her singular beauty.

But her face is almost as pale as her hoodie, which is a ghostly gray.

"Come in," I invite, guiding her to the couch in my office's sitting area. It's a bit old-fashioned, but I still keep it. It helps me relax at the end of a long day. Besides, it's one doozy of a couch, leather-covered and that perfect blend of soft and firm cushioning that makes you want to just evaporate into it.

Emma, though, perches uneasily on the edge, back ramrod straight and hands fidgeting in her lap.

"What's wrong? Is this about me and Caleb?" I ask,

sitting down beside her.

Her eyes jump from her lap to mine, her head shaking. “No, I mean yeah, that was intense. But then I went home and—”

I break in, fearing the worst. “Did Nikolai hurt you?”

“No, please just let me say this. I don’t know how, but I need to.” She bites her lip and I can see her chin quivering ever so slightly. “Shit, this is hard.”

I take her hands, needing to ease her somehow, but she looks sadly at our hands. “Emma, whatever it is, just tell me. It’s okay.”

She takes a deep breath, shudders, and then plunges in. “So, I told you about my name, that I’m Emma Daniels, an actress and data entry Girl Friday for Professor Ford. But there’s more. I just didn’t know how to tell you or if I should . . .”

I’m frozen in place, there on my couch, in my office, completely my domain, and I should be in my element, but she’s making me question everything. There’s something in her tone that tells me it’s bad news, and my soft tones evaporate immediately.

“Tell me everything. Now, Emma.”

She jumps at the harsh order but does as I say. “My sister. She’s the one who told me about the party and asked me to go. She told me about you, and Caleb, your dad, and about the company. The basics, at least. She even told me about Nikolai.”

I’m still as a statue at her side. “She knows a lot.”

Warning bells are going off like mad in my head, but I still want to hear it.

Whatever it is, Emma needs to tell me this.

“She does . . . because she’s FBI.”

Her admission is barely mumbled but is still like an electric cattle prod to my spine, vaulting me off the couch to gain a bit of separation before my instinct to strike back at Emma’s apparent betrayal causes me to do something stupid.

For a moment, I wish I could have a time machine, to go back to the night of the party and ignore her, to let Caleb play a few games with her before casually letting her walk out the door, oblivious to what really goes on in my life.

But the next instant, I realize I wouldn’t change a single moment of the past. It brought me here, brought us here . . . and that could be worth the pain, the price. Life was dangerous before, but shit just got interesting.

Still, now that the words are coming, Emma can't stop them. I could make her stop, order her to or put my hand over her mouth, but I need to hear the truth as much as she needs to give it.

Maybe it'll give me some insight into how to stop this before it spins out of control.

“She asked me to come to the party, told me what I needed to know to help me get intel, insight, and report back to her. To the FBI.”

I stop my pacing, turning to her, the accusation hot on my tongue and out of my mouth before I can stop it. “You're a trap. You really are a honey pot.”

Obviously, I'm not as cool with this as part of me wants to be. The betrayal cuts me to the core, even as I know that I should've seen this coming. I'm as angry at myself as I am at Emma.

Somehow, the part that bugs me the most right this second is that I'm going to have to apologize to my brother. Caleb was right.

I fucking *hate* it when he's right.

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her I don't think you had anything to do with your dad or Anna and that this whole thing with Nikolai is aboveboard as far as I know, though

I really don't even know what's actually going on there."

"Anna? Who?" I ask, confused and almost not getting the reference out of context.

"Anna Russo," she says sadly. "They think you had something to do with your dad's death and with Anna's."

I'm shocked again. Not at Emma's words, but at the sheer ignorance that is the FBI. How stupid can they be?

But the thought is bitter, because I'm just as stupid, maybe more.

I thought Emma . . . I really thought we . . .

The thought is cut short by my phone ringing. I'd let it go, but that particular ringtone is assigned to one person only.

I point at Emma, walking over to my desk. "Don't speak, don't move," I order, picking up my phone. "Yes."

"*Da*. Stone. We meet to discuss in one hour. Bring the girl. She amuses me."

Nikolai's voice is jovial, simple, and relaxed. But I know with a sinking dread that if he so much as gets one whiff of the truth about Emma, it's not

going to be bad.

It's going to be deadly.

But still, I have to try. "I'm not sure if Kitty can get away. I'll have to check her schedule, but I can meet with you and we can discuss business."

Nikolai is not to be dissuaded, however. "You, me, girl. One hour. I'll send address."

"Of course. I'll see you soon," I say, knowing it's my only option.

I turn to Emma. "Nikolai wants to meet with us. Now."

She shakes her head, absolutely aghast. "No, no. We can't. Not like this. We need to talk first, Nathan."

That's a luxury we can't afford. "Seems fate has something else in store. We don't have time. Let's go," I say, grabbing her by the arm and scooping her to her feet as I roughly guide her out.

It's not how I'd like to handle her unless it was for a specific and sexy cause, but since she's been lying to me all along, I'd say a little roughness is warranted. I even take a small delight in tossing her in the backseat of my car, her legs going askew as she virtually tumbles in wildly. Her pissed off glare



as I sit down feels like a small victory.

I give the driver the address Nikolai sent and am surprised to find we've come to a stop at Rockefeller Plaza.

"Pull your hair back, and if he asks, you were exercising," I snap as the door opens. "Other than that . . . don't say a word."

"I understand."

I reluctantly get out with Emma, and almost before my driver closes the door behind us, Nikolai is instantly visible. He's a large man, but it's more that the power comes off him in waves. Even here, in a center for the arts and for good, clean fun, he acts like the common people of New York mean nothing to him.

"Come, Stone. Sit and we chat."

This is the meeting I've been waiting for, exactly what I need. But now I desperately need Emma to not be here for this. I don't want to believe she's a threat, but I have to.

The only saving grace is that Nikolai doesn't know the full reason for my requested visit to the caves. Still, everything feels a bit too out of control and risky. Caleb has always teased me about being a bit of a control freak, but even if I didn't have those

tendencies, I think this situation would set my every nerve on edge. There are just too many variables, and that can only lead to disaster.

“Wow, so pretty,” Emma offers as small talk, looking over the rink of skaters. “Wish I could do that.” And even though it’s polite and meaningless, I’m mad that she didn’t keep her mouth shut like I’d just ordered her too.

“*Da*, it reminds me of home,” Nikolai says, sounding almost human. “Cold, icy, but still it is vibrant in a way Russia is not. Like . . .” He pauses like he’s searching for the right word. “Like magic but not that.”

Emma tries to help. “Childlike? Wondrous? Whimsical?”

Nikolai snaps, and for the first time, I see something on his face I’ve never thought possible . . . an actual smile. “Yes, whimsical.” He says the syllables slowly and then nods, like he’s trying to remember the actual pronunciation. It’s oddly endearing to hear him speak fondly of the kids playing and skating along. After watching for a moment, however, he remembers who he is and why he’s here, snapping back into himself. “So tell me more about this deal.”

I have to be careful, oh, so very careful about what

I say. I've already known that consistency is key, keeping my story the same no matter how many times he asks.

But there's a new gamble here, and I need to account for the FBI so that if Emma does go blabbing to her sister, they don't have any suspicions about what I'm doing talking to Nikolai.

The last thing I need while searching Nikolai's caves is for the US Government to show up and do it first.

"I'll fly in under your protection order, and your travel team will meet me. A guide through the jungle path, an opportunity to spread my dad's ashes as he wished in the cave that was special to him. Guide escorts us safely out to airport. Plane takes off with no holds, no problems. In and out, safely."

It's the bare bones of the deal, or at least what I'm asking for. I'm loathe to discuss his side, the pink diamonds, because that might lead to questions on how I got them. And I won't throw Caleb under the bus like that with the FBI's representative noting every word.

"How many in your team?"

"Me, maybe my brother. Though his relationship

with Dad was rocky at best. So he might not come. Go-minute decision on his part.”

Nikolai rolls his eyes. “Baby brothers. Difficult creatures, I imagine.”

I nod, pursing my lips because right now, I should be apologizing to Caleb big time.

“Gear?”

“Backpacks and bags. We provide everything. It’s on my ass to keep myself alive. It’s a long trek. I’ll bring my own supplies and provisions.”

Part of the reason I’m insisting on my own equipment is that one, I wouldn’t trust anything Nikolai might provide. Secondly, I don’t want anyone associated with Nikolai having any chance to snoop around and see Dad’s maps. But I don’t tell him that part.

“Mmm, as I thought. I will tell Papa,” he says, vowing to share the information.

I’m disappointed. I’d hoped that this was merely a last check-through for any issues before agreeing to the deal. But patience is a virtue, and while I’m not a virtuous man, I’m a patient hunter. And that’s what this is. For all the maneuvering and polite words, it’s a hunt.

“I look forward to hearing his assent,” I reply, ending the meeting with a handshake before heading back to my car with Emma. I don’t say a word to her, taking every ugly word I want to scream and stuffing it down, same as I’ve always done.

“Where can we drop you off?” I ask, and Emma mumbles to take her home. I let my driver know and sit back in my seat, not even reaching across to open the door for her when we arrive. She looks from me to the building, words building in her throat as she searches for something, anything, to say to make this okay.

There’s nothing.

“Get out, Emma.” My voice is dead-calm and even, belying none of the tumultuous tornado on a whirlwind path of destruction that’s raging through my heart.

She huffs, laughing though nothing is fucking funny about any of this, but my curiosity gets the better of me. “What? What’s so funny?”

Her smile is as scathing as her words. “Claire warned me you’re dangerous, that you’d hurt me without giving it a second thought. She was right, but not in the way she figured. Because this right here, the cold shoulder and dismissive goodbye,

unfeeling and uncaring . . . this hurts, just not the way she implied.”

I don't think, I react.

My hand reaches out, grabbing around her neck and holding her against the seat. Even as I hold her very life in my hands, her head turns to me, seeking me out in any way, in every way. Her skin is soft beneath my hand, her thin neck so fragile I could snap it so easily.

A foreign thought that scares me.

But when her hands move up to mine, it's not to fight me. Instead, her fingers trace light patterns on the back of my hand, slow and tentative, worried not that I could hurt her but that I could push her away.

I stroke her hair, whispering in her ear. “Tell me the truth. The total truth.”

She swallows against my palm and speaks in choked sobs. “I don't know what this is, exactly, but I'm developing real feelings for you. It feels like I'm going all in, because my sister gave me an ultimatum . . . her or you. My own sister. I should choose her easily, right? But here I am, telling you everything, knowing that it could make you hate me. And even though I'm putting it all on the line

for you, baring everything I've got so we can truly know each other, you're punishing me for it."

She began softly, but by the end of her diatribe, she's angry.

At me, at herself, at the situation.

Me fucking too, Kitty.

The name, not an endearment this time, burns through me.

My fingers tighten instinctively, and she cries out, grabbing at my hand now and giving up any hope that I'll give her kindness.

She struggles beneath me. "I'm sorry! I should've told you before, everything at once. But I didn't know how you'd react. I guess I hoped you'd feel the same way about me, especially after last night, and you'd forgive me. But I can see I was wrong."

The words echo in the car for a moment, quickly swallowed up by her tears as she repeats them over and over. *I was wrong, I was wrong*. The salty wetness of her repentance flows down her cheeks, covering my hand in her guilty apologies.

She wrenches away from me, diving for the door and getting out. She runs for the building but looks back to see if I'm going to chase her down.

I meet her eyes one last time . . . and close the car door. It's the cruelest punishment I can give, but it's not just for her, it's for me too. It's a punishment for my idiocy, for letting her in before I could trust her.

Clearing my throat, I look up at my driver. "Let's go."

Slowly, my car pulls away from the brightest and the darkest star in my sky.

She had me for a moment. Whole and complete, she had me, and I would have explored and given anything to have her.

But it was a mirage.

And I'm not going to deal with mirages anymore in my life.



# Chapter 17

## Kyle

It's been days since the dinner with Carly where I freaked out. Days since I've seen her at all.

I've forced myself away from her shows, the market where we ran into each other, and most importantly, from Strega's.

I say *forced* because it has required dedicated and extreme restraint on my part. I've wanted to hunt her down, to apologize for freaking out.

I want to explain to Carly that the person she draws from my depths isn't me, not anymore. It's only a ghostly echo of someone I used to be but is easily wiped away like the mirage it is.

So the mere fact that an apology has crossed my mind makes me that much more certain that staying away is exactly what I need to do.

It's still what I'm planning to do, even as I finally give in and go to Strega's café.

It's Saturday night, so I know Carly will be working

to make the most money with the date-night crowds out for a romantic stroll. That I know that with certainty both relieves me and pisses me off. Why do I know her schedule? Why do I care?

I shove the questions down, focusing on the one thing I need and can have . . . coffee.

Because despite my best efforts, I can't quite get the hang of a European coffee maker, and I need a cup of coffee.

The coffee maker thing is an excuse, and I know it. But even as a loner who hates people, I need social interaction sometimes. Just superficial ones to stave off the lonely descent into oblivion.

And Strega has become a stern but friendly face, one who won't pry at my past and ruin the blank hollowness I've carefully cultivated.

Besides, she does have the best coffee in town.

"Ah, you need *cappuccino* and a *biscotto* too," Strega says, not even letting me choose my damn order.

"I don't want a cookie, just coffee." I tell her like my word is law.

But she ignores it completely.

"*Stronzino*, I did not offer you a cookie," she says

with a smile, but her eyes are shooting daggers. “I said you would be getting a *biscotto*. Do not insult it by calling it a mere cookie. It is what you need and it is what you will get. And you will eat it or risk offending me as your host.”

She scoots away faster than I’d think she’d be able to with the mass of chairs blocking her way.

Faster than I can believe possible, she’s back, setting a small cup and plate down kindly, two *biscotti* resting on the edge. “*Mandorla* . . . sweet almond, because you need some sweetness in your life. Eat it.”

I virtually gulp my coffee down, pointedly not touching the cookie—sorry, *biscotti*—as I try to hide.

This was a bad idea. I thought I could do this, be minimally social and civil for a few minutes, satisfy that annoying itch for human contact that still yearns deep inside me beneath the layers of anger like a dandelion shoving its way to sunlight through the tiniest crack in the sidewalk.

I used to be friendly—it was in my nature—but no longer, I think, yanking the dandelion out of my soul and wadding it up before tossing it over my shoulder.

In my head, of course. I have yet to find a dandelion growing on any part of my body, and there's no actual weed in the middle of Strega's. She wouldn't allow such nonsense, not even on the centers of her tables in some uselessly pretty centerpiece.

I slump down in my chair, thinking about just leaving the half cup and the *biscotti* to make a bolt for the door. I've already got my eye on it when it opens.

*You've gotta be fucking kidding me.*

Carly comes in like a damn ray of sunshine, all smiles and sparkles and shit. Her hair is wild and she has on slim black pants that hug her curves and a T-shirt from a museum I haven't bothered to visit.

Why is she here?

Irrationally, I'm angry at her for not doing as I'd expected.

It used to be my damn job to figure people out, find their routines, and manipulate them, but I can't seem to find the system with her. I haven't yet figured out her fly-by-the-seat-of-her-pants schedule and it makes me angry.

I'm pissed at myself for failing, at her for being here. And largely, for the tiny bit of happiness I feel

when I see her before I shove it back down in the black hole of my soul. Carly had said her ex was like a black hole. She has no fucking idea what that's really like as she sits on the edge of my darkness, dangling her feet in the danger like it's a fucking pond.

I rise, intending to leave, needing to escape like the weakling I fucking am.

But the movement catches her eye and she walks straight to me, a big smile on her face like she's forgotten that I kicked her out in the middle of dinner.

“Hey, Kyle,” she says easily. “How's it hanging?”

I try to brush past her, roughly tossing out the accusation. “Thought you wouldn't be here.”

She laughs. “Liar. You came here for me, though if you want to play Grumpy Gus again, that's fine.”

Her relaxed chill surprises me, and her words hit too close to home. “I came here because I thought you'd be working and I could get a cup of coffee in peace. I've missed Strega's coffee.”

I say it like she's been keeping me from Strega's coffee when the truth is, my own issues have kept me away.

“Well, sit. Drink your damn coffee then,” Carly says, chuckling. “But if you call it coffee again like some Starbucks level swill within Strega’s hearing, she’s gonna kick your ass.”

She gestures to the table and my eyes follow her movements. Her hands, her hair, her mouth as she talks are graceful, energetic, and hypnotic.

Everything gets fuzzy around the edges, disappearing for a moment as I get lost in the little peek of her white teeth, her tongue touching her lips as she wets them, and the wide brightness of her smile.

When time resumes, Strega is handing Carly a cup of espresso and she’s sitting down. At my table.

Of course she is, because Carly doesn’t need invitations to go anywhere in the world. Especially, it seems, not my world.

It’s my chance to escape, to simply walk away. I can find another coffee shop. Hell, there’s one roughly every twenty feet. But when Strega sets a plate with a small pastry down in front of Carly, I can’t help but look. It looks flaky like a croissant, but it’s shaped differently, and the inside looks like it’s filled with some sort of dark brown chocolate.

I wonder if Strega is a snack whisperer or

something. There just seems to be a bigger message in her bringing me a sweet biscotti with a comment about my needing sweetness and her bringing Carly utter darkness in a dessert.

“Here, *Tesoro* . . . a treat for the night. But just one. If you are hungry, I will make you proper food.” Strega gives me a hard look, as if she knows I’m about to bolt and she’s daring me to even try it.

Still standing, decision unmade and not able to look at Carly, I ask, “Why does she call you *Tesoro*? What does that mean?”

Carly grins so big I can see it in my peripheral vision. “Treasure. She calls me treasure sometimes, like I’m precious, valuable. It’s nice, makes me feel better. Why? What does she call you? She has nicknames for practically everyone.”

“*Stronzino*. She calls me *Stronzino*, but I don’t know what it means.” The words tumble out quietly. I’m still standing, still not looking at Carly, still haven’t decided if I’m staying, which only makes me feel weaker.

Carly busts out laughing, surprising me. “Oh, my God, does she really? Strega!”

She looks over her shoulder at the woman who’s watching the scene unfold before her like it’s a

damn soap opera.

My eyes jump to Strega and then, unbidden, to Carly. “What’s it mean?”

Carly looks me dead in the eye, not letting me go now that she’s got her hooks in me again. Fucking Medusa. “Asshole. But like a cute, diminutive, sweet version. Like it’s not **asshole**, it’s *asshole*.”

Though the words are the same, the different ways she pronounces them, first hard and angry, the second almost girly and affectionate, somehow explain the meaning perfectly.

“It’s a term of affection, I’m sure.”

I look at Strega in a new light. Maybe she’s not so kindly after all. Or maybe not so ignorant.

Instead of walking out, I sit down hard in her chair, grabbing her gifted *biscotti* and taking an aggressive and grotesquely big bite, letting the crumbs fall where they may. I chew with my mouth open. It’s every bit as much of a *fuck you* as if I’d said the words, but instead I’m just meanly scarfing her treat to spite her.

Take that.

Carly’s giggle breaks the staredown battle with Strega, who huffs and turns around, muttering



though I can't hear her.

“Ooh, you'd better settle your shit, *Stronzino*. Strega is a fight you don't want. And if you disrespect her sweets, you won't get another one. And that'd be tragic.”

She breaks off a bit of her chocolate one, popping it into her mouth with a happy groan that makes me think of sex and how many ways I could get her to repeat that noise.

“So good, Strega! Absolutely delicious!” she calls out to the retreating woman in an attempt to soothe over my effect on her.

She breaks off another bite and holds it out to me. I have a flash of me leaning forward to eat it from her hand, nibbling at her fingers to see if they're as sweet as Strega's pastries, maybe licking the crumbs from the pad of her thumb.

Damn it.

I grab the offered bite, tossing it back without even tasting it though I must make some sound because Carly calls out, “I think he prefers the chocolate ones, you know, for next time.”

Her impish grin only grows when Strega lets loose with a stream of Italian so fast I can't catch a single word.

It's silent for a moment save the soft chewing sounds of us on our treats and Carly slurping her coffee.

But Carly's eyes are bright as she looks at me, like she's already forgotten about how rude I was at dinner. Not that I care about being rude, but I'd felt something about kicking her out so gruffly.

Guilty?

Embarrassed?

Angry?

I don't know, but it hadn't been my usual cold indifference. It'd been some other emotion. Just not one I'm willing to name right now.

Looking at the crumbs on my plate, I pick one up, crushing it between my finger and thumb as I marvel at the subtle crunch and almond flavor. "I found the bread you left in the hallway."

I don't mean for the words to sound so soft, like a confession rather than an accusation, but somehow, they come out that way, and I feel myself turning red in embarrassment for some reason.

Carly's perfect white teeth poke out as she bites her lip. I want to bite the plump flesh, lick her teeth, and hold her head still while I pillage her soul

through her mouth and suck out every bit of joy like a fucking dementor.

She reaches across the table in slow motion, or at least it seems that way to me. I literally can see as the air shifts around her dainty hand, inching ever closer to mine where it rests on the table. And just before she makes contact, I hear her slightest exhale of breath and wish I'd been close enough to capture it in a jar and save it.

But then her skin presses to mine, her softness to my hardness. Her smooth, satin skin, unblemished, contrasting with the scarred, tattooed dirtiness of my own hand. And she rubs the smallest circle along my knuckle.

“You loved her.”

*She heard me.*

I knew she had, but I guess I'd hoped that it was a dream. A nightmare.

That I hadn't said those words out loud, hadn't told Carly the truth of what broke me and made me into the beast she sees. That I hadn't said it through a damn door like a pussy who couldn't even admit the pain from something so awful.

She doesn't uselessly say sorry like I did. She merely states a fact.

But she's wrong.

I didn't love Anna, past tense. I *do* love her. Still. Today. With my whole heart. With my everything.

A small voice whispers, *Everything? You have nothing left, hollow man.*

I recoil awkwardly, standing as my breath escapes the pressure in my chest, and I yank my hand from beneath hers. I don't feel hollow. I usually do.

Ever since, there's been a gnawing void in my center, a hole that only gets relief with vengeance, with plans of revenge. A bottomless pit of despair and anger.

But as I pant, heart racing, I don't feel hollow.

I feel like a new dandelion seed just blew into me, just one, but it's rooting in the inhospitable sidewalk of my soul and daring me to rip it out, daring me to let it bloom and see what awesome beauty it can bring.

If I only let it.

"I *do* love her. I love her, and she's dead," I shout. The words come easier this time, but they still grit on my vocal cords like shards of glass, bleeding me. Every bit of fury I feel at her loss rises up, fresh and hot, as if she died this moment, not over a year

ago.

My volume has drawn attention, people looking at me in shock, confusion, even pity as the outburst registers. Even though some of them probably cannot understand English . . . some things don't need translation. Like pain, and anger, and heartbreak.

But I don't give a rat's ass about their looking. I care that Carly is. She's not looking *at* me. She's looking *into* me.

And like the pussy I am, I bolt.

Shoving my way through the small tables like a bull in a china shop, I stomp for the door, escaping into the night.

Escaping into my loneliness, my sadness, my guilt.

## Carly

It's his fault, really. He opened the door with his admission that he found the bread, that he knew what that meant. I'd heard him on the other side of the door.

And I'm not a subtle, baby step kind of girl, so instead of tiptoeing, I kicked in the door and got to the heart of the matter, sending his own words back

to him.

“You loved her.”

I’m not trying to put any acid in the comment. In fact, I find it honest and I’m just trying to get insight into this intriguing, magnetic man.

But for him, it’s like I just set off a firework under his ass.

He skitters like a frightened rabbit, standing in a rush like there’s too much energy coiled in his muscles. His face shows pure, unadulterated fury as he rages at me, at her, at the world.

“I *do* love her. I love her, and she’s dead.”

The anger is hot, burning in its intensity, but he’s not mad at me, not really, though it likely looks like he’s yelling at me to the folks now looking our way.

His anger is at himself. I can see it plain as day.

He thinks he should’ve done something, should’ve stopped it, should’ve saved her from whatever led to her death. I don’t know the story, and he may never share how she died with me, but I know that unless he pulled the damn trigger, literally or figuratively, it’s not his fault.

It never is, though the survivors often feel that they should’ve, could’ve done something, anything.

And because of that anger, his guilt and pain are palpable. Not in the air around him, not something anyone in this room probably notices.

But I see deeper.

I see the way he jerks away from my touch, not like he doesn't want it but because he does. It's in the crinkles at the corners of his eyes as he squints to lessen the impact of my presence, my words.

It's in the tightness of his jaw where he's clenching it, his teeth grinding audibly. I wonder what words he's biting back because they clearly want out. He's only holding them back by sheer force of will and guilt.

He doesn't want the pain to lessen, wants to wallow in it and revel in its sharp edges because he thinks that's what he deserves. He's pushing me away so that he can stay there, alone in his hole.

But I was telling the truth before.

I may not have been through what he's going through, but I've been through enough shit to recognize when someone needs help they don't want.

No, that's not it.

He wants my help. He just doesn't think he

deserves it.

And that's an entirely different thing.

But I'm strong enough to be the one to tie that rope around his waist and haul him out of the pit, kicking and screaming the whole way.

I won't jump down in the hole with him. He doesn't need that. He needs tough love, even if he fights it, fights me.

Luckily for him, my black belts aren't just from doing dance around, no-contact training. I'm tough. I know how to fight. Even if I'm fighting his own mental trauma to save him.

As I make the commitment to myself—and to him, though no words are spoken—he makes a run for it.

I knew he would.

It's a dance.

Two steps forward, one step back.

But if I can twirl him around a bit, get him dizzy, maybe he'll forget which way we're going and let me lead.

I'm still staring at the door where he disappeared when Strega comes over. "*Mio Dio*, what happened?"



I don't even look at her, just answer with a smile.  
“A breakthrough. A big fucking one.”

I pop the last bit of pastry in my mouth, swallowing it with the last bit of my espresso. “So good, Strega.”

She thinks I'm talking about her food, the pride transforming her look of worry to a soft smile. I'm not talking about the food at all.

But about Kyle.

He's good, so good.

Or at least he will be if I have anything to do with it.

# Chapter 18

## Nathan

It doesn't take much to find out all I can about Emma Daniels once I apply my resources to it. Background check, online presence, family history, criminal records . . . all of those are easy pickings for the people I have on my speed dial.

Within hours, I hold in front of me the whole package deal that she's walking in with.

At least on paper.

But there's more to her.

Whatever that is, it's something I can't describe, can't write or draw or photograph. It's intangible and what draws me to her like a moth to a flame, even though I know the moth burns in that scenario every time. She just has *it* and I respond to it every time.

But I'm a smart man, contrary to my brother's bitching. And I know that his calling Emma a 'honey pot' is true, now more than ever.

My brain might say one thing, but my hunger says another. I can't help but want to eat every last drop. So I revert to what I know, research and reconnaissance.

With the thick file in my lap, research is accomplished. Now, it's time to recon, so I change into dark jeans and a navy-blue Yankees T-shirt along with some plain Nikes. With my hair mussed up and a decent case of five o'clock shadow, I look like countless other guys.

Respectable but not formidable, handsome but not whiplash-inducing, average but not powerful.

I shrug my shoulders, loosening the tension through my body to affect the casual, relaxed posture the military drilled out of me.

I even smile at myself in the mirror, noting that it seems passably real.

This mission is a go.

The drive is quick, and I tell my driver to circle the block and wait for my call to return. I approach the front doors of the brick building, ignoring the ticket window and the posters out front, hoping they're unlocked but with a backup plan in place if not.

Hell, I've got a backup for the backup plan. I've done my studying, and Sun Tzu is as well-known to

me as Dr. Seuss.

But fate is on my side today and the doors open to me easily.

I make my way through the lobby, making it a point to look at home and like I'm supposed to be here, but no one stops me or questions me in the least.

Finding the next set of doors, I move into stage two of the plan, entering the dark, softly carpeted space like a ghost.

I don't look up, not yet. Not until I'm in exactly the place I want to be.

I studied the plans for the building. I know just where to sit to be invisible but see everything. The shadows are dark, deep, and concealing as I blend in, finding the seat I scoped out. Silently, I sit, settling in to wait.

Five breaths. I still my body, slow my breathing, calm my racing heart, listen carefully . . . and open my eyes.

Only then do I allow myself to look.

Only practice keeps my reaction silent, because almost instantly, bells are chiming inside like a fucking church on Sunday.

I see her.

Emma.

But not. At least that's not who she is today. Today, she is Cleopatra VII Philopator of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

The stage is bright, lights creating stark relief with the backdrop that's still in preparation. And there's a whirl of activity as a voice calls out, "Places . . . running from scene twenty. Emma, it's your opening line."

My eyes lock on her as she nods, and when she begins, it's a thing of beauty. It's my utter destruction. She's good.

Not just able to recite lines and move as instructed, but even to my untrained eye, she *becomes* a two-thousand-year-old dead Egyptian queen right in front of me.

Her mannerisms change, her smile is aristocratic instead of full, and her movements are graceful in a way that Emma is not.

And if she can become someone else so readily, so completely, then is who she is with me even real?

Or is it merely another character she's created? One her sister and the FBI designed based on some profile of what would appeal to me?

Was any of it real?

My feelings were. They *are*.

I'm honest enough to admit to myself that in just a few days, she's carved a hole in my heart and inserted herself, and now that hole feels empty. She's entwined herself with my emotions, and I wish I could explore them just as much as she declared the same to me.

But if what I feel is based on some fantasy creature that doesn't even exist in real life, then how real can they be?

Anger replaces the affection the longer I sit here, watching her act, watching her laugh and talk with her co-workers during breaks, casually chatting and keeping it relaxed before the director calls for action again. It's disconcerting, watching her flip in and out of character like it's nothing.

I hear the disembodied voice of the director, who's been in a tiny orchestra pit this whole time, call a wrap with a rehearsal call time for tomorrow, and people start to mill out, but then he calls out, "Emma, a moment, please."

I see the bite of her lip, a sign of her nerves. But she approaches the front row with her head held high.

She looks every bit the educated, upper-class, rich girl she grew up as. Not too cocky, not too bitchy, just serenely elegant and ready to take anything the director says to her with a wan smile.

Bland, vanilla, fake.

This is her fake.

I can see that at least, and a tiny kernel of hope tries to rise inside me. But I remember her on stage, how real it all seemed, like I was merely watching people go about their actual lives. Not acting.

*She's that good*, I remind myself harshly.

The director gets up on stage and says something quietly to her before she walks off, and I can see the smile on Emma's face, like she gave her good feedback or something. I want to take her happiness away. I can't bear to see her have it from someone else.

Not when she's destroying my every belief in her right before my very eyes.

I stand, walking to the front silently, my feet barely whispering on the carpet. Reaching into my pocket, I message my driver. *3 min.*

"Emma?" I say from the darkness when her back is turned, and she can't see me in the glare of the

stage lights.

She jumps, whirling. “Shit, you scared me!”

I step further into the light, and she looks around as confusion scrunches her brows. “What are you doing here?”

“Spying on you,” I tell her honestly, wanting to throw the truth at her like a knife. “You’re good. Really good.”

Her smile almost returns instinctively at the compliment, but then it registers that perhaps I hadn’t intended it as one. “Why do I get the feeling you think that’s a bad thing?”

“Come,” I say simply, though I expect her to argue. Instead, she nods and hooks a thumb toward the side of the stage.

“Let me grab my bag.”

Her agreeableness is suspect. I think everything she does will be suspect from here on out.

But she does disappear backstage and then reappear a moment later with a normal-sized bag slung over one shoulder.

“Where to?” she asks, trying not to smile but still managing to give off the impression that she’s happy about this. But can I trust what my gut’s



telling me about her reaction?

I turn, leaving the theater and heading to the curb outside. She follows like a trained dog, *or like the submissive girlfriend she's been playing*, I think with a sneer. I hate that something so new and unexpectedly delightful to me has been sullied by her repeated lies and omissions.

*Did she enjoy it too, or was that part of the act?*

My gut roils, remembering our night together. If anything, I'm pretty sure she didn't fake her orgasms . . . although who says you can't enjoy your work?

I hold the car door open for her, not because I'm a gentleman but so I can shove her inside if she tries to make a run for it.

The ride to my house is quiet, and I stare out the window, thinking.

She looks at me the whole way, saying nothing, but her eyes full of questions. Questions I'm not going to answer here.

Grant opens the door when we arrive, his face as inscrutable as ever. "Welcome home, Mr. Stone. Would you and your guest like anything?"

I shake my head. "No, thanks. We'll be fine."

“Very well,” he says, but I can tell he’s evaluating Emma as he walks away.

He’s protective, precise, but also eminently professional. He won’t say anything unless he’s certain he should.

In this case, I almost wish he’d give me advice.

Sometimes, he sees something others don’t because he’s so unobtrusive, people forget he’s there.

It’s quite a skill, quite an asset, and though they taught us something similar in the military for recon, Grant is on a whole different level.

I walk upstairs to my office, testing my theory that Emma will simply follow along behind me wherever I go. Nikolai’s laughing comment comes back to me . . . *woof, woof*.

It should disgust me still, but mostly, it just makes me sad as she does indeed trail along behind me.

When I close the door, she startles but steadies herself. “Okay, so you’ve got me here. Now what? More yelling, more cold shoulder, more anger? Whatcha got?”

It’s the first bit of spunk she’s shown since revealing her whole deal . . . and to be honest, I like it. It feels more real, more like her.

But I wonder if it's simply the character skin she's slipped into. Inside, I'm desperate to know the truth, but she's not the only one who can hide their real face behind a professional mask. And I know how to be the commanding asshole without even thinking about it.

"Sit," I command, the dog joke only in my head as I gesture to the chair in front of my desk. I intentionally go around to the other side, taking my place in this little scene.

The power is decidedly with me, as it always is in this room, until she took it away last time with her bomb drop. But I'm taking it back, and if she's slipping into character, then so am I.

And I'm a mean fucker in a slick suit, accustomed to giving orders, to playing smart, to spit-shining a piece of shit into something people will desire and sell their souls to own. Even if I'm in a T-shirt and jeans.

And she's . . . her.

There's no way she's getting one over on me. Not today, not ever. I let the mantle of control fall back onto my shoulders, the weight comfortable and familiar.

"You were excellent today," I begin, sitting down.

“Your talents are magnificent.”

A soft lob served up on a silver platter.

“Thank you. It’s a great play, one of my favorites. Well, that’s probably because it’s my first big break. But I’m guessing that’s not what this is about? We need to talk.”

Understatement of the century, and a reminder that Emma isn’t a dumbass. I appreciate that.

“We do.” I wait, using the time-tested method of a pregnant pause to see if she’ll jump in to fill the silence.

I hold back the victorious smirk when she does, and she looks down, her face falling as well.

“I’m so sorry, Nathan. I really am,” she says, rubbing her arms. “But I agreed to do what I did for my sister thinking it wasn’t going to be this.”

She swings a finger from her chest to me, then huffs humorlessly. “I thought I was just going to come to the party, report back on what I saw, and that would be that. I doubted I was going to hear shit. I mean, it was a party. I was certain I’d never see you again. Then it all got crazy with Nikolai.”

“That’s what you were doing when you fell behind the tree,” I add, nodding slowly. “Listening.”

She nods. “I had to take the chance and figured I could play it off. Most men see a woman in a dress like I had on and lose about a dozen points off their IQ.”

She’s right. *Most* men do. Hell, I did, I think self-deprecatingly. “And did you report back to your sister, Claire?”

I throw her name in on purpose, but she misses the significance.

She nods again. “I did. I told her about the party, about you and Nikolai. She told me I couldn’t go to the dinner, but I said I was going.”

“Why?” I ask, needing to hear her justifications and excuses. For what reason, I’m not able to say clearly.

“I said it was because of Anna, to do what was right because whoever hurt her needs to pay. But the truth is—”

I cut off her explanation with a wry laugh. “Truth? Aren’t you afraid the very word will burn on your lying tongue?”

I see the anger and pain glittering in the corners of her eyes, but she swallows the barb down.

“The *truth* is that I wanted to see you. I couldn’t

reconcile this monster Claire was talking about with the man I met. You were powerful, and yes, a little scary . . . but no monster. You risked things to keep me safe, and I felt something in return. So I agreed to meet with you to prep and to have dinner. I know it's all a tangled web, but I swear, the setup was fake, but the rest . . . it's real. That night was real.”

I clear my throat and watch her look at me with so much hurt and hope that I can't help but let her have it. “I want to believe you. God help me for being stupid and gullible, but I want to. But I can't. Not yet, at least,” I say, hooking her with false hopes. At least I hope they're false, but I'm honestly not sure.

“So I'm going to test you, and you're going to go along with it, or I'll have my answer.”

It's a dark promise, one of death and destruction or salvation and hope. And for one of the few times in my life since I put down the combat boots and picked up the wingtips, I've given her total freedom. It's completely in the palm of her hand to do with as she chooses.

Every cell in my body knows the answer already. She will falter. People always do.

There's no reason for someone like her to be

involved in a world as dark as mine. It's not like I'm the sort of man who can give her the security and safety she obviously deserves and desires, even if she thinks differently.

And though she's here, she will eventually leave, run screaming for the safety of her comfortable life where a dangerous night is closing the club down at two AM and a big deal is coupons on candles at her favorite store.

She lives in a world of silk ease, even if she is slightly rebelling. I live in a world of billion-dollar deals wrapped with deadly coercion and topped off by shiny gilded bows of luxury.

We couldn't be more different.

"Test me how?" Nervousness makes her voice waver, but I can see that her body is rattled in a different way. Something inside her wants to be tested . . . maybe the same thing that made an eighteen-year-old me go into the military and then later into other pursuits.

"You're going to ride this deal with Nikolai out with me. And keep telling your sister and the FBI exactly what I want them to know, nothing more and nothing less," I order. "More importantly, you're going to tell me everything they know about me and my family. I want it all."

“Like a double agent?” she ventures as if this is some James Bond movie.

I nod, letting her have her little bit of wordplay as a shield. It’ll help, and I’ll make sure she’s fully aware before I truly test her strength. “Yes. I’ll admit to feeling a bit dirty about using you this way, but I suppose it’s only fair since you were using me first.”

The jab hits home just like I knew it would.

“If you’re going to use me, at least tell me why you really want access to the caves,” she replies, bitterness tinging her response. “I know it has nothing to do with your dad, and maybe I could help.”

“Help? I think you’re doing more than enough,” I tell her dismissively.

“The Carajas National Park in Brazil mainly falls in the state of Pará. There is a cave system there, where a civilization thrived more than 8000 years ago. Unfortunately, they didn’t leave much of a written record behind. What I know of that area, most of the land is being destroyed by mining before exploration can be done. It’s a potential archaeological loss and infrastructure disaster.”

She rattles off the facts like she’s reading from a



textbook, and I clap sarcastically. “Is that supposed to impress me? You are a research assistant, correct? So a Wikipedia page summary is weak at best, useless at worst.”

She glowers, standing up and planting her palms on my desk as she looms over the desk. “I’m not stupid, and I can help if you’ll let me. Or is your plan to continue this adversarial bickering until you decide one way or another? Newsflash, bucko. I did some shady shit, as I’m well aware, but I’m trying to make up for it because for some reason, I like you.”

She lets her words hang on the air for a minute, then continues. “Hell, I take it back. Maybe I am stupid as fuck because you’re making me feel like I shouldn’t even try here. I’m telling you everything, even the stuff that could get me killed, get my sister fired, and make you hate me. I’m taking all of this and rolling it up into one mega-burrito of suckage, and you’re sitting over there tossing out insults like this is a carnival ring toss game. How about this? You tell me how we *fix* this?”

Her fire is beautifully painful as she drives a sharp nail into the stack of folders in front of me. Ironically, the one she’s gouging with the tip of her pink nail is the one most relevant. I’m about to do something really fucking stupid, but I want to see

just how far she'll go and how much she knows.

This test is do or die, maybe for us both.

I open the file, turning it around to face her. "What do you see?"

She looks down, her eyes quickly flittering over the paper. "A map. Brazil, Pará state, Carajas National Park."

"What else?"

She studies for a moment. "The dots here represent various caves, from what I remember, although closer north is where they've found significant pieces, ceramic vessels and amethyst and quartz tools showing habitation by indigenous groups."

I lift an eyebrow. Now she's showing me a bit more of her skill. "Go on."

"If I were to guess, it's likely there are discoveries literally in each and every one of these caves, some more impactful, some less, but I'd bet, and so would every real archeologist, that we could learn a ton about this civilization. But we can't get in."

"Oh, but I can." I let that sink in and see the moment she mentally connects the dots about my negotiations with Nikolai.

"What are you after? I'd assume a gemstone

because of your company, but it's more likely that the area would contain artistic artifacts—figurines, drawings, remnants of vessels. Not exactly a pink diamond.”

“Tell me about the people there,” I say, ignoring her question and pointing at the map. “Not the Brazilians. The indigenous tribes.”

She launches into another blast of information, and I'm honestly a little surprised by her knowledge.

I certainly didn't think her stupid, but this is not your average dinner conversation trivia. Her book smarts information is vast, varied, and maybe even as useful as she'd claimed.

“New assignment, or additional, I suppose. I want you to research the cave system, the peoples, the possible findings in the area, everything you can get your hands on. Quietly, also known as ‘don't tell your sister.’ Think you can handle that?”

She sighs heavily, then comes around to sit on my desk. Her ass is on top of the map we were just studying, and it amuses me because it is the last bit of my father's ill-conceived, ill-fated legacy.

The heat coming from her warms me, though I somehow didn't realize just how cold I'd gotten during our discussion.

It's like she's pulling all the warmth in the room, but as she smiles at me, the edges more than a little sad, she gives it back full force.

“I will do it . . . *all* of it. Play along as Kitty for Nikolai, tell my sister things as long as it doesn't affect her career or safety, tell you what they know as long it doesn't impact Claire, and research whatever you need me to. But what I need you to realize is that I'm doing this because I feel something between us. Maybe if I do these things for you, you'll finally see that and truly accept it.”

She bends and lays a soft kiss on my lips, and it's almost as if I can taste the truth in her, like a sour candy, the first bite of the coating puckering and painful like her lies but underneath, the pure sugary goodness of what I hope, pray, and dream is real.

# Chapter 19

## Carly

My phone rings, and for no good reason, my heart jumps into my throat with hope that it's Kyle.

But it can't be Kyle. He doesn't even have my phone number.

I mean, he could get ahold of me through Strega if he was so inclined. She's one of half a dozen people I've given it to.

But since he hasn't, yeah, there's that one step back. But I'm still proud of the two steps forward because I get the feeling he's never admitted his pain to anyone before. But he's said it twice now . . . to me.

I still wonder who Anna was to him.

Scratch that—who she is to him, because she's obviously still alive and well in his heart. And speaking of alive, I wonder how she died. Because he's carrying around an elephant's share of guilt.

Somehow, even though I saw him the first time

nearly kill a man in a back alley, he doesn't strike me as violent. Maybe he uses violence, but I don't see him hurting someone for real, especially not a woman.

So wrapping back around, who is she, what does she mean to Kyle, and what happened to her? Just your usual everyday questions about the guy you're obsessing about, right? Not.

But I pick up the phone, even though it's not Kyle with the answers to my nosy questions.

"Hey, girl!" I tell Emma by way of greeting.

"Hey yourself! T-minus one week. You ready for some NYC and me?"

"You, always. NYC, I could do without, mostly. What've you got planned for us?"

"Mani-pedis, of course, lunch, and late-night gabfests over pizza. But there's a big gala while you're here too, so we can go to that," Emma says excitedly.

"Gala? I don't know. I don't want to risk running into my parents."

I feel like such a shit for saying that, but it's the truth. I'm still in avoidance mode, though it's starting to feel more like stasis than a big change.

I just don't need their drama in my life. I'm happier on my own without them.

But I can almost hear Emma shaking her head. "No parents, I promise. It's a Broadway celebration-type thing, nothing they'd be interested in anyway. Plus, I'm hoping I'll have a date."

Parents forgotten, I go into greedy girlfriend mode, demanding information. "Okay, now shit just got interesting. Who's the guy?"

But she's clammed up all of a sudden, even though she's the one who brought up the mystery guy. "I shouldn't have said anything. It's complicated."

"Complicated means he has a wife and kids, right?" I ask, aghast. "You're better than that! Don't you dare be a side bitch, bitch!"

Her laughter takes me back to high school sleepovers, when we'd lie in the dark and talk all night. "He's not married and I'm not a side piece. We just didn't get off on the right foot and it's hard to right the train when it's barely dangling on the track."

"Ew, barely dangling is not a word you should use to describe any man you're interested in. Ever."

"What about you?" she says defensively, changing the subject while telling me a few things . . .

including that ‘barely’ hardly applies to Mr. Mystery’s dangle. “Anybody dangling on your track?”

Her voice is all innuendo, and again, I wrinkle my nose.

“You said you didn’t really want to talk about mystery men. Well, me neither. I’m hung up on a guy who pretty much wishes I’d just leave him alone, but he needs me.”

“Of course, he does. Everyone needs a bit of Carly in their life. Me especially!” We laugh and then Emma says quietly, “Do we sound like schmucks or what? Both of us chasing after guys when they should be chasing us. Pitiful.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Grade-A schmucks. We just need a bald friend and we could be The Three Schmucks. Or wait, wasn’t it Three Stooges? Whatever, point is, you know anyone willing to shave their head to hang with us?”

Emma laughs, but after a moment of silence, she whispers, “I don’t know why I said that. I don’t feel like a schmuck. I feel . . . hungry. For him.”

I grin ruefully, knowing what she means. “I think the word you meant is horny.”

She snorts instead of laughs, but I think she feels



like her word described it better. I know it did for me, even if I don't want to admit it out loud.

Hungry. For his attention, for his story, for his truth, for his soul. Okay, and maybe for his cock too. I'm a woman. I have needs. And they've been ignored for far too long.

We banter on about life, the differences between us ever growing but the connection always as if we still see each other every day at school. Emma's just always been my other half. Ten thousand miles and months apart can't change that.

When we hang up with promises of seeing each other soon, I dance around a bit in excitement. One week. NYC and Emma. One I can do without, one I absolutely cannot.

I yank on my performance clothes and hustle out of the hostel to hit the sidewalks a little early for tourist night. But as I make strides down the street, scanning my surroundings for anything sketchy just to be on the safe side, I see something unexpected.

Or rather, someone.

"Hey! Excuse me," I call out. Several people turn to look at me, but not the one I'm after. I scoot through a couple of people and try again. "Hey!"

And he turns around. I offer a big smile like we're

old friends, because I guess to me, he kinda feels like one. I've got a whole story in my head of what he's like, who he is, what he means to Kyle.

He smiles back, stopping to let me catch up.

“Hello. Do I know you?” he asks, confusion marring his face.

“No, well, yes. Kind of. I'm Carly, a friend of Kyle's.”

His face changes, harder and less open. “Raul, but Kyle's no friend. Excuse me.”

He turns to walk away and I call out, “Just wanted to see if you're okay. I, uh, I saw what happened.”

He freezes, looking over his shoulder. “Nothing happened. But you said Kyle's a friend of yours? You should know . . . he doesn't have friends.” He shakes his head. “He's dangerous, and you should get away from him while you can.”

His tone is ominous, like he can see into the future and Kyle's going to flip out and go postal. Actually, I could maybe see that too with as tightly wound as he is.

But it's not his true nature, instead one created through loss, grown with pain and anger, and watered with tears. I don't think he's the cornered

animal that'll bite to get away, but he is the lion with a thorn in its paw, sitting alone and licking his wounds.

It doesn't have to be that way. I can help him recreate a better future again.

If only I could find him.

Kyle

It's been days since I walked out of Strega's.

I found another coffee shop, but it's not nearly as good.

And I miss it.

The coffee, not Strega, and definitely not Carly.

The lie doesn't even slip into my consciousness because my brain laughs at me for even trying to pretend that's true.

But I refuse to give in to the urge to go see her. Instead, I've spent the past few days focusing on my research, the only thing that can distract me from imagining Carly's dark hair fisted in my hand as I slip into her.

It's harder to get quality intel across the ocean, away from the familiar networks I've cultivated in

Europe, but it's doable. And I've spent every waking moment and the ones I should've been sleeping deep-diving into Nathan Stone's life.

I feel like I know everything now. His strengths, weakness, history, and future. Same for his brother and company. I want to know it all.

There's no hiding anymore, Nathan. I know what you did and I'm coming for you.

It won't bring Anna and our babe back, but I pray it gives them some peace, and in return, a little sliver of peace for myself too. A moment of not feeling guilty, where I can just be a regular Joe.

# Chapter 20

## Nathan

“We don’t keep secrets,” I start. “No matter what. No secrets, and it’s me and you, always.”

Caleb’s sitting across the island from me, chugging a protein shake that looks disgusting, green and chunky, and every few sips he shakes it again, like he’s trying to make the fucked-up mess half palatable.

I turn the stove burner down, slowly stirring my eggs, getting the cheese mixed in just right. Grant wishes we’d let him make us breakfast, but it’s one of the few things I’m good at cooking, so I enjoy this sometimes.

Things are mostly back to normal after our knock-down fight. What can I say, we’re brothers. We tear shit up, fight, but love each other fiercely.

Usually, any argument or tussle is left in the moment.

We’ve even gone straight from exhausted panting when one fight got a little long, straight to the beer-

drinking make-up. But this time, I'm gearing up for another round.

Caleb looks at me like I've grown a second head on my shoulder. "Yeah, I know. I feel like you're building up to something here. What's up?"

I remember the first time we made that pact. No secrets, no matter what. It'd been me doing stupid shit that time.

*Sneaking down the hallway, I hold my shoes in my hand, not even risking a tell-tale squeak that'll get me caught.*

*I'm almost home-free, the back door half-open and one bare foot on the cool concrete patio when I hear the small voice. Caleb.*

*"Nathan? Where are you going?"*

*"Oh, hey. Just out for a minute. I'll be back soon. Go to bed and I'll see you in the morning." I keep my voice down, not wanting to wake up Grant. Even in my teenage wisdom, I knew the real danger wasn't in waking up Dad but in waking up Grant because he's the one who doles out actual punishment and lectures me.*

*"Where are you going?" he asks again, not letting it go.*

*“Out. Don’t say anything and we’ll hang out tomorrow, ‘kay?”*

*I’m such a shit, bribing my only brother with hangout time to buy his silence. We both know we’d be hanging out together anyway. It’s me and him against the world, but not tonight. Tonight, I have plans of my own.*

*Lacey Ninninger.*

*Caleb rolls his eyes in that way only teenagers can manage and throws a two-fingered wave my direction as he heads back to bed.*

*Leaving Caleb behind, I finish sneaking out. My plans tonight? Meeting Lacey and the gang on the other side of town.*

*They’d asked if I was going to bring Caleb. They’re good like that, better than most friends would be about someone’s sixteen-year-old little brother. It’s not that we’re much older, but sixteen and eighteen feel miles apart. And to be honest, as shitty as it may be and as much as I love him, I just want a night off. No responsibilities, no rules, no anything. Just wild and young and free.*

That freedom had lasted till about five AM, when the cops had pulled up to the field we were parking in, half of us drunk and my hand up Lacey’s school

T-shirt. They'd taken all our keys, piled us in the cop cars, and delivered us one by one.

Thankfully, the cops had told Grant, not Dad, because I was willing to take the lecture and grounding over what would've been Dad's screaming disappointment that I'd been picked up for drinking, trespassing, and lewd acts in public.

I'd scoffed at the last one. Lacey and I had barely even gotten hands inside clothes when the cops pulled up, but apparently, her straddling me and grinding against my cock were considered lewd when she's the minister's daughter.

We'd still been fully clothed, for fuck's sake, but it'd stuck, along with the other charges.

A fine and a promise to do better and I was on my way though. That's how it was for kids like us.

Back in the past, I remember Caleb's anguish.

*"You could've just told me you were going out with Lacey and everyone. I would've been fine with it. Hell, I would've covered for you."*

*"It wasn't that. I just needed . . ."*

*"What?"*

*"To get away. From everything and everyone. Dad, Grant, even you. I just needed out for a minute."*



*Caleb thinks for a moment, then nods. "I get it. Tell me when you're at your limits. I've got your back. That's what brothers do. No secrets, no matter what. Just spit that shit out and we'll handle it."*

That'd been the year he caught me in height, and at the time of that conversation, we'd been pretty spot-on even, though we'd go on to grow and pace each other over the next several years until we finally stopped with Caleb just an inch taller.

But in that moment, it'd been the first time I felt like we were equals, partners, each other's responsibility, not just me taking care of him.

"No secrets, no matter what. I'm putting that shit to the test," I say as warning. "I talked to Emma. You know with all the name and hostess stuff, the setup was just slick, yeah?"

His eyes narrow. He's always been more suspicious than I am. I'm a tank. If it's fucked, I'll just drive right over that shit and handle it.

He's like a drone, in and out so fast and smooth, you never even knew it was there.

"There's more," he says, guessing correctly.

I plate my eggs and bring them to the island too, but I can't swallow a bite. My fork clatters on the plate

as I set it down, not even trying. “It’s her sister, Claire. She’s FBI.”

The explosion is instantaneous. Caleb’s drink slams to the counter as he pops off the stool and yells, “What the fuck, Nathan? FBI?” But like a true soldier, he goes into sit-rep mode. “Okay, so business is fine, no worries there. You’ve got it all aboveboard. I’ll go see Jake today, give him a heads up. Probably need to cancel my trip to Bolivia, and you need to quit the shit with Nikolai.”

He’s rambling, but that one stops him short.

“That’s what this is about, isn’t it? The FBI is snooping around because of Nikolai Fucking Romanov.”

“Yes and no. It’s Nikolai, but also Anna and Dad,” I explain. “I think they’ve just got a hard-on for me, for the business. But mostly, me.” I sigh, feeling the weight and wishing there were a target I could just take out. Mission set, acquire target, execute, exfil. All that’s left after that is the AAR and the beer.

This is messy, though, so fucking messy. With business and emotions and family all tied up in one giant mess, it’s damn near a shit sandwich.

“And Emma, she just told you all this?” he asks,

pitching his voice high, feminine and fake. “So Nate-y Wate-y, remember how I lied about my name and my job? Turns out I lied about other shit too. But it’s fine. See, look here at my magical pussy. Everything is *fine*, just *fine*.”

I throw a jab at his shoulder, trying not to laugh even as he pisses me off. What is it about siblings that make you want to kill them even as they amuse you, anyway? “Shut the fuck up. It’s not like that and you damn well know it.”

He glares at me, silently asking ‘really?’ but then he breaks and chugs more protein drink. “That’s what it looks like from here. My job is to keep you safe, and fucking around with the FBI is a sure-fire way to be *not-safe*. Get your head out of your ass, man. And what’s up with Dad and Anna? Nikolai I get, but that’s been ages ago. Case closed. Or do they have a new lead?”

“You’re looking at suspect number one,” I reply tiredly. “They think I’m some Daddy killing, company stealing shit who then killed Anna and her baby because she was asking too many questions. Did you know she was pregnant?”

Caleb shakes his head, surprised. “No, I never even met her. Just knew the name because she helped Dad. You?”

I shake my head as well, trying to remember what I can of Anna. “I talked to her once, right after Dad was killed, because she called to give him some report he’d been hounding her about. I called her back to say she didn’t have to worry about it anymore. She was upset about Dad, more than me, actually. Never talked to her before or after, and then she was dead.”

“Suspicious circumstances?”

I look off to the side, remembering. “The Italian police called when she died because I was one of the last numbers she’d dialed. But they didn’t seem interested when I told them who I was and what the call had been about. Just thanked me for my cooperation. At the time, I looked into it some to make sure it wasn’t connected to Dad’s murder because it seemed suspicious to me. But I never found anything connecting them, so I dropped it when they deemed her death an unfortunate random act of violence. We’ve got enough on our plates.”

It sounds callous, but Caleb understands that this is the time for straight talk, and I’m not the world’s savior. “Okay, so go back. What are we going to do about Emma? You broke off all contact, yeah?”

He says it like that’s obvious. Honestly, it is, but I can’t stand the thought of it.

“Well, no. I’m turning it around.” I tell him about the double-agent stuff I arranged with her, and Caleb’s eyebrow lifts as he muses the possibilities.

“You flipped her? You sure about that?”

“As sure as I can be. She says the feelings are real, not fake, and she got carried away with all the FBI stuff and didn’t know how to get out,” I reply, finally eating some eggs. “She took a real risk telling me what she did.”

“And you believe her?” Caleb asks. “You know the easiest scam to pull is to get caught, retreat, and then tell a half-truth instead of a whole lie. What about your feelings? For fuck’s sake, please tell me your feelings are that both she and her sister need to disappear.”

I press my lips together, knowing he won’t like this, but I let him in deeper. “*No secrets, no matter what.* There’s something there.”

Three little words, so much meaning, an impact that echoes through the room, through our relationship.

He runs his hands through his hair, yanking at the strands. He’s embraced the relaxed hair standards of nonmilitary life more than I have, that’s for sure. “Fuck, Nathan. Fuck.” He glares at me, and I take it all, knowing it’s warranted.

“I pulled everything I could on Emma and her sister. File’s on my desk. Take it and go through it. See if there’s anything I missed. Please.”

He growls his frustration, but he nods as he grabs his cup and heads back to the office to start digging into everything Emma Daniels and Claire Daniels have ever known, done, or said. He doesn’t want to do it, would rather I wash my hands of the whole thing, but he’s got my back. If it’s important to me, it’s important to him. That’s what brothers do.

I dump the rest of my eggs in the trash, uneaten. I need something else even more.

# Chapter 21

## Emma

The loud bang on my door resonates through my apartment, likely disturbing everyone in the whole building. Not Claire's pattern, but urgent nevertheless.

I peek through the peephole and see Nathan there, and my hands fly to my lock. I don't make him wait, too afraid he'll leave.

When I open the door, he puts a hand on either side of the frame, caging me inside my own apartment but not entering either.

“This is not the way to do this, but fuck if anything else has been right. The only way I know how to tell for sure what's real and what's fake is to break down every fucking wall between us. It's the only way.”

Whoa. Talk about an honest and just . . . out there declaration. It's so surprising I hesitate. It's not what I expected, but at the same time, it's what my heart's been yearning for.

A chance at redemption.

I know what he's asking of me. He's telling me that I'll have to go all-in.

That's a scary thought under the best of circumstances, and we have probably the worst set of circumstances Hollywood could script between the mindfuck his dad laid on him and then the one I just pulled.

I'm not much better, suddenly falling inexplicably and deeply for the bad boy who should be strictly off-limits.

Oh, he may not have a motorcycle and leather jacket, but he is the ultimate in bad boys, the power in his charm and expensive suits as he holds court in the boardroom or whatever it is his business does.

Everything is against us.

And still I jump at the opportunity and fling myself off the edge, praying he'll catch me and that this isn't some twisted retribution.

I back away from the door slowly, walking backward to the living room so as not to break eye contact. I make sure I'm in full view from where he stands in the doorway, and I sink to my knees.



It may not have been something I've ever done before, or at least not before that frightening moment at the party.

But it's the only thing I can think of to show that I'm at his mercy, open and vulnerable, willing to let him take everything.

It's how we started, and now, it'll be how we start again.

I feel my lips tilt up in hope. "Nathan, come in."

It'll be the last order I issue.

He's on me in six strides, the slam of the door closing still echoing in the room when he grabs a handful of my hair and tilts my head up for a kiss.

No, not a kiss.

Though our mouths move against one another, our tongues tangle, and our breaths mingle, this is a possession.

He is taking me—my breath, my body, my power—in this instant.

I arch in surrender to his power, trying to get even closer to him as he leans over me.

But he fights me, moving his hands to grip my face in his palms. His eyes steady on mine, and his truth

is painful. “I am so fucking furious at you. I hate you, hate that you lied, hate that I don’t know if you’re still lying, hate that I had to defend myself to my brother, hate that I’m here when everything screams at me to stay away. But here I am. I hate you.”

He shakes my head slightly, triggering the tears in my eyes to spill over, down my cheeks.

But I don’t push him away.

I did this to him, to us.

Maybe it would’ve been different if we’d just met on the street or at a bar somewhere.

The fantasy plays out in my head . . . casually running into him after a big day at the office, flirting with each other, and he’d gently push a lock of hair behind my ear and give me that charming smile.

I imagine dates and sweet sex and a relationship built on solid ground that nothing could shake.

But that’s not what happened. The same voice that asks for the fantasy knows that if we’d met in a coffee shop, we’d have made eyes, maybe had a date or two, and then our lives would have gotten in the way.

No, it took this fucked up situation to bring us together like this.

I'm shaking, though, shivering in his hands as he tastes my skin. We didn't get that fantasy. And now I need to see this reality through.

"Why you?" he murmurs against the skin of my neck. "I didn't want anyone. Ever. But why you?"

He doesn't want me to answer, more talking himself out of this, and that's the last thing I want.

So even though it shreds my heart, I tell him something else he doesn't know.

"If it'd been easy, you wouldn't have wanted it. Wouldn't have trusted that either. Fate set us both up."

"So you want to what, just start fresh?" he snarls, anger and desire sweeping through him in equal measure, judging by the darkness in his eyes.

My fingers trace up his legs, so gentle he might not even realize they're there, but I shake my head. "No, not fresh. But to continue, to right things from here. The only way was for it to be messy, but we can clean it up together. Get through all this . . . together. I'm sorry for everything I've done, but I want you. This. Us."

The words ignite something in him, maybe touching the part inside him that's never felt wanted, and he yanks me to my feet. He grabs the hem of my shirt, ripping it over my head as I hear a seam give way.

Then he does the same to my jeans, swatting at my hip to get me to step out of them.

In seconds, I'm naked before him.

Not just physically, but emotionally and mentally as well.

Anything he wants, any truth I have to give, it's his. He's fully dressed, just as he symbolically shuts me out, fortifying his shields.

He reaches forward, taking my neck in his palm. Not choking like in the car, but off to the side, fingers wrapped around the nape and his thumb keeping my chin lifted.

Slowly, he starts his punishment. I take it all, hoping we can scourge the ugly lies and come out the other side of this purified and clean.

And together.

He tweaks my nipple sharply, the cry escaping before I can stop it. And when Nathan's eyes meet mine, they're dark and deep.

There will be no mercy here tonight.

He repeats his torture to the other side, and when my nipples are sensitive and red, only then does he move his mouth toward them.

Normally, I'd pray for a soft lick, a nuzzle to balance, but not this time.

When he latches on and sucks forcefully, it's everything I want. I arch my back, my hands moving to his head, not to push him away but to pull him in harder, hoping the sweetness of my skin can temper the venom in his blood.

“Spread your legs, kitty.”

I'm not sure if it's a cut at the false name or an endearment. I'm not sure he knows either—likely a mix of both—but I spread my feet wider.

He doesn't trail a touch down my body, doesn't cup my pussy like a lover.

No, he rears back and slaps my clit. Hard. The first touch, but I'm already dripping wet so even the angry snap of it feels good in a twisted way. Just like us.

I moan, a ripple going through my body as I sag.

He takes my weight into his hand, propping me up by my neck before doing it again. My hips violently buck this time, the pain too bright and the desire

too overwhelming.

I watch an arrogant smirk spread his lips as he watches my pussy clench and release. “Bad kitty. There’ll be no relief tonight. At least, not for a while.”

It takes me a moment to figure out what he means. But when I realize he’s intending to work me over and then deny me a final release, the tears slip down my cheeks faster.

It’s not that I want him for the orgasms, but that his cruelty is so shocking. It shouldn’t be. I know what Claire said, how strongly she’s warned me, but Nathan isn’t an evil man. Hurt, suspicious, cautious, calculating, yes, all those things.

But that my actions have driven him this far, this deep into depravity, saddens me. Because nothing else has. Not the lonely childhood, not years of seeing atrocities in the service, not the death of his father.

None of those broke him.

I did.

Guilt consumes me along with a promise to fix it, fix him. Whatever it takes. I steel my core, knowing it’ll take all I have.

His fingers move against me, brushing my clit. It's so good, almost exactly what I need. So he takes it away.

He does it again and again. Touches so light I can barely register them, but my body does, mixed in with rough rubbings, slaps, and even pinches to my clit. And my pussy reacts powerfully to every bit of it, my honey making his every move slippery and easy.

I'm going mad, only standing because of his continued grip on my neck as I beg. "Oh, my God, Nathan . . . please."

But he is immune to my pleas, just continuing the delicious torture, taking me to the edge again and again but never letting me fall over into the abyss.

"Your mouth lies time and time again, but your pussy tells the truth. Whatever you wanted from me when you walked into that party, this wants my cock."

He cups my pussy roughly. "This is truth right here."

He sweeps his fingers through my juices, bringing his messy fingers to his mouth.

"Fucking delicious. Your *truth* is delicious."

He shoves his fingers into my mouth, making me taste myself. I lick and slurp at his fingers, even when he pushes a little too far and I gag a bit. He chuckles darkly.

“Truth is hard to swallow, huh?”

My eyes narrow, and I suck his fingers hard, hollowing my cheeks and not letting them go. But he gets them free of my mouth, so I say, “I want the truth. All of it. Nothing between us, no lies, no secrets.”

He spins me, pushing me over the arm of my living room chair. Face down, ass up, I hear him undoing his jeans. And God help me, I wiggle my ass like a red cape in front of a raging bull.

I hear a rustle of fabric, and he’s naked behind me. He grabs my shoulder with one hand, forcing me to arch, and uses his other to line his thick cock up with my slit. There’s a sweet moment of anticipation, just his crown touching my entrance, which pulses like it’s kissing his cock.

His moves his hand to grip my hip and slams into me, one powerful thrust to the hilt.

I cry out at the invasion, so good but so full, and my walls spasm around him instantly. He smacks my ass hard. “Don’t you dare fucking come,



Emma. I'm gonna fuck you rough and hard, punish you for your lies. And you'd better not come. Understood?"

I nod, my cheek pressed to the seat cushion of the chair, and agreement received, he does as he promised. A man of his word, even if I'm not a woman of mine.

Each pounding stroke shakes my body, my ass jiggling in waves from his power. He takes each cheek in hand, squeezing so hard I know I'll have bruises where his fingertips are as he spreads me wide.

I try to look back over my shoulder, trying to meet his eyes and see if there's anything there or if this is as cold as it feels.

But his eyes are locked on our junction, watching his cock disappear inside me with every stroke.

True pain washes through me, and I bury my head back in the cushion.

Maybe I was wrong.

Maybe I can't fix this, can't save us.

I'm giving him everything, and on some level, it physically feels good.

But whereas I'd hoped it'd be a cathartic cleansing,

emotionally, it seems like he's even further away than before.

I cry out in pain.

My soul, not my body.

His hips pause a moment and his eyes flick up to check on me. And there, I feel it. Deep underneath the anguish and anger, it's there. Hope.

“Fuck, Em,” he says, and I know he feels it too.

He probably senses even more than that because whether this is hopeless or not, I feel something big for Nathan.

“Look at me,” he rasps, and I look back as he starts again, hammering into me, using his grip on my hips to guide me at his punishing pace. Forcing me to ride him even as he fucks me. My clit rubs along the chair, and I'm so close, but I won't come. He told me not to, and as much as my body wants it, my heart knows I need to stave it off this time.

For him. A sign of trustworthiness, loyalty, sacrifice.

He must feel my walls clenching, squeezing him too, and I know he feels me lift off the chair, changing the angle he enters me so that I'm not getting the extra stimulation. He misses his rhythm,

thrusting erratically for a moment, and then he pushes me back down against the chair.

“No, kitty. Do it. Come for me.” It’s a permission I didn’t think to hear. It’s one I don’t think he thought he’d give, judging by the raspy way it forced its way out through his clenched teeth.

But I push back, both of us catching a flawless rhythm, and with three strokes, he comes violently, bellowing my name. “Emma!”

Emma, not Kitty and not kitty. Because there’s a difference to all three.

He collapses over me, his slick chest to my back as he buries his nose in my hair and his cum in my pussy. I feel a sharp bite at my shoulder and I find myself coming too.

The spasms are never-ending as we ride out our orgasms together, connected as one for at least this moment.

The sparkles at the edges of my vision slowly fade, and I become aware of us both panting for breath.

Nathan pulls out, leaving a void inside me and taking his heat away as he pushes off the chair, standing back.

I move my hair out of my face with a shaky hand,

realizing that might've been it for us. At least for him.

My heart stutters as I turn around, lifting off the chair to stand.

His eyes roam my body, and his voice is awed as he looks at me. "Jesus, are you okay?"

I look down, seeing the hickies already blooming on my breasts, the pink scratch lines along my hips, and feeling the dots of bruises on my ass. Plus, what little makeup I had on feels like it's smeared all over my face, there's sweat everywhere, and I can see my hair in my peripheral vision so it must be a mess too.

In short, he's utterly ravaged me. Physically.

But it's nothing compared to the turmoil inside.

"I'm okay. I'm better than okay," I say with a sad smile, "if *we're* okay."

He wipes at my cheek with his thumb but gives up at whatever smudge he's trying to wipe off. Instead, he pulls me to him, cradling my cheek to his chest. I can feel his heart racing.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to . . ."

He's talking about the rough sex. I can hear it in his tone.

I pull back, meeting his eyes. “Nathan, physically, I could do that again with you right now. I love it when you touch me, in any way, in every way. Bruises will fade, and Pantene’s damn near my best friend. But what I need is here,” I say as I touch his chest over his heart, “and here.” I touch his temple.

He sighs, sadness in his eyes. “Emma, you’re tearing me in half. I know what I want to believe, what feels true, but I don’t know if I trust you. Or maybe it’s that I don’t trust myself. I need time, I think.”

It’s a reasonable request and one he has every right to. It’d be so easy for him to walk away, and that he’s not gives me hope that maybe there’s a chance.

But if not, I need to lay it all on the table. “No secrets, Nathan. I—”

He presses a finger to my lips, stopping me, though he obviously knows what I was about to say. “Not like this.”

He doesn’t say it either. I wouldn’t want him to.

Not when he’s uncertain.

But I don’t doubt what’s in my heart, not a bit. I don’t care how long we’ve known each other or how we started. I know.

# Chapter 22

## Carly

I take one last sip of my espresso, tossing the three-pack of *biscotti* Strega wrapped up for me into my carry-on bag. I'll likely eat them all on the plane, but that's okay. Strega's baked goods are better than anything Alitalia's going to serve me.

"*Tesoro*, you're coming back, right? You promised," Strega calls from behind the counter, her arms open wide for a hug. I wrap my arms around her considerable size, wishing for the umpteenth time that she was my mother. Life with her as a parent would be a hoot, and I would've felt actual affection growing up. I sink into the hug for a second longer, memorizing everything about it.

"I'll be back," I reply as I pat her on her back. "I don't know how long I'll be gone, but I'll be back. I promise."

My eyes drift over to the chair I always think of as 'Kyle's.'

It's empty, same as it's been for two weeks since he

made the big step forward. I'd expected the reverse, but his backslide has been worse than I thought it'd be. I haven't seen him, not at Strega's, the market, my shows . . . anywhere.

I even went by his apartment, banged on the door until the neighbors came out and said they hadn't seen him either.

"I'm worried about him. Will you keep an eye out for him? And if he comes in, stuff him full of *biscotti* and *cornetti* and FaceTime me right then so I can give him a piece of my mind. I don't care how late or what time it is in NYC, okay?"

Strega's smile is sad. "Just because you cannot save them all does not mean you stop trying. *Stronzino*, he is a hard case, I think. Maybe choose easier next time you want to play guardian angel."

It's wise advice, *motherly*, I think with another pang.

"The heart wants what the heart wants," I reply wistfully. It's a common phrase in Italy, used for everything from wanting the bad boy to drinking too much wine with dinner. It's uselessly and endlessly used to excuse a myriad of things.

"Ah, but the brain must sometimes get involved and tell the heart to sit down and shut up." She zips

an imaginary zipper across her lips and tosses the key over her shoulder. “You think about that next time, *Tesoro*. But yes, I will watch for him.”

Walking out of the café feels final somehow, though I do have every intention of returning. But I have floated far too long and far too wide to make guesses about where I’ll go after being with Emma. I’m perfectly willing to go wherever the wind blows.

I just wish it wasn’t back to NYC.

The fourteen total hours to get back to New York go smoothly, mostly in a doze in my seat, and I do end up eating all three *biscotti*. The heart wants what it wants.

I’m glad I don’t have to mess with baggage claim. It makes TSA easy, but it does seem a bit sad that my entire life can be contained in one carry-on suitcase and a big backpack.

But long months of trekking through Europe carrying everything by myself has made me selective and an excellent packer. I could give Marie Kondo lessons in decluttering.

I finally make it out to the public space and scan, looking for Emma. Her blonde hair peeks out from behind a reuniting family and I squeal. “Emma!”



In an instant, my suitcase wheels are flying over the tile, clicking madly as I airport-run as fast as I can toward her, and she waves, seeing me.

“Carly!” she squeals back, running for me too.

We meet in the middle, hugging and jumping up and down in a circle. We probably look like loons to anyone watching, but I can’t give them a second’s thought with my bestie right here with me. Finally.

“Oh, my gosh! You cut your hair!” she says, playing with my current shag. I laugh, not wanting to tell her that this time, it’s simply six months of growing out after a self-chop in Sarajevo.

“Yeah, about fifteen times,” I laugh, shaking my head. “You too! You look great!”

I yank her back in for another hug, stockpiling them today like I’ll never get another.

A throat clears from behind her, and at first, I think we’re in the way. But when Emma looks over her shoulder, I can see the affection in her eyes as plain as day. I grin big and wide, scanning him from head to toe.

He’s nowhere near as sexy as Kyle, in my opinion, but Emma certainly knows how to pick some USDA choice beef. I offer my hand. “You must be the ‘It’s Complicated’ man.”

He raises a brow and glances at Emma, who rushes to do introductions. “Carly Edwards, this is Nathan Stone. Nathan, this is Carly. My best friend in the whole wide world.”

We shake hands and he smiles tightly. “You must be the Europe-hopping rebel.”

I glance to Emma too, and she throws her hands wide. “What? I’m not wrong about either of you. Come on, we’ve got things to do!”

Nathan leads the way, letting us catch up as he clears a path for our mindless walking. Honestly, if he wasn’t directing traffic for us, I’d probably walk into a pole, I’m just so excited to see Emma.

As we move, I whisper so Nathan can’t hear. “Oh, my God, he’s a hunk!”

Emma beams, her eyes fixed on Nathan’s butt in his tailored suit and a blush creeping across her cheeks. “I know!”

I lift my brows, still knowing Kyle’s . . . hunkier. Is that a word? “You’re sure he’s not married? No kids, no parole violations, no secret dungeon where he wants to tie you up?”

She blushes. “No, none of that. Just a rough start.”

“Are you figuring shit out though? I mean, he’s

here. And not many guys would volunteer to do an airport run unless there was a promise of sex later.”

She giggles, but when she glances toward Nathan’s back, she sobers. “It’s complicated.”

I can tell there’s so much she’s not saying, but this isn’t the time or the place. I know we’ll get into the deeper stuff later, so for now, I help her play it off. I hold my bent pinkie finger up and pout exaggeratedly. “Soooo complicated.”

She laughs loudly at that, moving quickly to push my hand down and hush me. “That’s definitely not the issue.”

“You two okay back there?” Nathan calls over his shoulder.

“Yep, all good,” I reply, winking at a wide-eyed Emma.

Nathan drops us off at Emma’s apartment and disappears, saying work is calling. Though it was nice to meet him, I can feel what Emma’s *not* talking about. When she’s not paying attention, he watches her.

But sometimes his looks seem affectionate and warm, other times almost wary and suspicious. It’s like there’s a running monologue in his head about her, and he can’t decide what to listen to or what to

feel.

But when their eyes meet, there's no question something's happening between them and that their connection is powerful.

I'm just not sure he knows it. Emma, on the other hand, is an open book to me. She loves him.

*The heart wants what the heart wants.*

We pile into her place and spend the next twenty-four hours lost in chatter, in the past, in Europe, and Emma's work, both with Professor Ford and with the play.

Every time I try to steer the conversation around toward her relationship with Nathan, she deflects or waves my comments off. I let it go. Somehow, with everything else we've missed, it's easy to talk about everything under the sun but our love lives. Especially since I don't really want to talk about mine either.



\* \* \*

The next day, and I feel a bit . . . out of sorts. It's been a very long time since I've really laid on the glam and dressed to the nines. I don't even recognize the woman looking back at me in the

mirror.

Emma, of course, looks stunning in a pale grey dress that makes her look like a walking fairy princess as it floats around her, and she lets me borrow a black sheath dress that looks simple from the front but plunges dangerously low in the back.

“How do you have a dress that fits me, anyway?” I ask, looking at her lean, willowy form contrasting with my short, curvy one in the mirror. “You can’t hold one of my boobs in both of your cups.”

She bites her lip, finally grinning. “I knew you wouldn’t have one in your bag from Europe, so I got it for you, secondhand. I had it cleaned and everything. It wasn’t expensive, I promise.”

I look down at the dress, warmed beyond measure that she’d do this for me. Once upon a time, I wore dresses like this damn near every weekend, and I left a closetful of them when I ran away from home. But I haven’t worn something like this in ages. Or more accurately, in a lifetime, because that’s what my time under my parents’ thumb feels like, a lifetime ago.

Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever worn a dress like this, one that someone bought with love because they wanted to spend time with me. To me, it means more than any Vera Wang or Oscar De La

Renta, regardless of the label.

Tears burn in my eyes, and Emma fans my face with her hands. “No, don’t do that, bitch. You just got your makeup finished.” She makes a silly face, and I laugh, just as she intended. “There, that’s better. Come on, we need to go.”

The cab pulls up to the Four Seasons in Tribeca and Emma pulls out an envelope, showing me the invitation as we wait our turn to enter. The thick ivory paper has tonight’s invitation to the festivities honoring the ‘Bastions of Broadway’.

“What’s that mean?” I ask Emma, barely holding back a joke about the Bastards of Broadway. Tonight is important to her, and I’m slipping back into my previous persona, a lady who doesn’t make inappropriate jokes at inconvenient times. Like when I can see the photographers preparing to snap pictures of my best friend.

She gushes in excitement. “They’re celebrating all the past shows on Broadway. Theater people love kissing their own asses. But some of the people currently on Broadway, or just off-Broadway, got invites too. Tonight is like a who’s-who of Broadway actors, actresses, directors, and investors, past, present, and future. All the big players will be here. Plus the upper crust, of course, because you know they’re always the ones who

pay the bills.”

I smile, knowing as well as she does that that’s true. The arts have almost always been dependent on one-percenter patrons, and I thank my lucky stars again that though my parents are part of that upper crust, they find the theater foolish.

The party is in full swing when we arrive, and I indulge in the old fantasy of playing royalty. They’ve rolled out a red carpet, though it’s not an overdone Hollywood-style one, thankfully. This feels classy and fancy but different from most galas I’ve attended.

For one, they’ve created an entire walkway of posters from plays over the years. There must be over one hundred of them on easel stands, ushers inviting people to walk through and see them almost like it’s a museum. I guess in a way, it is. While I’m busy trying not to look like I’m checking out the ballroom decorations too blatantly, Emma squeals.

“Oh, my gosh! Some of the posters are signed! That’s why there are security guards not letting anyone touch them. But look, you can take pictures. You wanna walk it with me?”

I know that this so right up Emma’s alley, she’s going to spend at least the next two hours geeking

her ass off about it all. “I think I’m going to mingle my way to the ladies’ room, and then I’ll join you, okay?”

Emma looks around, knowing what’s on my mind. “You okay?”

I check too, but I’m feeling more relaxed with every minute. “You’re right, this isn’t my parents’ scene. I’m fine. I’ll meet you in a bit. Go get your fandom kicks off. But remember to be professional, girl. No squealing ‘Oh, my God!’ in your out loud voice when you see Lin-Manuel Miranda.”

She freezes, her eyes going wide as she grabs my arm in a death-grip. “What, is he here? Do you see him for real? Where, where?”

I grin and point, and she exhales loudly when she sees the bearded superstar across the room. “Okay, I can do this. It’s fine. I’m fine. Just a nobody actress in her first almost-Broadway play, hobnobbing with the greats. It’s fine. No big deal.”

As far as pep talks go, hers sucks. I can think of a half-dozen movie speeches a lot better.

“You good?” I ask, the tables turned.

She nods and with a grin, she heads for the poster walkway. I watch her walk away, smiling to myself. Fuck, I’ve missed her so much. It’s so good to see



her getting what she wants with her career.

Finally.

She deserves to be happy.

I wonder about Nathan though. She's studiously avoided saying anything about him other than that he's probably going to meet us here later tonight. But she hadn't sounded sure, even though she brushed it off as a work thing.

I wander through the crowd, taking my time as I work toward the bar and get a glass of red wine. I sip and mingle some more, polite conversation here, a smile and nod there. I could do this type of thing in my sleep.

In fact, I have more than once over the years at my parents' events.

But with it being a theater gala, there are artistic types sprinkled throughout the room, so I stop periodically and watch their off-the-cuff conversations, their almost unconscious performances. It's hard to turn off my analysis as a fellow performer, seeing how they work the crowd.

Finally, I've drunk my wine and made my way toward the back of the room.

Setting my empty glass on a service tray, I head for

the restroom to powder my nose.

“Hey there, Carly,” a deep voice calls out behind me. I’d know it anywhere and gooseflesh pops out all over my skin.

Robert.

The abusive bastard.

I turn, terror and horror warring to rise along with the bile in my stomach. No. He’s not here, he can’t be standing three feet away from me, looking at me like I’m his.

But by some strange joke of fate, he’s not three feet away. He’s three inches away as he shoves me up against the wall and presses the length of his body to mine. I freeze and realize I can feel his erection pressing against my stomach.

I cringe, mentally going back in time to his words, his threats, his abuse. I want to scream, want to claw his eyes out, want to knee him in the nuts. But years of debutante training tell me to not make a scene.

Even knowing it’s utter bullshit that I don’t believe in the least, it’s hard to fight it, but I do.

I squirm, looking for an opening and using the wall as leverage to push at his chest. But he’s just bigger

than I am, an immovable force that's grinning down at me obscenely.

"I've missed you, wife," he says, like this is all foreplay.

To him, it probably is. He leans forward, and I can see his intent to kiss me, so I swivel my head to get away. My karate teacher tsks in my head, 'knee to groin, grasshopper'.

I struggle more aggressively, but my sheath dress and heels make it hard to get any sort of stability, let alone a fighting stance.

Seeing how off balance I am, he grabs my arm, dragging me further down the hallway. I'm stumbling, and I turn my ankle a bit in the heels as I reach out for a vase, a lamp, anything to bash over his head.

Nope, I'm not fighting to get free anymore. I'm going to kill him, right here in the hallway of the hotel. And I will do it with a clean conscience. The ladylike training has left the building, so to speak, and the only training in my head right now is my black belt counter-aggression maneuvers.

But he still has over a foot and more than a hundred pounds on me, so he manhandles me around, shoving me up against another wall.

I gouge for his eye but only manage to claw down his cheek. I feel the skin give way as I prove the best reason in the world to have a manicure. Blood starts to flow, and Robert explodes in fury.

He backhands me hard enough to make me see stars. “Fucking bitch, gonna have to train you all over again, I guess.”

He presses his body to mine, grinding himself against me, and I squirm as much as I can, looking for any opening to get in a punch or kick, crying out and hoping someone hears me. We’re not far from the party, but no one seems to hear.

“Fight me,” Robert hisses, lips spread, but I wouldn’t call it a smile. More like a sneer. “I like it when you fight me, Carly, because I know in the end, you’ll be spreading those legs for me anyway . . . like a good wife.”

“Fuck you, Robert.” I spit in his face, the last vestige of defense I have with the way he has me pinned. He backhands me again, even harder.

The impact to the same spot sends me whirling, and I fall to the floor. Soft carpet is under my hands, but I can’t see from the black tunnel vision. My ears ring and everything’s foggy, though I don’t think I pass out.

When it all clears, I look back, expecting to see Robert looming over me. But that's not who's there.

“Carly?” a deep voice rumbles.

Kyle

I keep my head down, obsessively going over every last detail of the intel I've received. Looking at my burner smartphone, I flip through Stone's personal file again.

Home plans, including security, make it difficult. The man knows he's a target, and his house is equipped with plenty of security, including electronics and a panic room . . . never mind whatever personal arsenal he might have as a former merc.

His office structure, with even greater security, makes it a negative. That office building would put the Pentagon to shame.

Every speck of dirt I can find on this guy says he's clean, but I'm good at reading between the lines. And what's between the lines is as black as the inside of a coal mine.

So my only chance is a public takedown.

That's why I'm here, dressed up in a monkey suit. It could be worse. At least it's not a tux. But the black slacks, button-up, and tie are not my usual work gear, though they're the same color.

I school my face into passive enjoyment, like most of the sheeple around me, and find my place on the second floor, overlooking the party below. There's no way I can blend into that crowd. The money virtually drips off them as they prance around.

My cover is that I'm security. It's a good cover, and I look the part easily with my size and threatening aura.

From my perch, I disappear into the shadows and scan the people below. Some faces I know, not because I know the theater world in the least but because they're on television, the news, movie screens.

But most of them I don't know at all. It makes it easy to search for the face I have memorized. Nathan Stone.

I see him come in, right at home in the sea of wealthy scene-makers.

My mask falls slightly, my lip curling as I grind my teeth. I watch him for a moment, let him come closer into the trap I've set. He walks the room, my

eyes following his every move with laser focus.

But just before I go to make my move, a flash of black catches my eye. It's not an attention-grabbing color in the least, but something draws me and I let my eyes tick to chase it in the crowd. And then I see . . .

Carly? What the fuck is she doing here?

In the US? At this party?

I left her in Italy, planning to never see her again, to walk away from whatever storm she stirred up inside me, unwilling to betray Anna with the things Carly teases from me.

But now she's here, like a demon in the night, telling me I can't get away that easily.

I shake my head, not able to look too deeply into that right now. I need to focus. One thing at a time.

Nathan Stone.

Anna.

Our baby.

*Revenge.*

I reacquire my target and find that he's strayed a little. I adjust, checking Nathan's progress around

the room, judging his likely trajectory through the crowd, and take a quick glance around me on the second floor to ensure I'm out of sight.

The stage is set perfectly.

I pull the Glock 43 I've purchased for just this mission from my inner jacket pocket, the six-inch-long pistol the smallest I could trust with this job. I wish I had something with a little more pop, but this is real life and I need practical.

On the other hand, I do have a laser sight, not perfect on a twenty-yard shot, but good enough that I can put a hollow point through his brain case. And a silencer that will hopefully ensure I can get out clean before anyone realizes where the shot came from.

I watch carefully, waiting for Nathan to freeze, knowing that I'll have a precious moment where he stands still to small-talk with each group he passes.

He approaches a small group of two men and a slender woman, his steps slowing, but in the small bit of viewing space I have that isn't Nathan, I see that black flash again.

Whispering a curse, I look up and see Carly.

I'm shocked to see she's pressed up against the wall, a slick-looking guy holding her there. I can



see the paleness of her face, the fear and anger mixing, but she's frozen. He leans forward to kiss her and an ugly thought races through my mind . . .  
*See?*

*She's already forgotten about you.*

But I see her struggling to get away, biting her lip to keep from crying out as she fights uselessly against him. She might be able to do backflip spin kicks, but at half an inch, her skills mean jack and shit.

The guy's grin is pure malice when he grabs her by the arm, dragging her down the hallway as she stumbles and tries to yank free.

What the fuck?

Time freezes.

The gun in my hand, aimed at the man who killed Anna. My body, already trying to follow Carly.

Revenge for the past.

Hope for my future.

I don't know when Carly began to represent that, but I know with certainty in my gut that she is my only shot at any happiness.

I don't want to want it. I want to stay in the darkness, the void left without Anna, but I'm dying

here, pouring salt on my own wounds to keep them fresh and unhealed. And Carly makes me want to heal.

My gun lowers without my awareness, but the choice is made.

It's funny. Just moments ago, I was ready to fire into a crowd, and while I wouldn't take the shot if there was a chance I'd hit any bystanders, I would most likely catch a hail of return fire that would make Tony Montana look like a pussy.

But here I am, shoving my Glock back in my jacket pocket, on auto-pilot as I run for the stairs. Luckily, people get out of my way, though I notice a couple of other black-clad guys scanning the crowd with renewed vigor, wondering if they missed something on their security assignments.

They did. Me.

But it's their target's lucky day. It's damn sure Nathan Stone's.

I get downstairs and quickly skirt the crowd, heading for the hallway Carly disappeared down. I turn a corner and my eyes take in the scene in an instant.

He's got her forced up against the wall. Grinding on her as she fights back.

I hear her. “Fuck you, Robert.”

In my brain, that registers as her ex, the one who screwed her up in the past.

Her past. My past. I need to get us away, out of this pit. She tried to save me and I wouldn't let her, but maybe I can save her.

But as the thought skitters through my mind, my girl spits in Robert's face like the fucking badass she is.

It's in an instant that I feel a veil drop into place, dividing me in half. One part of me, the hurting side that's screamed his emotional pain into pillows, laughed, and the man Carly knows steps aside.

What slides into place in the forefront is the other side of me, not emotionless but emotionally distant. A certain coldness falls over my body, a chill that has nothing to do with the air conditioning but with my mind knowing that I'm going to do whatever I have to do and I'll deal with the fallout when it's all over.

I can see his retaliation coming, but I'm too far to stop it though I'm already sprinting to cover the distance between us. He hits her and she flies to the floor. She's going to be okay. It's a hard hit, but she's going to be okay.

But he's not.

It's a fast fight, more akin to an NFL sack than an actual fight. He's not used to battling anyone who could actually hold their own against him.

Fucking bully.

My shoulder crashes into his ribs as I lift, taking two steps before twisting and dumping him over my shoulder, where he goes face first into the tile, shattering his nose. Blood gushes freely, coating his lips as he tries to yell.

“Wha—fuck!”

He tries to kick upward, and I grab his foot easily, taking perverse pleasure in twisting it hard to the outside, cracking bones and tearing ligaments. He howls, and I stomp on his fingers in response, adding some more injury to the hospital bill. He won't be hitting anyone again, not with that fucked up hand.

He cries in agony, and I know I need to get out of here before anyone comes down the hallway. In a final fuck you to him, I kick him in the nuts, driving the wind out of him while sending enough pain through his body that it's lights out.

I don't have any pity and immediately ignore his limp body to turn to Carly, who's on her knees,

trying to regain her senses. Hearing my approach, she looks up, anger in her eyes, but I call out to her. “Carly?”

She shakes her head, like she doesn’t believe what she’s seeing. “Kyle? What the . . .”

She looks at Robert on the floor, and I expect her to freak out like she did last time she saw me looming over an unconscious body.

But she kicks out fast and sharp, laying a heel into his side. Even in unconsciousness, he grunts.

*That’s my girl.*

Shit.

*‘My girl?’*

I can’t do this now.

I slip my arms around her waist, hauling her up to her feet. But as soon as she gets her legs beneath her, she looks up at me and I break like a fucking twig. I press my lips to hers, tasting her gasp of surprise. But then she kisses me back, and it’s like tossing gasoline on a raging inferno.

Now, I’m the one pressing her against the wall. But she’s not fighting to get away. She’s fighting for more, damn near climbing me like a tree. Her nails score along my shoulders to gain purchase so she

can get even closer to me, so I pick her up, pinning her between my hard body and the wall. It's wild, unrestrained, and crazy, just like her. It's rough, intense, and dominating, just like me.

"Fuck, Carly," I groan.

She bites my lip. "Say it again."

"Carly." And my brain turns back on. "Shit."

I let her feet touch the floor, the feeling of her body to mine painfully good as the knot in my stomach tightens. "We need to go," I say, looking down at the body on the floor so I don't have to look at her.

I damn near could've fucked her right here in the hallway, over her ex, whom I just ripped off her and knocked out cold. I'm such a fucked-up monster.

But she takes my hand. Before she moves, she leans over and spits on Robert again.

"Okay, let's not leave any more DNA evidence. Can you walk?"

She nods, but I hold on to her anyway, helping her down the hallway.

We make it out of the hotel and into the dark night. It feels safer than the bright lights inside, though I know we need to get the fuck out of here. She said her ex was some big-wig money, entitled son of a

bitch. Men like that don't get beat down and take it.

He's gonna wake up pissed, looking for Carly and revenge once he's in the hospital. And we need to be long gone before then.

I shove her into a cab and rattle off the address where I'm staying.

“What are you even doing here?” she asks.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

But she doesn't answer, her eyes going glossy as she slumps against the side of the cab, passing out.

*Shit.*

# Chapter 23

## Emma

Carly walks away to hit the ladies' room, and I head to the walkway of posters. To think that I'm included in the lineup is a huge honor.

Okay, so not exactly in the 'Walkway of Wonder', as I'm calling it. But there's another set of posters highlighting current productions, and I am in that section.

I can't help but go over there first. I find the one for *Cleopatra* and pull my phone out to take a selfie with my name on the poster. I grin at my phone, the reality of my name and face on marketing posters for a barely off-Broadway production staring me in the face. It's amazing, it's awesome, it's everything I've ever wanted.

I look up, the smile plastered wide on my face to find . . . no one.

Sadness washes through me. All the things I've given up over the years, fighting with my parents, rebelling in ways that don't matter to anyone but



me, agreeing to do stupid shit for Claire, and what has it gotten me?

A poster in a collection of a hundred others, one I should be jumping for joy over, sure, but I'm standing here, fucked up and alone.

I know Carly is here somewhere, but it's not just that. It's that tonight is an amazing opportunity and honor, and I want someone to share that with. No, not just *someone*.

Nathan.

He'd told me he'd try to make it, but I'm not holding my breath. We're still not exactly back on proper footing, though I do feel like he's trying. We're moving on, not merely from ground zero but from a bottomless well, and we haven't even made it to the surface yet.

He hasn't touched me again, not since the night we went so rough that I felt seared, inside and out, by the time we were finished. The bruises are all faded, the soreness gone, and I find myself missing them.

In a twisted way, they were proof that he cared, evidence that he wanted to punish me and not throw away what we have.

That he was fighting for us.

I smooth my dress down, tracing my hips and remembering his hands gripping me there so tightly.

Shuddering, I force myself back to the present. I have worked so hard for this moment and I am going to enjoy the hell out of it. Even if it's by myself.

*Network, Emma, my memory reminds me. You never know who you'll meet.*

I can hear my mother's words in my ear. Ironically, this time, she's right. I make my way through the 'Walkway of Wonder' and begin looking at each poster. It's interesting to see the differences over time—fonts and styles change, actors and actresses aging before my eyes as posters showcase their careers in play after play.

I've made my way through the lineup on each side and there's still no sign of Carly. I start to wonder where she is and make my way back over to the poster with my name and picture on it, wanting it to be the first thing I show her so that I can have that celebration moment again. And this time, I'm going to do it properly.

I'm standing right in front of the poster when the worst possible thing happens.

“Ahh, Kitty!” a big, deep voice thunders happily.

I turn, my face paling, wondering why fate likes to fuck with our lives. “Uh, hello, Mr. Romanov. Maritziana.”

What the fuck are they doing here?

I mean, it’s a Broadway celebration, and while I’m a believer there’s something for everyone in the theater, I don’t exactly get the feeling he’s a fan of *The Lion King* or *Hamilton*.

I take a couple of steps to the right, hoping they turn ever so slightly to stay facing me and away from the poster. They do, and Maritziana leans forward, pressing her cheek to mine and air kissing on the left, then right.

“So good to see you again, Kitty.”

“You too. Are you a fan of the theater?” I say, trying to make small talk and keep my heart from jumping out of my chest.

She smiles and nods. “Yes. And of parties.” She laughs, lifting her champagne. I laugh back like the joke is funny.

“Where is Nathan?” Nikolai asks, scanning the crowd.

Oh, God. He’s not here.

I’m standing with one of the most dangerous men in

the world and he's one glance away from knowing I'm a big fucking liar. And I'm well aware that he's *not* a man you lie to for any reason. That's what got me into this mess in the first place.

I know what I have to do. I click into character. Kitty. Nathan's submissive girlfriend.

I follow suit, looking at the people around us, pretending like Nathan is here somewhere. Steadying myself, I say demurely, "He allowed me to look at the posters while he mingled and did business. He will be back for me."

Nikolai looks at me. His face is blank, unreadable. He might be about to tell a joke or kill me, I don't know which.

"Have you seen the 'Walk of Wonder'?" I lean forward, whispering. "It is not really called that. I just named it that in my head." I smile like it's a secret, then offer, "I could show you."

I'm praying he'll take me up on the offer, let me lead him away from the ticking time bomb right behind him. And I think it's going to work when Nikolai turns to Maritziana, his brows lifted, almost asking if she'd like to go. It's a surprise kindness.

But I watch in slow-motion horror as the brightly colored poster catches his attention. In the instant it

takes him to turn back to me, his face has changed.

Fury is written in every line, danger flashing in his eyes.

“Emma. Daniels. Who is this?” he snaps, moving in close. His breath is hot on my cheek, promising destruction.

I meet Maritziana’s eyes first, which are spread wide in alarm. Almost imperceptibly, she shakes her head.

I meet Nikolai’s eyes. “The actress in *Cleopatra*, it seems,” I say, not exactly playing dumb, but more confused at his sudden change in mood.

“It is you. This Emma Daniels.” He looks back and forth, double-checking. And while the picture of me is full stage makeup, hair, and costume, it’s fairly apparent that it’s me.

“I . . . uhm, I . . .” I say, my eyes jumping around wildly.

He grabs my arm, his thick fingers so tight around my bicep that the skin bulges between them. He shakes me as he speaks, “Where is Nathan? Does he know this? Are you playing him, or is he playing me?”

He growls and starts dragging me from the room. A

scream for help is bubbling up through my throat, a wish for Nathan squeezing my heart.

“What the fuck is going on here?” a voice hisses from behind me.

Oh, shit. It’s like a fairy godmother heard my wish and made it come true. He did come.

# Chapter 24

## Nathan

“Take your hands off her,” I say to Nikolai, letting the possession I feel enter every syllable.

Nikolai turns to me, his eyes narrowed. “What is the meaning of this?” He lifts his chin toward a poster on the wall and a quick glance tells me he knows exactly who Emma is.

*Fuck. Think, Nathan. Improvise, adapt, overcome.*

Save Emma.

Save yourself.

Save the deal.

In that order. That I think of her first doesn't escape my notice.

“It is a poster of Kitty's play. Your hand is still on her,” I growl. I move forward, taking Emma's other arm and pulling her to my side forcefully.

“Explain,” he orders.

I calmly glance around. “Perhaps we should go somewhere private to discuss business.”

He nods. “*Da*. Let us find a room to talk.” He says ‘talk’ like he means ‘kill’. But he walks away, giving me his back and trusting that I’ll follow. As soon as we approach the door, one of his men approaches. “Follow us.”

The guard takes the rear, and our walk into the lobby seems much more like a perp walk now. We march down a hallway, finding an empty conference room.

Nikolai stops and addresses Maritziana. “Take one of the other guards and go home to the hotel.”

She nods and walks out, though I catch her giving Emma a sly look of sadness.

Once we are slightly private, Nikolai turns to me, his eyes flaring. “Now, explain.”

I look over to the door, where the guard is standing. “Respectfully, if I’m going to air my dirty laundry, please instruct your guard to wait outside. I am no danger to you. And Kitty certainly isn’t.”

That’s not exactly true, and I will fight my way out here, even kill, if necessary. But there’s no need for it to come to that. Not yet.



“Go,” he tells the guard.

Only after the door closes do I proceed. I’ve had a moment to think as we walked to the room, analyze approaches and possible outcomes, and choose the course of action that will meet mission objectives.

Save Emma, save myself, save the deal.

I let all semblance of friendliness fall off my face, hardening my jaw and letting my body swell, imposing and threatening as I lean toward Nikolai. My teeth clenched, I carefully enunciate.

“Let me be clear, Nikolai. You are never to touch her. It is a disrespect to me, to her, to our potential business alignments. You will apologize for the rudeness.”

It’s a big gamble, but Nikolai is a man who respects boldness and strength. He purses his lips and then lifts his brow. “I am sorry.”

The words sound foreign on his tongue, not because of his accent but because I’d wager he’s never actually said them before.

“And to her.”

“She is not who she says she is,” he argues, his eyes darting to Emma for a moment before returning to me. “She lies!”

“I know exactly who she is. Apologize to her, and I will explain. Perhaps then we can continue on as the businessmen we are.” I’m doubling down and hoping for a jackpot.

“Sorry,” he spits out at Emma, not meaning it a bit, then to me, “now, your explanation.”

He plops into a chair, leaning back comfortably as if he’s not contemplating killing us both where we stand, but I know better and that thought is first and foremost in his mind.

I nod but glance at Emma. It’s the first time I’ve dared to look at her with all this going on. She is stunning in a grey dress that hugs her breasts and floats down her body.

But her eyes are wild and fearful, her face pale with bright spots of color on her cheeks. I lay a soft kiss to her forehead and then lift her chin with a light touch.

“I apologize as well. I shouldn’t have left you alone so long. I wouldn’t have allowed your skin to be sullied by another.”

I’m giving a performance of my own, laying it on thick, but I need her to understand my play here. That we are returning to our original story with Nikolai full-force, perhaps even more so, because

he would expect me to have even better control over her now.

Her lashes flutter as she blinks slowly and nods her acceptance. I only hope Nikolai is as easy. “Kitty, kneel.”

She’s in character, having caught on, thank God, so she gracefully drops to her knees before arranging her skirt around her. Once I’m satisfied with her pose, I sit as well and look to Nikolai.

“So you saw a poster with my Kitty on it and assumed she was playing me? Or that I was playing you? Correct?”

“*Da*,” he says, and I can tell the delay is getting to him. Good. The more amped up he is, the less logical he will be, which helps me.

“Have you ever dreamed of being someone else, Nikolai? Of not having the Romanov name and all that comes with it?” I ask, improvising on the spot. “I know that while there have been moments I’ve enjoyed being a Stone, there have been others that it was not seen as favorable.”

He nods, listening and at least on my hook.

“Kitty here has a name too. Emma Daniels. It also comes with family expectations, professional obligations, and such. But when she is with me, she

leaves all that behind and is simply mine. My Kitty.” I reach down, running a finger through her hair, and she tilts into me. It doesn’t feel like an act for a moment but like it’s just us.

“But she is still Emma, a talented actress who is quite excited to have been cast in *Cleopatra*. There is no subterfuge in her name. She is merely one to me and one to everyone else. In the interest of disclosure, I trust that you will do a check on Emma Daniels. You will find that she is the daughter of a loving family and the sister of an FBI agent.”

“What?” he roars, standing up and slamming his palms to the table in front of him.

“Calm yourself. Sit.” I take care to make it sound casual, not like the order I gave Emma. “This is not a private board room or one of your restaurants. This is the Four Seasons. She is an informant for me. Her sister occasionally tells her things, which she shares with me. And vice versa. I’m certain you have police and agents in your pocket in Brazil and in Russia. It’s no different.”

Nikolai glares at me. “*Da*, I have spies, but I do not use them as fuck toys.”

I narrow my eyes, insulted. “Kitty isn’t a plaything. She’s *mine*. And if you call her a fuck toy again . . .

I will take it as a personal insult. And there will be consequences.”

Though the words are intended to save us, they ring truer than I’d realized they would. My heart jumps at the realization, blooming dangerous thoughts.

“You should have told me,” he challenges.

I let a dark chuckle out, challenging him. “As you have shared all your secrets with me? No, I think not. But perhaps now that we are alone, we can finish our business? Are you ready to come to an agreement? Has your father made his decision?”

Bringing Papa Romanov into the conversation is intentional, a distracting ploy to make Nikolai feel small. He will rise to the challenge to prove himself big. It’s who he is and what he does, every time.

He looks to Emma, evaluating what he wants to say now that he knows she reports to the FBI for me. To put his mind at ease, I say, “She reports back only what I tell her to. This is of no concern to the FBI, merely a son paying homage to his father.”

“A decision has been made,” he says, not filling in the blanks on whose call it was, though we both know. “The package for safe passage as you outlined.”

“Accepted.” I offer a hand, and he shakes, but he’s

crushing my hand in his grip.

He pulls my hand toward his gut instead of letting go. “I do not like surprises. There will be no more.”

I meet his eyes, threat for threat, squeezing back just as hard as he’s trying to crush me. “Agreed, and I assume that holds true for you as well.”

# Chapter 25

## Emma

We're in Nathan's car, heading for his house, but I have to call Carly. We left and I couldn't find her anywhere. I'm scared, but she's a grown woman who knows her way around a party and NYC, so it can't be too bad.

I hope.

"Carly?" I say when the line connects. "Where are you?"

"Em, something has come up," she says evasively, but at least she sounds like she's not drunk or frightened or in danger. She just sounds . . . tense. "Like something major. I'm, uh, I don't know if I'm going to make it to the play tomorrow."

Her words are stilted, like she's still searching for them even as she speaks. Okay, more than tense. Rattled.

"What? Are you okay?" I say warily. "What's going on? Do you need me to come get you?" I glance to Nathan, silently hoping he'd do that if she

needs help, but his eyes are fastened on the road.

There's a shuffle on her end, and then her voice quiets. "No, no. I don't need you to come and get me. I feel like a shit friend for doing this, but that mystery guy? He . . . uhm, he, well, he showed up at the party in a major way and got me out of a bit of a situation."

Christ, now I've got two sets of alarm bells ringing in my head, one for Carly and one for me. "What kind of situation? Carly, you're talking in circles and not answering the question. What's going on? All of it."

"Okay, short version now, long version later. Robert was at the party and started some shit, and Kyle put a stop to it. He's here, in the US, in New York City, and he took me back to his hotel. I'm fine, better than fine, actually." Her voice lowers even more, barely a whisper. "He kissed me. Em, this is it. It's my shot and I have to take it. I'm so sorry, really, I am. Can you ever forgive me?"

"You're really okay?" I ask, not liking what she said about a situation with Robert. She never told me the full scope on his asshattery, but I know Carly isn't a 'fraidy cat that would run over nothing. She bailed for a reason, a good one.

"I really am," she says, and I can hear the smile in



her voice. I haven't heard her like this in a long time, a really long time.

I swallow thickly, wishing I had the full story, but her happiness is apparent. "All right, as long as you promise you're fine. I can't believe the guy you've been chasing all over Italy is here in the US at the same party. I don't know how that even happens. Must be some serious fate intervening on your behalf."

I look up at the stars above the speeding car, wondering if there's some magic woven into tonight.

"But here's what I do know. You are a wild child, but you're not stupid. So if you like him enough to skip the play and jet off into the sunset with him, it's gotta be good. You deserve for this to work out for you, and I really hope it does. Normally, I'd go with 'chicks before dicks', but I'm giving you a pass this time because I love you, honey. As long as I get the long version later."

She squeals in my ear then hisses. "Ooh, sorry, that was really loud. Thank you, Emma. So much. I love you, babe."

I shake my head, teasing. "I can't believe I finally got you to come all the way back to the US and you're ditching me for a guy."

“Hey, what about you? Where are you?” she asks.  
“Still at the party?”

I have no idea how to answer her. “I’m actually somewhere between ‘lost and confused’ and ‘alive and well’. I’ll have to give you the long version later too.” I glance at Nathan, who has both hands on the wheel.

Carly whispers in my ear. “He showed, didn’t he?”

“Yep,” I say, not sure what else to say about how Nathan swooped in and saved my ass with Nikolai by telling the Russian mob that I’m his secret agent-slash-property.

“You good?”

“I think so. We’re almost to his house, so I’m going to let you go. Holler when you figure your stuff out. And Carly?”

“Yeah?”

“Go get him, girl.”

“You too, babe.”

We pull into the garage and silence reigns as we go inside. It’s not manufactured. I honestly don’t know what to make of everything that’s happened tonight. My heart is reading so much into his actually coming and that he swooped in like a white

knight to save me, even if his methods were a bit unorthodox.

In the living room, he offers me a drink and then moves to the bar to pour for the both of us as I sit down on the couch.

“So, how was it?” a voice asks from the doorway.

I turn and meet Caleb’s eyes and his smile falls. “Well, that answers that. Guess I’ll leave you two to your makeup sex. Keep the goddamn noise down, and pick up your undies when you’re done. I don’t want to step in anything. Later.”

Nathan stops him. “Caleb. Nikolai was there.”

I see Caleb’s eyes tighten, the smallest sign of fear, but it’s a telling chip in his devil-may-care attitude. “Shit.” He walks over and steals the drink Nathan poured and tips it back in one go. “Again.”

Nathan pours for himself before refilling Caleb, who takes it and sits in the adjacent chair, and then finally one for me. He hands it to me. “Drink. It’s been a rough night and this will settle your nerves.”

It’s an order, but it’s soft. *My* Nathan, not the character he plays for Nikolai.

I take a sip as he sits beside me, doing the same.

Nathan tells Caleb about the run-in with Nikolai

and how he'd basically given me up to the mob in a twisted way of saving me. I'm still not sure what I think about that, but I don't know that there was another play to make that would've gotten us out of that room both alive and with Nathan's deal in place.

“So, you got your permission? When do we leave?” Caleb asks.

Nathan shakes his head. “I need you here to take care of the company. Someone killed Dad, and we don't know who. It'd be real fucking convenient for us both to go off to the Brazilian rainforest and wind up dead. We can't risk it. I've got to go and you've got to stay.”

Caleb leans forward, pointing at Nathan. “Fuck that. You're the brains of the operation. You stay and I'll go.”

“You don't even want to do this, Caleb. But I need to. I'm going, and that's final.”

They're talking in circles, factors I can't even imagine at play. From their childhood, with their dad, with the business.

“Take me,” I offer. “I can help. I told you all about the maps and artifacts. I know more than either of you about the civilization's history, and I've been

doing the research you assigned me. Take me.”

Caleb looks at me sharply. “You’re volunteering to go into dangerous cartel territory, so remote they probably haven’t seen a woman in months, if not longer, to hike to a cave for a reason you don’t even understand. You can’t use a gun, you don’t know how to fight, and Nathan’s influence won’t mean shit in that area.”

None of what he said is a question, more like he’s trying to wrap his head around my sudden offer.

“For Nathan, yes.” I’m being honest. It does sound like hell, but if he’s going, I want to help however I can.

But Caleb obviously doesn’t believe me. “Whatever. You’ll quickly learn that suicide sure as fuck ain’t painless.”

“Both of you, just stop. We’ll see. Nothing has to be decided tonight.” Nathan’s words close the matter for now, though Caleb and I stare each other down.

Caleb gets up, tossing back the rest of his drink before setting it on the table, immediately ignored. I wonder vaguely how many of Caleb’s glasses Grant has to pick up each day.

Nathan takes all three to the kitchen, leaving them

in the sink, and I smile. I guess not as many as he could.

“It’s late. Let’s go to bed,” he says. I take his hand and let him lead me down the hallway to his room.

My heart soars and I think he’s finally going to touch me, right up until he slips a T-shirt over my body and hangs up my dress.

He pulls the blankets back, helping me to lie down, and then he curls up behind me, the big spoon to my little spoon. I wiggle my ass a bit, hoping to encourage a little action, but he grips my hip, keeping me still.

In the darkness, his voice is deep and quiet. “Tonight could’ve been really bad if it’d gone differently.”

“I know, but you took care of it,” I reply, totally at home in his arms. Sometimes, sex isn’t all that’s needed. “I was scared there for a minute because I didn’t know what to say, and I’m still nervous about a guy like Nikolai knowing all that about me. But you did the right thing.”

“I could’ve lost you.” He sounds like that would be devastating to him, and my heart opens up to him just a little bit more.

“You didn’t. I’m right here.” I almost tell him what

I'm feeling again, but he's still not ready, especially after such a dramatic evening, so I bite my tongue. That's okay. My love is not contingent on his. He may never love me, may never forgive me completely, but I will always love him anyway.

His hand slips from my hip, encircling my waist to pull me against him, and I feel a soft brush of his lips against my shoulder through the thin fabric. "Good night, my Emma."

Slowly, he drifts off as I listen to his breathing grow even and deep. I'm exhausted, but I just want to bottle up this moment a little longer. Sometime later, I fall asleep too.

# Chapter 26

## Emma

I'm so fucking nervous, I barely notice anything until I feel a stinging pain and realize I've chewed my nails down to the quick.

“Ugh,” I say, forcing my hands down. I broke that habit years ago, but it's trying to get its claws in me again. My lips tilt at the stupid pun. Claws will be right if I don't stop gnawing on them.

By way of distraction, I go over to one of the mirrors backstage. Wig, ironed flat and perfect. Makeup, heavy for the stage. Costume for the opening scene, properly spirit gummed in place. Lines could be practiced. I know them by heart, but it never hurts to have them fresh in your head when you step out into the spotlight.

I spend twenty minutes in a quiet corner with my eyes closed, visualizing the stage, my costars, and going through every line.

“Emma, you've got a couple of visitors over by the side entrance,” a backstage costume assistant tells



me. “Make it quick, though. Curtain in thirty, and we’ve got the opening night cheer to do beforehand.”

Curious, I hurry over and see Claire and Nathan standing there, lifting my spirits. I’m still surprised Carly ditched me, but I truly hope she figures out whatever deal she’s got going with her Italian stud.

Claire smiles warmly at me, but I can see how she’s holding herself apart from Nathan. Like they’re not standing there together for the same reason. Me.

Well, at least she isn’t drawing down on him.

And Nathan is holding a bouquet of deep red roses.

“Hey! Thank you so much for being here. I’m nervous but excited too, you know?” I shake my whole body, letting the feeling of ants on my skin fling away into the air around me, and settle into myself. I’m Emma, but only for a few more minutes because when the curtain lifts and the lights shine, I’ll be Cleopatra for the next hour and a half.

Claire hugs me and then holds me at arm’s length. “You’ve got this, Sis. No doubts, no worries. Just breathe and become that old Egyptian queen. Live in her and bring her to life for the rest of us plebeians in the audience who couldn’t act our way out of a paper bag.”

“Just remember I get to die as her too,” I joke, loving her for her silly pep talk and for being here. She’s my sole family representative in the audience tonight because I didn’t tell my parents about the play. I’m sure they would’ve come, but they don’t get my desire to ‘play pretend’, and they never will.

They simply don’t want to. And I didn’t want any negative energy tonight when such a big dream is coming true.

I did want Nathan here though. After last night, I knew he’d come, but the roses are a sweet surprise. “Are these for me?” I say with a smile, accepting them.

“Of course,” he says, handing them over and then pressing his forehead to mine. “Although I’ve heard tradition says to save them for after the play, I couldn’t help being a bit of a rebel.” His lips quirk like he’s proud of the joke.

I grin, resisting the urge to kiss him because Stephanie the makeup artist would kill me if I messed up the red lip stain she spent fifteen minutes getting just right.

“Break a leg, Emma. Though I don’t think you need any luck. I’m sure you’ll be brilliant up there since you’re such a great actress.”

He says it with a cocky smirk, so many layers to the compliment.

Is he talking about my gig as Kitty at the party, the FBI spy, the double agent, as his obedient girlfriend, or even just a truly straightforward compliment from watching me rehearse?

More layers than an onion, but I choose to take him at face value.

“Thank you. And thank you for the roses too. They’re beautiful.” I sniff them, loving their rich, deep aroma.

Claire clears her throat, and when I glance over, her face is pinched tight. “You’d better get going, right? I’ll be in the audience, cheering you on.”

She’s so transparent, trying to break up any moment I might have with Nathan. I know she doesn’t agree with what I’m doing, and I hate that.

She’s always been with me, and I think this is truly the first time we’ve been on such diametrically different sides of something.

She glowers at Nathan, cold and suspicious.

But she is right about one thing. I need to go. I point back and forth from one to the other. “All right, you two. No fighting in the audience, and if

you insist on shooting each other, do it honorably, ten paces at sunrise. You have a reputation to uphold, Agent Daniels. And you don't need any bad press, Mr. Stone. Can you play nice while I go do my thing?"

Claire sticks her tongue out at me, making me grin. She may be a fierce FBI agent, but she's still my big sis, and on some level, we'll always be those annoying kids we once were. I give her another hug, "Thanks again. I love you."

I turn to Nathan, who winks, but there's something serious hiding in the depths of his eyes. I freeze under his gaze, my body pulled to him without his even touching me.

My voice is soft, hazy, as I whisper in his ear, "Thank you."

His breath stutters, and I think he's going to say it first. It's right there, plain as day in his eyes, and I stand taller, wanting to get as close to the words as I can when he speaks them. But they don't come.

Instead, his mouth presses to mine gently.

He's slow and easy about it, but the intensity is just as consuming as when he was fierce and possessive.

"Emma," he groans. I can feel his emotion bleeding

out in the word, pain and heartbreak, hope and love. At least I think that's what I'm hearing. I pray it is.

I want to stay here and find out, but the assistant speed-walks by and grabs my arm. "Time to go!" She drags me away, and as I look back, Claire and Nathan are talking as they head to the theater lobby.

*That's a start, I think.*

The play goes amazingly well for opening night. No flubbed lines, no missed marks. I don't even try to look out into the audience, experience telling me the stage lights would blind me in a moment if I did, but knowing that Claire and Nathan are out there makes me happy.

As soon as the curtain closes on the last bows, I'm running for my things. I don't bother taking off the stage makeup. I can do that later. I only change out of my last costume because the wardrobe crew would have my ass if I tried to leave in it.

Instead, I hang it up neatly and turn it in, glad for the dress I brought to toss on after. It's soft and flowy, bordering on being a cotton nightgown.

I grab the wrap sweater I brought to toss over it to stave off the evening chill, and I'm out, heading for

lobby with my roses in my arms.

I see Claire first, and she hugs me again, gushing, “You were amazing!”

I smile big and wide, hugging her as tight as the roses will allow. “Thank you! It felt really good. Everyone did such a great job.”

I look left and right, curious. “Where’s Nathan? He run to the bathroom or something?”

Claire’s eyes darken and I see her swallow hard. “He, uh . . . Emma, honey, he left.”

She reaches for my arm with a comforting touch, the glitter of tears visible and not letting me pretend she’s lying.

She has to be lying. He wouldn’t leave. I could see the words on his tongue, feel them in his kiss. “No. No, no, no,” I ramble, getting louder. “DAMMIT!”

Claire tries to wrap me in a comforting hug, but I shake her off.

My heart shatters as the roses fall to the floor and I run. But I’m not running away. I’m running toward something.

Him.

I won’t let him do this to me. To him. To *us*.

The night air is cold as I burst through the lobby door, hailing a cab. As I slam the door and tell the cabbie to drive, I see Claire following me.

Through the glass, I can't hear her, but I see her lips form the word, "Emma!"

But I won't let her stop me.

I can't.

The cab pulls up to Nathan's place, and I toss money over the seat, slamming the door before he even fully stops. I fly up the stairs to the front door, banging on the wood and ringing the bell obnoxiously as if I can make Grant hurry to answer it faster.

But it's not Grant who opens the door. It's Caleb, and I instantly want to wipe the smug grin off his face.

My breath heaving, I demand, "Where is he?"

"Gone."

"No, he can't be. He wouldn't." I plead for him to tell me this is some sick joke.

Caleb takes a few steps back, spreading his arms wide in some mocking gesture of openness. "Come on in, Kitty. Oh, I mean, Emma. Feel free to look around. He's gone."

I unconsciously step inside, and though the house is huge, I can feel that it's empty. He's not here. Somehow, his presence, or lack thereof, has changed the very air in the place.

“Why?” I can feel tremors sneaking through my body, my mind refusing to accept the truth right in front of me.

Caleb is triumphant, mocking. “He left you. Got what he needed, I suppose. Nikolai called this morning with the final arrangements, and Nathan's plane left about” —he looks at his watch— “an hour ago. Maybe less.”

I collapse to the floor, trying not to sob. “He knew. He came tonight. It was a kiss goodbye, wasn't it?”

Subtly, I can see Caleb's cruelty cracking. I don't think he's necessarily a bad guy. He's just protecting his brother against what he perceives as a threat.

Me.

It'd be hysterical if I wasn't breaking apart. The thought that I could hurt Nathan, be a danger to him . . . when the truth is, I was the one at risk all along.

Claire warned me. I just didn't listen.



I should've listened.

The squeak of brakes behind me gives me a flash of hope, and I turn, my heart hoping it's him and that this is all some awful misunderstanding.

But it's not Nathan.

It's Claire's sedan, and she jumps out, rushing around the car and up the stairs.

"Emma!"

"He's gone," I say hollowly.

She drops to her knees at my side in the middle of the foyer floor, gathering me to her and cradling me like a child as the tears flow freely. "I know, I know."

I pull away. "What do you mean, 'you know'?" I search her face for answers and see the hesitation. "Claire, what do you mean?"

She bites her lip. "He told me tonight. You went backstage, and he said he was leaving, asked me to take care of you like I always have."

"You knew? And you just let him go? Oh, my God, Claire. You should've stopped him or told me!" I'm ranting, my voice getting stronger.

"I thought it was for the best. This is all my fault.

You should've never been caught up with all this in the first place." She looks at Caleb with disgust, and Caleb looks back, the feeling mutual. "This was a way to get you out of it. So no, I didn't stop him. If he had feelings for you, he wouldn't have bailed on you like this. That's not what a good guy does, Em. You've gotta see that, right? Nathan Stone is not a good man. He used you and then he left you."

"You know what?" Caleb growls, unable to hold his tongue as my sister runs down his brother. "I don't give a fuck who—"

"He left me."

It shuts Caleb up.

My sadness grows hotter, slow degrees of anger adding to the hurt to make a bitter stew of confusion.

"Come on, honey. Let me get you home."

Claire helps me stand, ushering me out the door, and as we pull out of the drive, I glance back one last time.

Caleb is in the doorway. He's wearing his cocky bastard persona again, but I can see the concern in his eyes.

He gives me a little two-finger wave and shuts the door as Claire turns out of their driveway.

# Chapter 27

## Nathan

I squirm in the plush leather seat of the plane I've chartered to take me to Brazil, but my discomfort has nothing to do with the luxurious cushioned seating in the G280 but something else.

"Mr. Stone?" the flight attendant, a pretty raven-haired woman who I've been told is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, says. "Is everything okay, sir? Would you like some refreshments before take-off?"

"No, thank you," I reply, adjusting myself one more time.

Reaching quickly for some kind of polite excuse, I point toward my combat boots. "Been awhile since I've worn these."

"Ah. Well, sir, if you don't mind the advice, I'd shuck 'em," the attendant says with a smile. "We've got a few hours until we stop in Vieques to refuel. No reason to be uncomfortable. It's not like you'll offend the other passengers."

She chuckles but stops when I don't smile. Other than her and the pilots, I'm the only person on board. My local security staff will meet me in Brazil.

I wish I didn't have to use this small plane that requires a refueling, but it is what it is. My destination doesn't have a runway capable of landing a larger plane.

"In any case, sir, once we hit our cruising altitude, the bench seats are great for catching a nap as well," the flight attendant says before making herself scarce. I don't even watch her go, turning my attention to what's going on outside the cabin windows, where the ground crew is doing final prep so we can take off.

I feel like hell. I know I'm doing the right thing, but that doesn't make it easy.

This morning, Emma slept in my arms peacefully and I knew it. I was even able to whisper the truth to myself.

I love her.

I'd watched her for almost an hour, memorizing every freckle, every sleepy sigh, and the lush curves of her body. She's all sweetness and softness, inside and out.

But that's why, after absorbing as much of her as I could in that single kiss, I held back from telling her. It's why I kept the peace with Claire and begged her to take care of Emma.

I know Emma won't understand, but ironically, in my enemy, Claire, I could see understanding. She knows what kind of man I am, what I would do to her sister. Yes, I'd love Emma with a passion that would sear the very pages of history with the heat of our bond.

But in the end, I'm not good for Emma. Whether it's through my own inner darkness, my failings, or a hail of gunfire from one of my family's enemies, I'd destroy her.

So I have to do it now when it's an easier break, for her and for me, even though my body is revolting against me, trying to rise up out of the seat and go back to her.

Because it'd be so easy. Even as the engines fire up, part of me wants to get out of my seat and run across the tarmac and jump into my car.

I want to pull her in close and tell her how I feel, that I want her to move in, to be my woman . . . to be my wife. I want to have that comfortable life, to raise a few kids . . . hell, maybe even finish raising Caleb.

But I can't. Because despite every happiness that such a life would bring me, there'd be that poison festering just below the surface, deep in my psyche. Giving up on understanding what drove my father, giving up what set me upon the life path that I'm on . . . I could ignore it for a time.

But it'd explode eventually, poisoning our lives. So my gut roils and my heart breaks at what I've done, knowing it'll hurt her.

But I have to.

It's better that she be merely cracked now than shattered later.

I'm turning into my dad, after all, despite my fiercest battles against that ending. Despite all my promises that I'd be different, I'm running his company, chasing down some dangerous adventure for treasure and truth, and most damning, leaving behind those who love me. Not just Emma, but Caleb too.

There's no such thing as a happily ever after. Not for a bastard like me.

I'm not throwing myself a pity party. I'm just mad that, even in death, my father has set me up to be alone, obsessed, and to never get the happily ever after I once wanted.

I thought it was beyond my reach, but with Emma, for the first time in a long time, I'd hoped.

And the death of that hope is a bitter, jagged pill to swallow. But I won't do that to her.

She deserves better than a distracted man, one torn between the past and the future but never truly living in the present, a man not able to promise her much beyond material things.

She doesn't value those in the least. No, Emma wants the real stuff . . . my heart and soul. By the time this is over, however, I'm afraid I'll be too stained to be of any use to a woman like her.

This is for her own good, and maybe in time, she'll see that.

The engines get louder, and within moments, we're taxiing. Even though it's unnecessary since the plane's small enough a raised voice would work, the pilot comes on the intercom. *"Mr. Stone, if you'll make sure your seatbelt's tightened, we've got clearance for takeoff."*

I double-check my strap and sigh, trying to put Emma out of my mind as the jet accelerates and I feel myself pressed into the cushion. It's different from an airliner, where liftoff happens slowly. Instead, it feels like we're in the air with a rocket



strapped to our back almost immediately, the New York skyline disappearing by the second.

Within minutes, we're at our cruising altitude and over the ocean, speeding at roughly six hundred miles an hour toward Puerto Rico before refueling and jumping to Brazil.

There's a part of me that doesn't want to come back from that jungle.

It'd hurt less.

# Chapter 28

## Emma

The next morning, I feel like I'm hungover, even though I didn't drink. Last night feels like I was swept up in a whirlwind of emotions, from joy at finally having my dream come true of being on stage in a big way to the complete letdown of having Nathan leave me.

I barely even remember Claire shuffling me out of Nathan's house and Caleb's little two-fingered wave.

I won't be doing anything today or any other day for a while, I think as I sink down into my nest of bedding. I scrub at my puffy eyes with the frayed edge of my memory quilt, making a promise to myself to wash it later, even though I know I won't.

He left me. I can't believe he actually did that.

I'm not really hurt right now, though I'm certain that painful emotion is coming. I've moved from shock at Caleb's pronouncement to full-fledged anger at this point. "Ugh," I tell the empty room,

kicking the covers off in a hissy fit my toddler self would've been proud of.

Hearing the noise, my bedroom door creaks open and Claire peeks in. "You up?"

At my nod, she comes in slowly, like she's afraid I'm going to go rabid and bite her like a damn raccoon. Actually, considering the amount of makeup I left on the quilt, I probably have some serious trash panda eyes going on.

I sit up and she sits on the edge of the bed beside me. "So, where are we this morning? Sad, mad, plotting revenge? I'm pretty good with the third option, have some rather creative ideas already, if you're interested." Her smile is tentative, her eyes worried, and it's almost like we've done some version of this before. Other than Carly, Claire's been my go-to girl for every broken heart I've ever suffered.

"How fucking dare he?" I spit out. "I mean, I know I fucked up, but I came clean eventually. And he was mad and felt betrayed, but we were working on it, you know? You just don't bail without a word. Who does that?" I ask her, ranting as my arms flail this way and that to get out some of the energy buzzing through my veins.

Claire presses her lips together. "Okay, so we're in

the mad stage.” Her brow furrows. “I’m not sure what to tell you. I feel like you majorly dodged a bullet here, an actual literal bullet. So if his running is what gets you free from a situation I should’ve never put you into, so be it. I hate, truly hate that it’s hurting you, but I think it’s for the best. And his bailing is just another sign, one of many, that he’s not the man for you.”

I flop back, arms spread so wide my hands hang off the sides of the bed. “But he is the one for me. That’s why I’m so furious. I’m willing to fight for it, but he’s not. I’m willing to give him time. Hell, I would’ve understood if he’d at least *told* me he was going alone. But I can’t let him walk all over me like this. I’m not really some obedient little dog that’ll just wait for its master to return.”

Claire’s eyes pop wide as she screeches, “Excuse me . . . what?”

I shake my head. “Not like that. Well, kinda. But not really.” That doesn’t reassure her at all, so I try to explain further. “It was part of the cover story when the tree fell, a way to save my ass from Nikolai. I told you Nathan pretended I was his girlfriend. But we also pretended I was his . . . submissive. Nikolai made a joke about my being a dog, literally said ‘woof, woof’ to me. And it was stupid and so wrong on every level. But later, it was

funny because it's so obviously not true in the least. But it was our inside joke, you know? We have those. Even with our trying to dig out of the damn pit we were in, there are a million little things that only we understand that connect us."

"I don't know what to say. That's a lot of information. A dog? A submissive? Emma, what the fuck? I don't think an 'inside joke' is something you build a relationship on, especially not one like *that*."

The tears come again. Big crocodile tears of sadness streak down my face, dripping in puddles on my T-shirt. She doesn't get it. "He's ticklish, but only on his right side. That's why his tattoo is on his left. He was scared he'd jerk when the needle hit that spot. But when I scratch him there, he'll goof around and kick his leg like a happy dog. It's cute. He likes mimosas when he eats orange chicken, even though it's a breakfast drink with a dinner food. And now that's how I eat takeout too. We like to face the wall when we spoon because it's like the outside world doesn't exist and it's just us in this cocoon."

Claire looks stricken the more I spill. "Fuck, honey. I didn't realize." And I think she understands for the first time. "I already feel like such a shit sister for getting you mixed up in this, and now

you're . . .” She looks at me, and I know she must see a complete and utter mess because that’s what I feel like.

She sighs, looking at the ceiling for guidance. “I can’t believe I’m fucking saying this, but if he’s it for you—which to be clear, I don’t think he is, and I think he’s more dangerous than you give him credit for—you should talk to him when he gets back. I’m not exactly a relationship expert, but it sounds like it’s at least worth a conversation. For closure. And maybe a tiny bit of revenge though?” She holds her finger and thumb up an inch apart.

It’s a big give on her part. To say that I should talk to him is damn near a one-eighty for her, considering she’s been trying everything in her power to get me to never see him again.

I hug her and she pats my back, mothering me even all these years later. “Come on, you need a shower.”

I force myself up and to the bathroom, and eventually, the water from my shower splashes down on my head as I replay everything. The fog clears in my mind, and I know what I need to do.

I have to follow him.

I hurry back to my bedroom, where I grab my

backpack. Luckily, the archaeological field trips in school mean I've got some appropriate gear, including, most importantly, a 'three-day' rucksack. Not quite as large as a backpacker's frame pack, I'm still able to fit everything I need inside.

Not that I'm packing heavy. I'm heading to the Brazilian jungle, not the north end of Iceland. Thankfully, I've got some quick-drying cargo pants, a few tank tops, and even a button-up that has SPF in the fabric. All relics of my undergrad days, but they still fit.

I'm just slipping on my boots when Claire comes back in, scaring the shit out of me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Claire asks, looking me up and down. Her eyes widen in recognition, and she starts shaking her head before I can even answer. "Oh, hell no. I said to talk to him when he gets back. There is no *fucking* way I'm letting you go after him."

Any sweet sister moment we'd had is wiped away with the hostility in her voice.

"Thanks for the pep talk," I reply, double-knotting the laces of my boots before standing up and picking up my bag, throwing it over a shoulder. "Excuse me."

I shoulder my way past Claire, who's so surprised that she actually does let me by, and I set my backpack by the front door before going over to my kitchen junk drawer where I pull out my passport, sticking it in my pocket along with my wallet and phone.

“Are you listening to me?” Claire asks, planting herself squarely to block me in the kitchen. “I said you're not going!”

“And I say you need to get the hell out of my way,” I reply before forcing my voice to lower. “Listen, you wanted me to follow him, learn what he's up to, right? Well, I have. I can do that even better if I'm by his side on this trip. But that's not why I'm going. You're so wrong about him. I know you are. I can feel it.” I place my hands on my heart.

Claire grumbles, “I think your hands are in the wrong spot. I'm sure you feel something for him, but at most, it's one hand on your heart and one on your vagina. To point, neither are on your head, because you are not thinking with your damn brain. I didn't tell you to fall in love with him!”

“But I did, and that you can't change!” I cry out. It's the first time I've admitted that out loud, though I've known it for a while now. It hurts that the first time is to Claire and not to Nathan himself.



“You’re not thinking straight,” Claire shouts back, “and I can’t do anything to help you if . . . no, *when* he gets his ass in a sling out of the country!”

“I don’t care,” I reply, placing my hands on the counter. “Claire, I love you. You’re my big sister, and you want to take care of me, but you’re wrong about Nathan. He’s not the bad guy you think he is.”

Claire pleads. “This isn’t the theater or an archaeological dig. This is real, actual dangerous stuff, Emma. Nathan Stone is an international criminal. You want to know the sort of shit people like him get up to? If I had the opportunity, I’d drag your ass down to my office, show you the files. Spend two hours in my closed case files, and you’d never go near someone like Nathan ever again!”

“Yet you put me inside his house,” I reply quietly, and Claire reacts like she’s been slapped. Maybe, in a way, she has. “Admit it. There is nothing concrete, just a hunch. Claire, if you stop for a minute, I think you know he cares for me too and would never hurt me.”

“Can you—” Claire starts, but I roll right over her.

“I’m going because he’s up to something. This trip isn’t about spreading his dad’s ashes, and he’s worked damn hard to get into those caves for some

reason, a reason he's pointedly not shared with me," I continue, respecting Nathan's order to not share the cave maps or the research he's had me do about the area's history. "It's not illegal, though. I'm sure of that because I trust him, even if you don't. I'm going because I love him, Claire. I'm going because he's going to need my help. But no matter what, I'm going. So please just make this easy on both of us and get the hell out of my way."

"Wait . . . spread his dad's ashes? That's what he said he's doing?" Claire says.

I nod. "Yeah, but I know there's more."

Claire purses her lips. "I'd say so, since Michael Stone's body is buried at Landmorrow Cemetery. He wasn't cremated. So what's Nathan up to?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out."

Claire scrubs at her cheeks, thinking so hard I can almost see the hamster spinning behind her eyes, but her mouth has no doubts. "No."

"Claire, listen to me very carefully," I snarl through clenched teeth, coming around the counter and getting in her face. "The only way you're going to stop me is if you shoot me. You're my sister and I love you, but I will put this boot up your ass if you don't get the fuck outta my way."

It's a total bluff. We both know it. She's trained in kicking ass and would easily subdue me, but right now, I don't give a shit, and after staring into my eyes for a moment, she relents. "Fuck!" It's a loud exclamation, pained and furious.

"Thank you," I tell her, going to my bag and pulling it on. "I'll call you when I can."

I open the door, but Claire calls out to me, "If you get arrested, there or when you get back, I can't help you. This is beyond off-books, so far out of our jurisdiction it's actually illegal, not just ill-advised. You get that, right?"

I nod, looking back at her. "I know. I love you, Clairol."

She doesn't smile at the old nickname from our childhood, and she doesn't follow me this time. Instead, I hear her talking on the phone. "Matt, I really fucked up . . ."

I close the door behind me, rushing downstairs and grabbing a cab. The driver gives me a double-take when I give him the address. It's a huge fare, but I don't give a shit.

I don't care about losing my role in *Cleopatra*, even.

All that matters is Nathan.

I text *Cleo's* director while we ride before shutting off my phone, not wanting to ghost without giving them a heads up. A stab of disappointment strikes me at the lost opportunity, but I know the show will go on without me.

But Nathan might not.

When the taxi pulls up at the Stone mansion, I toss him three twenties and grab my bag.

There aren't many lights on, but I don't care. Instead, I start jabbing at the doorbell until my thumb cramps, then hammer at the door until I hear a booming voice behind the door answer, "Hold your fuckin' horses!"

The door opens and Caleb's there, a tank top drenched in sweat clinging to his muscular frame and a weight belt cinched around his waist, obviously telling me what I've interrupted .

He takes a look at me and sighs. "For fuck's sake, didn't we already—"

"Shut it, Caleb," I growl, using all my weight to try and shove him in the chest. He's so surprised he actually takes a step back, and I wedge myself in the gap. "I'm going after him. Claire said no, I already know you're going to say no. But I'm going, and that's not up for discussion."

I pause to breathe, and he starts to speak, the expected answer already shaping his lips. So I talk over him. “Now, I’d prefer to do it with your help, but if you won’t, I’ll find a way myself. I’ll go to fucking Nikolai if I have to. I love him, Caleb! Can’t you see that?”

Instead of waiting for an answer, I head straight for Nathan’s office.

“Hey! What’re you doing?” Caleb says, chasing after me. But he doesn’t lay a hand on me as I shuffle the papers on Nathan’s desk around, looking for the file he showed me. “Looking for anything in particular?” he asks condescendingly.

“Nathan said he was going to a cave to spread your dad’s ashes. He asked me to look up the tribes in the area, and I thought maybe he was going to try to honor their traditions or something for memorials.”

Caleb snorts, leaning against the door frame where I know he can make damn sure I don’t leave if he doesn’t want me to. “He isn’t doing this to honor our dad’s memory or whatever load of shit he gave you and Nikolai.”

I look at him, rolling my eyes. “I know. Because your dad is buried. There are no ashes. So what’s he doing?”

I see a flash of anger in Caleb's eyes, but it seems directed at Nathan's actions, not mine. I decide to play on it. "Caleb, I just need to know what I'm getting myself into. I have a habit of getting in over my head, and I'm trying to be smart here because someone I trust told me I'm not thinking straight. But I'm going."

Caleb laughs loudly, shaking his head. "Must be a blue moon, because your sister and I agree on something. You're not thinking straight. There's no way you're going to just jet off to Brazil, head into cartel territory, and be all 'Hey, Nate-y Wate-y, I missed you.' This isn't some stupid rom-com where the Girl Friday hurries off to save the affable but charming doofus. If you could even *get* to Brazil, which you can't, you'd be kidnapped and sold as a sex slave before you took your first breath of the humid air."

"Then I guess I'll be heading down to the Russian restaurants. Should I start in Manhattan or Brooklyn?" I ask, bluffing but hoping Caleb buys it. I mean, I can't be that bad of an actress, after all.

"Fuck!" he finally shouts, sounding surprisingly similar to Claire's reaction. He runs his hands through his hair, pacing back and forth a bit, and I glance back down at the file I've finally found. I sit in Nathan's chair to flip through the pages, looking

for any clues.

“Why are you doing this?” Caleb’s voice is quiet, stone cold.

I look back up and meet his eyes. If looks could kill, I’d be a dead woman right now.

“I love him,” I proclaim, every bit of honesty I can pull up poured into the words. “I know you don’t trust me, don’t even like me, but we have one thing in common. Nathan. We’ll both do anything for him, even if it means working together. I’m willing to do that. Are you?”

He sits down in the chair in front of the desk, hands steepled beneath his chin as he stares at me for several long minutes. I can see his mind clicking away, can almost hear it as he plays out scenarios to their resolution and evaluates each one for success or failure.

“Your gear . . . is it good?” he asks quietly.

“Good enough,” I reply. “Why?”

Caleb grumbles, getting to his feet. “That doesn’t sound convincing.”

Going over to the door, he jabs a button, talking into an intercom panel. “Grant, we need gear, stat!”

I’m not sure how Grant’s supposed to know what

exactly that means, but there's the answer I was looking for. Caleb is just as willing to do anything for Nathan, has likely done so many times over the years.

But this time? It's a big request, and Nathan's not even the one asking. I am.

"Don't play me, Caleb," I warn, turning back to the file. "I'm done being someone else's pawn. This is my play, my game, my move."

Caleb grins, and at first glance, most would think it's a charming one, but I can see the darkness in his eyes now that I know to look for it.

The Stone family has what appears to be a glittery life on the outside, but from the inside, neither of the Stone boys got out unscarred.

"I'm seeing what Nathan likes in you. To be honest, I'm not all that pleased that he left me behind either. I don't give a rat's ass about running the company. That's all him. But I do care that he's in dangerous territory without me. Let's go provide a little backup and get the son of a bitch. Then you two lovebirds can figure your shit out."



# Chapter 29

## Nathan

“Mr. Stone? If I can have your glass, sir, we’ll be landing in about ten minutes.”

I hand the glass to the flight attendant, which contained a multi-vitamin and mineral fruit blend along with some other nutrients to make sure I’m ready for the trek, and she disappears.

Buckling in, I feel my stomach lurch into my throat as we make a final sudden drop before touching down smoothly on the runway.

Ten minutes, my ass.

The airport’s tiny, just a single runway in grasslands that border the jungle, with a warehouse-slash-hangar at one end. There isn’t much, but then again, Romanov doesn’t need much.

I was actually surprised when he said that I could bring a jet in here, but as we get closer to the warehouse, I see why. A C-130 cargo plane sits next to the warehouse, the back ramp dropped as men load pallets of ‘exports’ into the belly of the

beast.

No wonder Nikolai has five thousand feet of runway in the middle of the Amazon.

My jet comes to a stop, and I give the flight crew a nod. “Where to next?”

“Sir, we were told under no uncertain orders to refuel, fly to Belem, and stay there until called,” the pilot says, his eyes darting around outside the cockpit. As a charter pilot for a company that deals with men like me, he knows that he’s not always flying to the nicest spots on the planet . . . but that doesn’t mean he has to like it.

“Perfectly fine,” I assure him, climbing out. The tropical heat and humidity smack me in the face, and I remind myself that I’m going to need to be extra-careful about hydration. I’m in shape, but my body’s used to New York, where most people are wearing jackets by now.

Here, the only reason to wear clothing is to prevent sunburn.

A man in a boonie hat comes out of the warehouse, his unbuttoned tropical-weight shirt revealing a heavily tattooed torso. I know enough of prison tats to read a little bit, and this man isn’t one to mess with.

I'm surprised, however, when he speaks to me in perfect English. "Mr. Stone, my name is Flavio. I'm the manager of this air strip. Welcome to Brazil."

He offers his hand, and I shake, measuring the man. He's got that sense of true danger that I know so well from my time as a mercenary. I think 'manager' is a polite way of describing his role as boss because I can guarantee that in his office is an AK locked, cocked, and ready to rock.

"Thank you for hosting me," I reply, giving a small nod to my plane. "My pilot said he's to refuel and then wait in Belem?"

Flavio nods. "Unfortunately, we have some merchandise that we need the warehouse space for. Your flight crew would not be comfortable," he says. His eyes look toward the window, where he chuckles as the pilot visibly pales. "Where do you find these kinds of men?"

"He knows to keep his mouth shut," I assure him. "And qualified jet pilots are hard to find."

Flavio snorts. "Come, you can rest inside while my men unload your cargo. If I can ask, just for the government reports, of course, what did you bring?"

"Just my jungle gear, laptop, two Heckler & Koch

UMP's and ammo. . . night vision goggles, and sunglasses.” I tick off each item as I mentally go through my minimal luggage.

Flavio nods. “So, let me make sure I have it right for the government documents . . . personal baggage, and two cases of Coca-Cola?”

I chuckle, nodding. “Something like that.”

We go inside, and while I don't like the idea of Nikolai's men messing with my equipment, I understand they're going to search it for weapons. I'm only half-surprised when they confiscate the UMP's and ammo. Flavio lifts one shoulder like he's just following orders, but the man searching looks like he won the lottery.

“I'll expect that back, along with every round of ammo,” I warn, though it's a tolerable loss to my arsenal back home.

Thankfully, all the documents I need are in my pocket or are in my head.

The warehouse isn't air conditioned except for a huge fan that stirs the muggy air, and inside I find three men waiting for me, each of them deeply tanned.

“My guides?”

“Your escorts,” Flavio confirms, although in the way he says it, I know that could have many meanings. Protection or prisoner, maybe both.

“I hired two of my own men to assist me,” I tell Flavio, whose face pinches. “Is that a problem?”

“I’m afraid that there may have been a miscommunication,” Flavio says, his eyes deadly. “There were two men who tried to approach the airport, but they were . . . impolite. We did not know they were hired by you, so there was some violence.”

The message is clear. I’m to do this with Nikolai’s men, not some outside hires. And I’ll be unarmed, while they’ll certainly be packing.

Fine.

I nod. “I’m sure it was a mistake. When do we leave?”

One of my escorts shrugs and points toward a room in the back. “Relax. We’ll leave morning after tomorrow.”

“Why not tomorrow?”

It’s a test, and I know I’m taking a risk, but it’s a necessary one. My test is answered when the roughest looking of my escorts grabs me by the

lapel of my shirt and shoves me against a wall.

“Listen, *Norte*. We have a man coming from deep in the jungle for your entitled ass. It takes time to get here. Be patient or get out. Nikolai won’t care either way. He just said to send you home alive. He didn’t say untouched.”

My escort smiles and brushes off my shirt forcefully before saying something over his shoulder to his buddies in the local dialect, and the three of them laugh and leave.

Flavio watches them leave, and at least I can understand what he says. “*Those fucks will get themselves killed someday.*”

He turns to me, his face passive. “The room I prepared for you isn’t luxurious, but it should be comfortable enough. Please do not leave the building without an escort.”

He leaves, and part of me is glad no one was here to see that. I know I can handle myself, and if this were on neutral ground, I would have given out a lesson in manners.

But I’m at a disadvantage here and everyone knows it. Sure, I could put up a good fight, but so what? There are a dozen men at this airport, most of them with automatic weapons.

So if I have to play along a bit, I will.

I head into my ‘room’ and find a twin bed with a plain mattress, a wool blanket on top. At least there’s mosquito netting arranged around it and a sink that gives cool, if questionable, water.

“Thank God my shots are up to date,” I mutter as I soak my head, cooling down. In the corner are my bags, the sealed box containing the urn of ‘my father’s ashes’ resting on top.

I chuckle, going over and slashing the box open with my utility knife. I pick up the silver canister of fireplace ash and shake my head. “Well, Dad,” I tell the container, “Does this finally make you happy? That I’m chasing your dream?”

I think back to all the nights that I had to tuck Caleb in or when it was just Grant who would go to school events. Even when Dad was home, he wasn’t home. His mind was somewhere else.

*“The stories about it, Nathan . . . they say whoever has that diamond is invincible,” Dad says as I sit in his study with him. He’s been back three days, but it’s the first time we’ve actually been able to talk.*

*And of course, the conversation is gems. THAT gem, in particular.*

*“Dad, there’s no way a stone can make someone invincible. This isn’t a comic book.”*

*His eyes tell me he’s hearing me but not caring. “The legends are pretty telling. They say that the stone isn’t even Brazilian but was mined in Mexico. The Mayans found it, thousands of years ago, but the Mayan Emperor lost it to what became the Aztecs.”*

*“Let me guess,” I reply snidely. “And Montezuma just happened to misplace it as well?”*

*“He was a war leader, not a bank clerk,” Dad says with a laugh. “Legend says that the last of the Aztec emperors tasked his brother with hiding the gem from the Spaniards. When the brother reached caves, he was met by natives so fierce, so untamed, that even his warrior’s heart trembled in fear and he knew he’d found the stone’s hiding place.”*

I shake my head, remembering how that night, I’d wanted to tell Dad about the college scholarship offer I’d received. His lack of caring, his utter mad devotion to the gem, told me the truth of his priorities, and as soon as I finished high school, I joined the Marines instead.

“You didn’t even care then,” I whisper, looking at the urn. “But here’s something you will care about, you son of a bitch. I vow that I’ll hold the gem in



my hand. I'm going to look at the one thing in life you cared about more than anything, more than your wife, your sons, your business . . . and then I'll destroy it, just like it destroyed you."

Setting the ashes aside, I pull out one of the few pieces of electronics I brought, a sat phone that'll reach the States. Turning it on, I wait a moment to get a good signal before calling Caleb to check in.

I'm worried, of course, about Emma. I need to know she's okay, even if she hates me.

But instead of connecting, the phone goes straight to voicemail. After listening to a very Caleb-like tongue-in-cheek fifteen-second cut from Celine Dion's *Ashes*, his voice cuts in. "*Leave a message, dumbass.*"

I hang up, tempted to call Emma, but I'll be strong.

For her sake, she has to think I walked away without caring about her.

# Chapter 30

## Carly

I wake up in a cheap motel room.

Even with my eyes closed, I can tell from the scratchy sheets and musty smell.

It's far from the worst place I've slept, considering that one hostel I stayed in during a stay in Portugal, but far from the best too.

I learned long ago to wake slowly, keep my eyes closed and breathing steady as my awareness scans the room, another lesson learned after staying in hostels and shared rooms. Usually in hostels, it's to protect me from roommates rubbing one off in their bunks, although one time, I woke up to find out just exactly what a 'devil's triangle' looked like.

But even as a kid, it let me avoid my parents and their stressful bullshit for a few more precious moments. Growing up, those moments were like gems to be hoarded and treasured, never to be given up lightly.

Seems my luck runs out as I hear a deep voice

chuckle from a few feet away. “I know you’re awake, Carly. Your breathing changed.”

Shit.

Kyle. Just thinking his name brings the last twenty-four hours rushing back to me.

Robert pulling me into the hallway, saying cruel and filthy things that turned my stomach and made my heart race in terror. I remember fighting him, but it was useless. He was so close to raping me, and I couldn’t stop him.

And then Kyle saved me, like some hero from a mythical story, rushing in and breaking Robert into pieces as he hauled me out.

And the kiss.

That kiss was everything, burning up my entire being with one unspoken promise of his lips to mine. But the promises were shaken almost from the moment our lips parted, judging by the harsh look in his eyes as soon as we’d left that hallway and the moment had shattered.

After that, he’d shoved me in a cab back to this no-tell motel. I’d thought it was going to be another breakthrough, but instead of taking me in his arms, kissing me, and showing me what lovemaking is supposed to be like, he’d gruffly told me to go to

sleep.

He'd given me the bed and slept upright in the chair by the door.

I'd hoped we'd talk the next morning, but he'd been a growling, angry menace of tense muscles all day. He was cold and distant, virtually ignoring me beyond shoving food in front of me twice as he drove us around in a rental car, running some list of errands only he was privy to.

Yeah, another breakthrough and another backslide.

I tried, of course. A near-constant stream of chatter from my mouth, about nothing and everything, punctuated nearly every moment we were together. I tried everything to draw him out of his shell.

But he'd barely grunt in response, more annoyed, it seemed, than anything else by my attempts at conversation.

Last night had been another silent one, me in the bed and him in the chair, takeout burgers between us. At least they were good burgers, but I barely tasted them. I was so hungry for Kyle, not fried potatoes.

I've been afraid of pushing him when he is so desperately trying to retreat from what had happened.

The kiss, I mean. Not beating up Robert. I won't swear on it in court, but I'm pretty sure Kyle got some twisted pleasure out of that.

If not, I know I did.

I don't normally condone violence, but some people just deserve to have their teeth knocked out.

By the time I went to sleep last night, though, I'd almost wished I'd gone to Emma's play instead of telling her I couldn't if the silent treatment was all Kyle was going to give me.

But today's a new morning, and when I open my eyes, something has changed. I can see it, feel it, almost taste it in the air between us.

He sits down on the bed beside me, his back to me as he holds his head in his hands. "I can't keep doing this."

Usually, I'd take that was my cue to leave. Guys who say they can't keep doing something are usually ready to say something I don't want to hear. In Kyle's case, that his backslide is heading into hermit territory and he wants to be alone.

But when he looks at me, it doesn't feel like he wants me to go.

Deep in his eyes, I see pain. Pain that he's finally

not masking with anger, with icy asshole tendencies. Pain he's not hiding from me, and I get the sense he's never let anyone in even this much. And he hasn't said a word.

"Tell me about the guy," he says.

It takes me a minute to realize he's talking about Robert.

Strangely, it already seems ages ago, even though it's only been a day and half. "Robert? I told you about him. Asshole ex who tried to tie me down, both literally and figuratively. In an arranged marriage, not in the fun way. Not that I would've ever let him do that. I didn't trust him enough to be at his mercy that way."

I'm intentionally keeping it light, mostly for my sake. I can hear that he wants the full story, the deep, dark, and ugly. And there's definitely enough of all three of those to make a full-grown man shiver, or you know, beat the hell out of Robert.

Considering Kyle did just that, it's understandable that he'd want to know exactly how warranted it was, or maybe if a little more is called for.

I'm willing to give him all the gory details, more than I've told anyone, even Emma. There's probably something to that, but I feel like Kyle can

handle it in a way Emma wouldn't have.

But after so long of squashing it down, I need to warm up to it, and Kyle's not the guy you just jump into the deep, black waters with. He'll shut down even if it's what he's demanding. He's like a lobster in a pot. You have to turn the heat up slowly, get him used to the intensity gradually so he doesn't abandon ship.

Kyle looks over at me, one concentrated look telling me to spill my guts. Now.

I sigh, like it's a big hassle, but inside, I'm bee-bopping that he wants to know anything at all about me. Yeah, it's the dark, festering, diseased side of my past, but he still wants to know. That's a good sign, right?

“Okay, like I said, he's my ex,” I say, trying to keep my voice level. It's harder than I thought it'd be, elation, terror, and disgust threatening to jerk my voice in five different directions at once. “After high school, I went to college like a good little girl, and my parents—my dad, mostly—set up some business exchange where I was the primary export product of the Edwards family. He sold me to the highest bidder, not literally but damn close, and I was suddenly dating Robert Gunze the Second. All capitals. For real, that's how he says it.”

I roll my eyes at the memory of how Robert always tossed his name around like it came with special privileges. ‘Do you know who I am?’ was an actual thing he said, unironically.

“I know it sounds stupid, but it didn’t seem weird. In our circle, that’s just kind of how things went. You see the same families at every event, summer together in the same vacation areas, travel in the same social circles. It’s only natural to pair off within the group, you know.”

“So you dated,” Kyle says, cutting through the bullshit. “Then what?”

I lean back, letting my eyes unfocus as I try to recall everything accurately. “I was about two years into college, and there was a party at our house. The whole gang was there, everyone mingling around the pool, sipping drinks, and eating hors d'oeuvres with pinkies out.”

I mime holding a snack, nibbling the air in front of my hand with my pinkie high. “And my dad cleared his throat and tapped on his glass, saying he had a happy announcement to make. Then he called me up to stand beside him and Robert walked up. I found out later that he already knew. But I had no idea—”

I break off, blinking several times as the scene



plays out in my mind, so vivid and real I can see Mom's sappy smile, smell Robert's too-strong cologne, and taste Dad's careless betrayal. There was Robert on Dad's left, and me standing on Dad's right in a red sundress that I'd had a big blow-up with my mom about wearing. 'Only harlots wear red, Carly,' she'd said, so of course, I'd worn it.

"He announced my engagement to Robert. Not that Robert or anyone else had asked my opinion on whether I wanted to get married, or God forbid, my permission or agreement on the matter. So there I am, gobsmacked while Robert's shaking his fist in the air like he won a prize pig at the county fair. People were congratulating him and asking if I was planning a fall or spring wedding."

I shake my head, clasping my hands together. "It was ridiculous. And when I argued about it, first with Robert and then with my parents, they all assured me it'd be fine. Basically told me to sit down and mind my place."

Kyle smiles a little, leaning forward and propping his elbows on his knees. "I can't imagine that went well for them."

I blush and shrug. "Unfortunately, back then, I was still a little . . . softer? I rebelled, but it was always in small ways. A red dress instead of tan, karate

instead of ballet, stuff like that. I was still growing into the Queen Badass I am now. So, next thing I knew, I was planning a wedding. Robert didn't care about it at all. He couldn't be bothered. The one time I brought it up to him, he told me just to make it worthy of the paper's society pages and washed his hands of the whole thing, leaving it to me."

"Fuck that guy," Kyle growls, and a sad laugh escapes my lips, finally happy that someone gets how weird and crazy it all was. "But . . ."

I nod. "That was stressful enough, but then Robert got stressed at work or something. He started coming home late, going out with the guys more."

"You lived together?"

I plaster my hand to my chest in horror, gasping in the perfect imitation of a horrified debutante. "Of course not, that would be inappropriate." But I smile, dropping back to my normal voice, "But yes, it's not really announced like other things, but we stayed over at each other's houses under the guise of wedding planning. We were always chaperoned," I say with air-quotes, "because we both lived with our parents. Had to keep up the appearance of being a virtuous, pure woman even if he was galivanting around with who knows who."

Kyle snorts. "My first time was the real American

way . . . back seat of a car, a lot of awkward fumbling, and lasting about five minutes tops.”

“Oh, how I wish,” I complain, wishing it could have been Kyle instead of . . . well . . . “Robert had always been entitled, that kind of bratty douche canoe type that’s stereotyped in that tax bracket. But decent enough. He started changing, would make snide comments about my hair or my weight, and then about my schoolwork.”

I disappear into the past, the words coming out in a mish-mash as I think about all the sneaky ways Robert had made me doubt myself, question everything I thought.

“I later learned it’s called gaslighting, but I didn’t have a label for it then. I just felt like something was wrong with me. No, I felt like *everything* was wrong with me.”

“And then it got physical. It started harmless enough. He’d smack my ass when I walked by, but not in a ‘hey, sexy’ way, though that’s how he tried to frame it. He was testing me, I think, to see how far I’d let him go, ramping it up slowly the same way he had with the insults. That progressed to pinches and slaps like he did at the party.”

Kyle growls, his hands clenching. “I saw him backhand you, Carly. That wasn’t a slap.”

I shrug, the distinction not mattering to me any longer. “And he always wanted rough sex, which I don’t mind, but this was different. This was him shoving my face into a pillow so he wouldn’t have to look at me and using me as a gloryhole.”

Kyle whispers under his breath, his knuckles popping as he holds back his anger. “He did want to . . . *fuck.*”

I can feel tears burning hot trails down my cheeks, but I continue, needing to get it all out. “And then he punched me. As bad as everything else had gotten, that was a boundary I couldn’t excuse, couldn’t minimize. I had a black eye and it swelled really badly. I went to see my parents, telling them I couldn’t marry Robert, wouldn’t live like this.”

“What’d they do?” I can hear the purposeful steadiness in Kyle’s voice, and I look over to find him rolling his wrists, like I do when I’m about to hit something and need to relieve a little tension.

“Not what you’re thinking about doing, for damn sure,” I reply, taking my own hand and twisting it the way I was taught before karate. “My dad told me I must’ve done something to warrant it and that I’d best prepare to be a better wife. My mom went into damage control mode and told everyone I’d had a bad Botox injection. And I went to my room, packed a suitcase, and just left. Ran away to

Europe, ignored everyone's calls for a while, and told them to fuck off when I did finally answer. And then I literally ran into you, and you've heard the key parts of my backpacking adventure."

I smile at the memory of being on my ass on the floor, Kyle's big frame looming over me, his look dark. "Why are you smiling? I scared the piss out of you that night."

I nod but look up at him honestly. "Sure, but my first thoughts were that you were huge and hot. And then I was just embarrassed about the whole tampons thing, which is stupid because half the Earth's population bleeds once a month so it shouldn't be a thing at all. But you were just so . . . hot, like midnight chocolate."

He chuckles, the sound contrasting with all the darkness I've been spewing about my past. "Midnight chocolate?" His hands spread wide as he looks at himself. I look too, at the messy blonde hair he's been running his thick tan fingers through, his eyes open and light for once, the bulge of his biceps straining against the sleeves of his black T-shirt, and the long line of his jeans-clad legs. He's barefoot, which strikes me as super sexy for some reason, like most folks probably don't get to see him this chill, but I'm the lucky ducky who gets to right now.

“You know, like—” I pull a face, mimicking his brooding expression with my arms crossed over my chest and my shoulders wide. I snap my teeth together toward him in an air-bite, grinning. “Maybe big and darkly brooding is my type. I wanted to take a bite right out of you.”

“And then the chocolate bit back in the alley,” he says, continuing the metaphor as he makes chomping moves with fingers. Who knew the man had jokes?

“Look, I’m not a tit-for-tat kind of girl. I’ve got baggage, you’ve got baggage, we’ve all got baggage. But just to be clear, what I just told you? No one knows that shit, not even my best friend. So when you’re ready to share what that was about in the alley that night, I’m here to listen without judgement. And when you’re ready to talk about Anna, I’m here for that too.”

I see him flinch when I say her name. And I wonder again, who was she to him?

He sighs heavily and runs his fingers through his hair again, pulling on them as he grunts. After a moment of introspection, he springs up, pacing in the small room. “I don’t know if I can. I haven’t talked . . . not since . . .”

“It’s okay. Kyle, you have to understand. I know

you've got something deep and dark. But I'm not going to run away from it, and I'm not going to force you to say anything. But if you want to, you can."

I sit in place on the bed, not moving, not wanting to crowd him because he looks like he's about to crawl out of his skin, fists clenching and releasing, jaw tight. Finally, he turns to me, his eyes swimming with pain and raw vulnerability.

"Anna Russo. She was—" He pauses at the past tense and I can see that it's a stab to his heart. He swallows and continues. "She was my fiancé. She was killed. Her . . . and our baby." His words are stilted, choking as they break free.

As they fill the space between us, all the air is sucked out of the room. I gasp on the nothingness, hands over my mouth. "Oh, my God, Kyle! Your . . . that's awful. I'm so sorry."

He sinks to the bed, head dropped low again. "I wasn't there to save her. I was a military contractor, gone on assignment. You see, I came from rough beginnings, to the point I got kicked out of the Marines for punching out a drill sergeant. So private military contractors were the way to go, a place where the rules were laxer and my method of coping was tolerated. Hell, sometimes encouraged. But Anna calmed me, taught me how to be a real

man. We always talked every day when I was working. We were so excited about the baby, planning the nursery and trying to pick a name. I love her.”

He said ‘love’ not ‘loved’. I don’t think you ever really stop loving someone who passes, but that he’s so lost in her is bittersweet, answering so many questions but creating so many more.

“Will you tell me about her?” I ask softly, tilting my head. “What did she look like, what was her favorite color, what do you love about her?”

He seems surprised by the questions and looks at me suspiciously. “Why?”

I scoot over beside him, laying an arm over his shoulders. “I feel some kind of connection with you, Kyle. And if she means this much to you, I’d like to know her too.”

He nods like that makes sense, and slowly, he tells me about Anna, her life, and their life together. As Kyle talks, he transforms. The weight on his shoulders lifts in degrees, his lips tilt up slowly, and the light blooms in his eyes.

I feel like she’s here with us, a ghost in the room that only Kyle can see. And bit by bit, I get to know Anna, but more importantly, I get to know Kyle.



## Kyle

I haven't said her name to another soul in over a year, and even then it was only to explain why I needed help investigating. But once I got started, talking about Anna with Carly feels natural, like I'm sharing her with someone she would've liked.

I think Carly and Anna would've gotten along in a weird way. Neither of them lets me get away with shit, so at least they'd have that in common. They've got nothing in common other than that, coming from two different worlds, but still, I like the idea that they would have been friends.

But Anna loved me when I was lighter, happier, still gruff and rough around the edges, but more Captain America good guy even though I thought I'd been damaged goods. Carly seems drawn by my darkness, like the jagged pieces of my splinters soothe rather than slice her. She likes me, even though I know what true destruction of a soul is now, not the pansy-ass crybaby shit I used to deal with.

I don't know how I feel about Carly's acceptance of me with all my baggage, as she called it. Part of me says I'm betraying Anna, but another side of me says that she would somehow approve of Carly. Of how she pulls me into crazy shit like this.

*Twenty-four hours on US soil, and somehow, I've blown my mission, rescued the damsel in distress, and slayed the 'douche canoe' dragon, I think with an eye roll.*

Life's not a fairy tale like that. There's real drama and trauma tied up in those actions, a consequence for each step on the path and for each misstep. And fuck, have I made some of those. I need to refocus on those missteps, the ones Nathan Stone made when he had my Anna killed.

But a wiggle in my gut won't let me leave Carly right now, unsure if Gunze will somehow track her down. I know his type, but I also know it's an excuse, so I say it loud enough in my head that I can pretend to believe it.

*Don't leave her, Anna whispers in my soul. Keep her with you, keep her safe, stay with her. Kyle, I can't be there with you, but she can, and she's good for you.*

“Get cleaned up. Checkout is at noon and we need to be out of here by then.”

Carly's smile at the slip of “we” is bright enough to light every deep, dark corner of my soul. And even as I feel the warmth from it, I hate it, desperately wanting the cold bitterness, wanting the numbness, because she's making me feel again.

Feel so much.

# Chapter 31

## Nathan

I've spent the last two days giving the guards a hard time, wandering the small area inside the boundaries of the airport, and talking with Nikolai's men.

They're a remarkably vociferous group. Most of them are just regular Brazilians who look at Nikolai's transporting drugs as a normal export business. My Portuguese is far from perfect, more minimal at best, but between my broken Portuguese and their broken English, we've been able to chat.

"Listen," one of them said as we shared a Coke during one of his frequent work breaks. In any other place, it'd be called lazy, but with the oppressive heat that saps the water from your skin almost as fast as you can drink it down, it's necessary to avoid heat exhaustion. "Look at our country. You turn on the television, you see what? Cars, you see beautiful women, happy people, and smiling faces. But the truth . . . ah, the truth of Brazil isn't in the Copacabana but in the *favelas*. It's in the dirt lots, playing *futbol* or back-alley *vale*

*tudo.*”

“So what, you’re used to having two sides?” I asked, and the man nodded, grinning.

“Like a coin, no?” the man replied, swallowing the rest of his Coke. “And if people want to put the *loco* powder up their nose, who am I to stop them?”

Now, in the early morning as I walk another lap of the runway, I focus on my breathing. It’s a two-mile circle, just enough to let me get some sweat going as I let my body acclimatize more. It’s training, of course, knowing that I’m going to have to move through jungles and caves, but it’s also a way for me to probe Nikolai’s men, to see if they’re actually professionals or just thugs with guns.

Luckily, the guise of mourning my father has let me do a lot without arousing suspicion. What they don’t see as mourning, they assume is just me being a stupid *norte*, despite my reputation. I can see it in their eyes, especially my three ‘escorts’. They think I’m a rich pretty boy who was gifted his money and doesn’t know what I’m getting into.

That’s fine. While I’m near the airstrip, I’m perfectly happy to let them make their assumptions. There’ll come a time to use their arrogance against them.

Still, it's been weird to follow in my father's footsteps, like he's watching over me. Though I can't tell if he's proud or if he's angry that I might accomplish the thing he never got to.

I pause at the end of the runway, looking out at the dark green shock of jungle that starts fewer than a hundred meters away. It's a common misconception, that the jungle is green. Maybe from up top . . . but at ground level, the jungle is dark, a forbidding, steamy dragon with wisps of smoke drifting up from its skin.

I hear softly crunching footsteps behind me, and I look over my shoulder to see my conversation partner approaching, his darkly-tanned skin already glistening in the morning heat.

“Flavio sent me to say get ready. Your guide's going to be here soon.”

I nod and turn back to look at the jungle, wondering. I've faced harsh climates before. I've stood in sandstorms so fierce that they would strip the paint off cars, leaving them gleaming in the sun afterward, and I've hurtled down mountains in the face of a blizzard so cold your piss would freeze before it hits the ground.

I've faced many things, but am I still strong enough after my time in a suit to face the Amazon and walk

out alive?

“You know, I met your father,” my friend says, offering me a bottle of Guarana Antarctica, the local soft drink possibly more popular than Coke. “Here, you’ll need it.”

“You drink a lot of soda,” I note, and the man laughs, nodding. “How’d you know my father?”

“Oh, I worked at a cafe then. I was just a boy. But this *norte* would come in, he looked like you. Many of us know of the old ways, the people who lived in the rainforest, but their ways have watered down and are lost to time.”

“It’s the way of the world, unfortunately,” I reply, and my friend nods.

“But the *norte*, he talked like no time had passed, like the history played out before him like a movie only he could see. In some ways, it was inspiring.”

It sounded like Dad, always the storyteller. The one thing he was good at. Although hearing this slightly positive interaction, it’s like a warm twist in the gut. My father could contribute to the world . . . he just never contributed to mine.

My friend and I start walking back, sipping our bottles of Guarana as we do. “So, what do you do when you’re not working here?”

“I have a family in Maraba,” he says, smiling. “I will go back, make sure my son hasn’t driven my wife crazy, and see what the world brings me. You?”

“I have a business in America,” I reply, and the man chuckles. “What?”

“Nothing,” the man says, looking at me with dark eyes. “I feel sorry for you, though. A man’s business cannot be there when he faces The Creator. His family can. Ah . . . your escorts.”

We reach the warehouse where a jeep sits, my bag already waiting in the back. Flavio’s with them, his face amused. “You took your time.”

“Wanted to enjoy my drink,” I reply, lifting my mostly empty bottle. I finish it off and hand it to my friend, who takes it before walking off toward the warehouse while I look at my bag. “You realize I’m going to check it myself?”

“Your choice. The longer you take here, the less time you have out there,” one of my guards says, leaning against the side of the jeep. “You die of heat stroke, not my problem.”

I’ve packed light, and I’m mostly worried about my sat phone, but it looks untouched. Five minutes later, I’m in the back of the jeep, Flavio giving the



four of us a goodbye wave as we leave the fenced-in perimeter of the airport.

For the next ten minutes, we make our way down a rutted, rough dirt road that looks like it's been hacked out of the jungle that presses in on both sides until we come to a tiny village. Everything's old-fashioned and poverty-strewn, wooden huts with corrugated plastic roofs built on wooden stilts, most of the people shoeless and wearing tank tops or less.

“What do people do here?” I ask, and one of my escorts laughs.

One of the men with me shrugs. “Farmhands, grunt work, whores. The cartel finds quite a few who sell themselves to get out of here.”

The idea of girls selling their bodies to get out of this devastating poverty twists my stomach, maybe even more than when I was a merc and saw some pretty fucked up shit.

We reach what I guess is the closest thing this village has to a square, a collection of white-ish buildings that surround a packed dirt space, a concrete fountain in the middle. Sitting on the edge is a small, spry looking old man with dirty clothes and missing teeth.

Upon seeing the jeep, the man stands up, waving. My guard glances over his shoulder, telling me, “Francisco, your guide.”

We come to a stop, Francisco exchanging quick greetings with the guards, who pass him a folded wad of bills. I get out, grabbing my bag and slipping the straps over my shoulders. I adjust them, then see that my escorts are still in the jeep.

“Coming?”

Laughing, the same guard who two days ago was so willing to jack me against a wall looks at me like I’m crazy. “No. Only *idiotas* go in there. Most don’t come out.”

I shrug, actually glad he’s not coming. “Suit yourself,” I reply, and the guard grunts.

Reaching behind him, he grabs one of the very same UMPs that I brought into the country and places it across his legs, patting it. “Thanks for the tip, *Norte*.” He laughs again, tapping his partner on the shoulder, and they leave.

In the muggy silence that reigns afterwards, it’s just me and Francisco, who shakes his head as they go. “Soft,” he says derisively. “Come.”

Francisco leads me through the rest of the small village, stopping at what is obviously the village

*mercado* to pick up his own bag, which is much smaller than mine, along with an ancient-looking bolt-action rifle.

“We go.”

“Wait,” I reply, digging into my bag. I pull out my knife and attach it to my hip, always wanting to be prepared, but especially when I’m heading into unknown territory. Francisco pulls out a worn but wickedly sharp looking machete, checking the blade but somehow making it seem relaxed and not threatening. “Anyone else?”

“*Sim*,” Francisco says. “Come.”

On the edge of the village, Francisco and I are met by two other men who are slightly younger, tough-looking, wiry, and crazy-eyed. I wonder if they test some of the jungle’s natural products.

They lead me to a Jeep that looks held together with duct tape, spit, and wishes. “Really?”

“In,” Francisco says, and I shrug, jumping in the back. The engine sounds like at least one cylinder is off, and the black smoke that pours out the back threatens to choke any of the surrounding wildlife as we embark on a bumpy ride through lush greenery for the next twenty minutes.

I don’t try to talk with Francisco. His English is

obviously limited to short commands, and my Portuguese isn't much better than his English even though I learned a few additional phrases from the guys at the airport. Instead, when they park and gesture for me to get out, I silently grab my bag and adjust my straps, following them into the deep rainforest.

Within minutes, the world's gone dim and hot, like I'm walking through a sauna with the lights off. There's so little sunlight penetrating the canopy overhead. Around me, I can hear a symphony of animal calls, from the screams of monkeys and the chittering of other small mammals to the cries of birds, the buzz of insects . . . I can't even keep track of them all.

But it's the animals I can't hear that I know I need to keep an eye out for. It's what you don't see that'll kill you. Whether it's any of half a dozen species of vipers, or poisonous frogs that'll send me into psychedelic death throes, I'm not going to let myself be caught unaware.

As we walk, the guys speak an even more mangled form of the local dialect that I can't figure out in the least. But I hear them talking about the *norte* and laughing, so I know I'm the butt of their jokes and commentary.

I don't really care. I can't worry about that when

I'm this close. The cave is deep in the jungle and over treacherous terrain, while at the same time, we must go around Nikolai's disguised fields and plantations. It's a weaving, dangerous path, and I know it'll take time.

As the sun sinks, we find a spot to camp overnight. I'm tempted to push on further, but I also know the rule . . . once the sun sets in the jungle, it goes so black that the few predators who are nocturnal don't use sight at all, except for maybe infrared.

The temptation to just slump onto the ground is intense, but that's a recipe for death. So instead, I pull out the 'jungle hammock' I packed and spend ten minutes setting it up while my local guides laugh quietly and climb into the nearest tree for their own rest.

I climb into the hammock, feeling every minute of the day's hike and my years living the cushy civilian life. Still, as I settle in, I can't help but feel the little shiver down my spine as I wonder if I've overlooked something and if I'm going to greet the sunrise a dead man.

Suddenly, there's a ray of light that pierces the canopy overhead, and I look up, seeing a gorgeous moon between the trees. It's brighter here, cleaner and almost pure white.

I wonder if Emma is looking at the same moon.

I miss her.

# Chapter 32

## Emma

I've lost my ever-loving mind.

When I begged Caleb for help, I didn't know it'd be like this. But he'd told me I'd be sorry I asked, and as much as I hate to admit it, he's right.

Actually, I refuse to admit it because judging by the smug look on his face, he's well aware that I'm freaking out a little bit as we ride in the helicopter over the Amazonian rainforest, so close I swear I could catch my boot on a tree branch if I reached out with a toe.

Okay, I'm more than a little bit . . . I'm a lot of bit.

This is some crazy shit.

After I promised him that I was doing this without any FBI help, things have been a flurry of activity. Still, Caleb didn't believe me at first, and it's good to know he can't read my acting versus my truth, because I have a sneaking feeling I need to keep a leg up on this sly guy.

He may be charming and come off as a rather gold-hearted playboy when he's not busy hating me, but after the past twenty-four hours, I know there's a pretty significant brain ticking away under his blond highlights.

I wouldn't trust him at all except I don't think he'd do anything to hurt Nathan. And though he left me behind, hurting me would hurt Nathan. I'm sure of it.

I think.

But once Caleb called for Grant, setting this chaos into motion, he told me he'd take care of everything. I should've known when I saw his maniacal grin that he was going to get some evil delight in torturing me. Exhibit A—my current status as a somewhat willing passenger on a black helicopter that just crossed the border into fucking Brazil.

The first leg had been a whirlwind of luxury on a private jet with a catered meal Caleb had forced me to eat, telling me I'd need my strength for the next leg.

He'd been right, though the delicious chicken in wine sauce now sits in my gut like a rock as the helicopter barrels over the canopy, hugging the terrain like it's magnetically locked ten feet over



the treetops.

Suddenly, Caleb's voice breaks the static in my ear from my headset. "Not too late to turn back."

"Why?" I reply, forcing a smile. "This is better than the roller coaster at Coney Island!"

Caleb smirks, having already decided I'm going to give in, which pisses me the fuck off. Okay, so I'm not some super-agent Lara Croft type, and this is well beyond anything I've ever done or even dreamed I'd do.

Hell, I might be walking into a situation that's gonna stop my heart from beating forever. And that's just from seeing Nathan, especially if he's not happy to see me. It's not even considering the whole cartel situation where, if TV has taught me anything, I think they'll shoot first and ask questions later.

If ever.

I shake my head violently, talking myself into believing it'll all be fine. Just fine. Despite my acting skills, Caleb must read the fear on my face because he laughs, the sound mostly drowned out by the *whup-whup-whup* of the helicopter blades through the open door, but I can tell how amused he is by the flashing of his perfectly white smile,

and I swear I see a dimple.

He's a good-looking man, but mostly, his happy appearance just pangs my heart because he's like a lighter version of my Nathan. But surprisingly, I find that I miss Nathan's darkness, his bossiness, his fierce demands for every thought that runs through my mind, not willing to let me hold back a thing from him now that we've got everything on the table.

Well, *almost everything*, my heart whispers.

But he held back, and for that, I'm going to put my foot up his ass when I see him. I'm just not sure if I'm going to do it before or after I kiss him.

He knew he was bailing on me and didn't say a word, just set me up like he knew what was best for me and went on his merry way.

Fuck that. I'm a lot of things, and I'm not perfect, but I'm a big girl and can make my own decisions.

Oh, maybe he has some grand illusion that he was going to jet off and handle this whole thing with his dad's legacy down here in the caves and then come back and pick up right where we left off like I'm some puppy he could kennel while he went to work.

But despite Nikolai's commentary, I'm not a dog

and I don't do the whole woof-woof thing.

I catch Caleb's eye and trigger my microphone. "How much longer? I have a bad feeling he's gonna need backup."

There's a part of me that wants desperately for Caleb to roll his eyes at my dramatics and tell me that Nathan's fine, a soldier in his own right who can handle whatever's going down on this trip. And I want to believe that so much.

But when Caleb's eyes flicker, I see the slight flash of fear in their depths and realize that he's scared for Nathan too. Caleb had fought to come with him, argued to come in his place, and he got left behind too.

"Nearest place the pilot can drop us off is still another half-hour or more," Caleb says. "Be ready. It'll be a real old-school, Vietnam-style battlefield drop off. I'll . . . I'll help you."

It's a tentative one, but a truce. For now, we're on the same side. Team Nathan.

After what seems like forever, bouncing up and down to stay off the grid, the pilot comes over our headsets and tells up to prepare for landing. We swoop down, and once again, my gut goes into my eyeballs, so I just sit back and watch out the open

door as the ground gets closer.

We come to a hover at what amounts to an empty clearing surrounded by miles of lush trees. It's dense here, and I know how deep in the rainforest we truly are. I can only trust that Caleb has a plan to get us the fuck out of here when it's time.

I follow Caleb's lead and pull my headset off, jamming my boonie cap on my head while jumping down from the open door of the chopper, following Caleb while the co-pilot chucks our bags out onto the ground. We run a few yards away as the helicopter takes back off, the wind whipping my hair around and almost making me lose my footing on the soft grass.

In the quiet, I look around. It's beautiful in a wild, untamed sort of way, and part of me thinks that this would make a great fantasy getaway.

The last vestiges of the helicopter's engine fade away, and I look to Caleb, who's been checking on our gear. "Now what?"

He points to the tree line, where a small, weathered old man is striding confidently toward us. "Caleb Stone?"

Caleb nods, picking up his bag along with the AK-47 that was part of our helicopter's 'equipment.'

“Miguel?”

“*Sim*,” the man says, and he must feel that’s introduction enough because he turns and begins those same sure and certain steps back toward the jungle.

Caleb takes a few paces behind him and then turns back, gesturing for me to follow. I’m frozen in place for a moment, not believing that I’m actually doing this and honestly not even sure if I can.

I’m not Claire, a trained agent, and this is not a movie where the director is going to yell ‘cut’ if things get sketchy.

I’m just a girl from New York, with dreams that are maybe a bit too big and hopes that are dangerously verging on hopeless.

But then I picture Nathan’s face. I’m fucking furious at him for leaving me, but I have to hope it was in some misguided attempt to protect me. He’s been doing that since the beginning when I’d stumbled into his first meeting with Nikolai. Even when I’d lied, repeatedly, he’s protected me.

*And used you*, a voice whispers. It’s the voice of self-doubt, and now that I don’t have a helicopter engine pounding in my ears constantly, it’s a little bit louder.

*But not all of being used was a bad thing*, I answer, thinking of the rough sex that he meant to be punishing but I found thrilling and liberating. He took me, but I took it all and gave it back to him.

I'm stronger than I sometimes think. And this is going to be one of those moments. It has to be.

So, I take the first step, and then another. Following Caleb and Miguel into the jungle, I remind myself that this is for Nathan . . . and for the tenuous, undetermined future that is *us*.

My old college boots would've been damn near useless on this terrain. So I'm thankful for the boots Grant found for me and that Caleb insisted I change into on the jet, because the ground almost immediately proves challenging, slick but gripping the soles at the same time.

My cargo pants, tank top, open over shirt, and boonie cap aren't cute or even flattering, but they are functional enough as we hike, avoiding the trees as best we can until we're into the deep bush and the ground begins to open up. It's like standing in a wooden palace of columns, a heavily leaved floor dominated by the towering behemoths all around us.

"Do you know where we're going?" I ask Caleb after we've been walking for long enough that my

calves are asking me why the hell I suddenly decided to take up ballet or something.

I know it's mostly because it's almost impossible to stay focused. The heat is all-encompassing, while the jungle is a consistent repetition of huge tree trunks, shadows, and animal cries. Even the screams of monkeys, which were fascinating at first, have started to be nothing more than annoying fingernails on the blackboard for me.

My partners aren't exactly much better, Miguel saying nothing while Caleb's black backpack bobs in front of me. He'll pause from time to time, check his GPS receiver, put it away, and loop and repeat. He glances back at me every once in a while, making sure I'm still with him, I guess.

Though maybe it's in hopes that I've been snatched away by a jungle cat. The one I heard sent chills down my spine, insanity and death wrapped up in one scream that pierced even the fog of my exhaustion.

Caleb looks oddly at home, like he's more comfortable in the wild forest than he is back at home in the city. His every step is sure-footed, and the dirt already smudged on his cheek seems more like camouflage and less like an accidental smear.

Pausing, he takes out his canteen and swallows, the

AK still in his free hand as he does. “Where you wanted to go . . . to find Nathan. And drink water. You don’t want to drop from dehydration just because you’re afraid of Montezuma’s Revenge.”

His easy, joking response gives me a bit of relief at the craziness my life has become, but I don’t tell him that. Instead, I stop and think about the stupidity of what I’m doing.

He takes two more steps before some sixth sense must alert him that I’m not immediately behind him.

“You okay?”

His eyes hold concern, actual concern for my well-being, and I don’t sense even a hint of sarcasm in his question. Up ahead of us, our guide stops, though I think Miguel could keep going for hours non-stop.

And just like that, I’m on the hill of the rollercoaster of emotions again, scared and then accepting, angry and then loving. It’s like on the helicopter, but this hill is dizzyingly high and I’m barely on the tracks.

“This is crazy, right?” I mutter, dropping to a knee and wiping at my face. “What are we doing? I should’ve just waited for him to come back. He



doesn't need us chasing him down in the Brazilian rainforest. Well, maybe you, but not me. I . . .”

My breath is gone, and I can't catch it no matter how hard I try to suck wind into my collapsed lungs.

Caleb comes closer, putting a heavy hand on each of my shoulders and squatting down to meet my eyes. “Breathe, woman. In and out.” I do as he says, the sparkles at the edges of my vision fading slightly. “There you go. Again . . . in and out.”

He breathes with me, pacing my frantic panting into regular breaths.

When I can feel the panic passing, I look up at him. “Thanks.”

Before I can stop the words, they escape. “Why are you being nice to me?”

He shrugs, unslinging his rifle and standing back up. “Giving rookies shit is part of how I was brought up. But you keep going. This takes guts on your part, and maybe each ration of shit you take, each step you make and don't give up makes me like you a tiny bit more.”

“Thanks, I guess,” I reply, standing up and taking a deep drink of water. “So even if I have a meltdown?”

“Everyone melts. It’s getting up when you’ve cracked that counts for guts,” Caleb says. “Though I still don’t trust you.”

I’m not surprised he doesn’t trust me because to be honest, I’ve done very little to inspire trust as far as he’s concerned. He doesn’t know about Nathan’s and my conversations, all the little ways we’ve connected and come to trust each other.

Unless Nathan told him, and while I get the sense they’re close brothers, I don’t know that they’d share that. But with Nathan leaving me, any trust Caleb might’ve fostered for me has to be smashed to smithereens.

If Nathan didn’t trust me to come, I can’t believe Caleb does.

“Guts on my part? What about on your part? This is some pretty gutsy shit, I’d say.” I gesture around to the trees, and even to myself, acknowledging that I realize I’m a risk he’s taking too.

He smirks, a big shit-eating grin splitting his face. “But I live for this shit. This is where I shine. Everything’s going to hell in a handbasket? I’m the guy you want on your team because when it’s dire, I’m the secret weapon.”

I laugh. His cockiness is coated in humor, but

there's an underlying truth to the words that puts me at ease.

Up ahead, Miguel clears his throat, pointedly interrupting us. "*Hermano* is two hours ahead of us still. We need to go before dark."

Miguel looks around at the wildness around us, and I'm not sure if the fear I see in his eyes is because there are animals to be afraid of or men who've become monsters from living out here in the untamed jungle.

# Chapter 33

## Nathan

Morning coffee was hours ago and I can feel my feet sweating in my boots. In some ways, I feel better than I have in years. I may dress in a suit and tie most days, but I'm no stranger to roughing it, and waking up this morning, getting out of the hammock, and gearing up, I felt like I was coming back to my real home.

The hike brings back all sorts of memories of missions, most of them with Caleb, though we rarely worked in jungle environments like this. Not when the majority of mercenary work in the world involves sand, mountains, and at a minimum, a working knowledge of Arabic.

I wipe the sweat from my brow, oddly relieved that it's simply salt water, not a gritty mixture of sweat and sand dust. Another difference was that the desert, with its expanse of sand and dunes, provided a good view for miles. Too many rookies took a false sense of security from those vistas that no enemies lurked nearby.

Here in the jungle, though, I feel eyes on me from every angle. I know that everything here is trying to kill me, and it's putting me on edge. Perhaps I should have taken Caleb up on his offer to come with me.

Offer? As if his insistence was a mere suggestion. He's been my 'battle buddy' for years, and I know that his not having my back this time burns him up.

But he doesn't understand. Yes, I wanted to do this myself because I wanted to prevent him from getting caught up in it. But also . . . I wanted to make sure he would be there for Emma.

I know that sounds strange, even to my own ears. The only reason I'd managed to get him to stay behind was because he wanted to see the moment of realization in Emma's eyes that I'd left her.

He's a bit ruthless sometimes, but he's my brother.

I know that he's got my best interests at heart. So even if it hurts her, and me, he'll make sure she stays safe, far away from the stupid shit I've gotten myself into.

I can only pray that he's not too cruel. I truly didn't want to hurt her, but this is more than I can ask of someone. Her or Caleb. They're the two most important people in my life, and I won't risk them

on what is, even to me, a fool's errand.

But some fool's errands must be done. So this is my own mission, right or wrong.

Our trek continues with Francisco leading the way with a machete, occasionally switching off with one of the other men as they clear a bit of brush from the narrow pathway he seems to be following.

To untrained eyes, it barely even looks like a trail, more so a thin meandering where water tends to run down the hills with the daily rainstorms. Even with my pathfinding abilities, I've more than once guessed wrong at the turns he's wanted to take.

But Francisco seems certain of his destination, so I'm trusting him, and Nikolai, that he is actually taking me to the cave as arranged. Still, I'm keeping my head on a swivel, a knife in my hand, and the GPS in my backpack has spare batteries.

I see Francisco lift his hand in a fist, a sign I know well, and my freeze is instantaneous. I drop to a knee behind the nearest tree as he slowly crouches down, hunkering into the dense greenery and almost disappearing in his dirty brown clothes. His rifle comes up, and for the first time, I feel inadequately prepared for this. Francisco's old bolt-action is large caliber, heavy, and able to pierce the jungle foliage.

On the other hand, my knife is only useful in hand-to-hand combat, whether with man or beast. If it's one of the cartel guys, I'm not sure I'll even have a chance to get close enough for the knife to be an asset. They'll likely shoot from yards away. And an animal? Well, they're accustomed to stalking prey in these treed hunting grounds, so they definitely have the advantage.

Suddenly, the silence is broken by the rapid burping sounds that I've heard in my nightmares and woken up in cold sweats hearing, the distinctive chattering sound of the AK-47 on full auto. A symphony of death only intensified by the ripping paper sound of leaves being punctured, the occasional *thwok* of a round hitting a tree, and the screeching of the surrounding wildlife as everything not of the human species busts ass for the exit.

As soon as the first shot rings out, I press myself against the tree I'm behind, dropping my pack and making myself as small a target as possible.

Scanning the terrain, I look to Francisco to see his take on the situation. I'm a leader, a doer, and have been in war more times than any man should. But this is his jungle and I'm the interloper, so I'll use my resources wisely.

From in front of us, I hear a booming voice speaking so fast I can't catch it to let my brain

translate. But I see the tension release from Francisco and the other two guards.

Francisco looks to me, a wide smile showing the gaps in his teeth. “Okay, *Norte. Conosco. With us.*”

He yells back, garbled and loud. A moment later, there are footsteps on the leaves in the underbrush, a deep rustling, and the occasional crack as a branch is stepped on.

I hold my position, not willing to take Francisco’s word on things until I can see for myself. I keep my eyes trained on where the sound is coming from and suddenly, a big, sweaty guy in a tank top emerges through the misty greenery.

He smiles at Francisco, but it falls instantly when he sees me behind a tree. He lifts his AK again, aiming at me, and I can see he’s a half-second away from firing when Francisco steps between us like a damned fool, a human shield.

He holds his palms out, one to me and one to the other man. “No, is okay! Nikolai safe passage!”

Their bickering switches to Portuguese, and is fast, but I catch enough to realize that the newcomer didn’t know about this trip. But with Francisco and his two guys all saying the same thing, he’s inclined to believe them. Finally, with a sneer in my



direction, he lowers his gun and nods.

I pull my pack back on as Francisco talks quickly with the man. A few minutes later, we melt back into the jungle, the burly guy disappearing in the other direction as he resumes his patrols.

But now I know that I was right.

There are eyes on me from all around.

# Chapter 34

## Carly

After checking out of the no-tell motel, we've made it as far as the diner down the street, where we sit in a booth made of vinyl and plastic and not much else.

But it's hard to fuck up eggs and toast. Coffee? That's easy to mess up, but thankfully, the cup sitting in front of me is steaming hot and bitter. Not Strega's, but damn good nevertheless.

As I shovel a bite of over-easy egg onto my fork with a bit of toast, I look at Kyle, leery that he's going to shut right back up again. Screw two. We just went a good ten steps forward, and I'm fully expecting the backslide to be epic this time.

But I'm hoping that the progress I've made into his inner psyche will get me back to this plateau and we can continue growing from here. It's a huge hope, but for some reason, I'm feeling hopeful today.

A question has been burning on my brain since I

first saw him, and I look squarely in his eyes but lift a flirty eyebrow to keep it non-confrontational. “How’d you end up in NYC from Italy?”

“A plane.”

I pause, toast half-lifted to my mouth and egg dripping down my fingers like the lady I’m not. “Jokes? You’ve got jokes. What miracle will you show me next?”

He shrugs, and there’s a tilt to his lips that makes me think he likes the compliment. But he didn’t answer the question, which seems intentional. Everything with Kyle is intentional.

“All right, I’ll let you skip that for now then. How about . . . what’s next? Where are we going after breakfast?” I look out the window at the people hustling by. It’s not crowded, exactly, just that constant pervasiveness of people you always feel in New York.

There’s not really anywhere, or any hour, to truly be alone here in the city that never sleeps. I guess in some ways it’s an effective camouflage, since you can melt into a crowd anywhere, anytime, but it makes me feel like Robert or my parents could be walking right next to me and I might not even notice. Vulnerable, that’s what the crowd here makes me feel.

“To find Nathan Stone.” The words are easy but weighted with importance as he murmurs them. I’m honestly not sure whether he’s answering me or talking to himself.

Chewing my too-big mouthful of food, I murmur, “What do you want Nathan for?”

Kyle’s eyes narrow and his voice grows rough. “You say that like you know him.”

I swallow the rest of my mouthful. “Kinda. Just met him. My bestie is dating him. Dating? Not sure that’s the word. But she’s seeing him.”

Click.

With a single sentence, the monster is back. Every muscle in Kyle’s body tenses, and if he wasn’t staring so intently at me, I’d probably look around to gauge the threat triggering the response. But he’s not looking behind me at somebody sneaking up on us.

Oh, no. He’s leaning forward, invading my space across the table and grabbing my hand in a decidedly not-flirty way.

“Where is he?” he demands.

It doesn’t occur to me to lie, not to him. Not even for Emma.

“Probably at home? I came to New York to see Emma’s play—that’s my best friend,” I offer plainly, trying to keep my voice level. “She’s an actress and her opening night was last night. He was going to watch her big debut, so I’d guess they’re probably still in bed, celebrating.”

I waggle my brows, trying to lighten the darkness that’s descended back over Kyle’s mood. But still, the intensity of his eyes troubles me.

If he’s here to meet Nathan, I expect him to focus on where Nathan lives, or maybe whatever info I might have, but his next words surprise me. “You were supposed to see her play last night? That’s why you came here?”

I nod, though I’m still torn up about missing it. She’s my best friend in the whole wide world, but Kyle . . . I remind myself that this is not a ‘dicks over chicks’ situation and that Emma gave me her blessing and encouragement to see where this thing with Kyle is going.

“Why didn’t you say something?” he asks. “You could’ve gone.”

I fidget with the napkin in my lap, biting the words back at first but on second thought, jump in like there’s no tomorrow. Because maybe there isn’t. “Because you wouldn’t have gone with me.

Because I love Emma, but she's always going to be there. Not that I'm taking her for granted . . . she understands. I just don't want to let go of you, and as stupid as that sounds, I feel this connection between us that I'm not ready to let go of. And right now, I'm not willing to leave your side because I'm scared if I let you out of my sight, I'll never see you again."

The flush on his cheeks and the grind of his teeth tell me I'm right and tell me that I'll do whatever it takes to stay with him.

"Your friend, Emma? She's in danger. Nathan Stone is not a good man."

This morning, he painfully told me about Anna, their baby, and how much he loves them. But now he fills in more of his story, and the words are spat out with such fury that I'm surprised they don't crack the formica of our table.

He tells me about Anna's work with Michael Stone, how Michael was killed, and then Anna was murdered soon afterward. Kyle tells me how he left his work and plunged into the darker world of semi-legal contracts, hazy enterprises, and more. He used every marker he could call in and promised more in return, until ultimately, Raul had found out who was responsible.

“Nathan Stone is the one who did them both,” Kyle growls finally, taking a drink when his voice cracks. “I don’t have evidence to go to the police, but I have enough. He had his father killed, took over the company, and then had Anna killed when she asked too many questions. I want him in the ground, and more importantly, I want to know who he hired. I want the person who actually held the gun because I know he didn’t fucking do it himself. He could’ve, is definitely trained for it, but no, the pretty boy is too smart for that. He outsourced and then made sure he had an airtight alibi.” He huffs and rolls his eyes like he’s just as offended that Nathan didn’t handle the murders himself as he is about them actually happening. “No honor, no integrity, no balls. And a stain on humanity like that took Anna.”

I swallow thickly, the tears burning again from his talking about losing Anna. But I refuse to cry again, not in public. “And what are you going to do to them when you find them?” I say, already knowing the answer.

Kyle’s eyes burn, and his voice is stony as he folds his hands over each other, like he’s about to make the world’s simplest declaration. “Kill them so they don’t hurt anyone else.”

His admission should shock me, but it feels like

poetic justice in a way, and I wouldn't expect anything less than ultimate retribution from a man like Kyle. But his statement that Nathan could hurt someone else rings alarm bells in my head.

Emma is in danger. She's my best friend and I love her dearly, but she likely has no idea what she's gotten herself into. She's sweet and innocent, a perfect victim for a ruthless man who would order a pregnant woman murdered to inherit a fortune.

*Oh, God!* I grab my cell phone and start calling Emma over and over, but each time, her phone goes to voicemail. Finally, I look at Kyle, who's been watching me carefully while he finishes his breakfast.

“We have to help her. Please.”

“Tell me what you know.”

Kyle

I can see the pain in Carly's eyes as I tell her what happened to Anna and the bloom of worry as she pieces together that this is who her friend is tied up with.

I hate that I put that thundercloud of concern there, but I'll help her, help her friend, and in the end, help Anna.



It's all tied up in one man . . . Nathan Stone.

He dies, and it'll *almost* all be settled.

She begs me to help Emma, and though it aligns with what I want too, I know that I'd help Carly with anything, regardless of my mission. It's just a bonus that we both want the same thing. Nathan where he can't hurt anyone ever again.

For me, that means dead. For Carly, I suspect she's thinking arrested and imprisoned. She's still good, the beam of light that I once had, and I don't want to take it away from her yet.

I just hope she won't have to see me crush Nathan's life with my own two hands personally. I'd like to think I can still be a 'good guy' in her eyes. Even if it's mostly a lie at this point.

I follow Carly's directions to Emma's apartment, where she rushes up the stairs and bangs on the door. I'm trailing close behind her to make sure Nathan doesn't answer instead, because if he does, Carly could be in danger.

But there's no answer at all.

Carly even tries some secret knock she says Emma knows only her sister does, hoping it's enough to get her to come to the door.

Finally, between the unanswered phone calls and apartment door, Carly sags against the wall, her spirit deflating before my very eyes.

It's just another tick on the list of crimes that Nathan Stone is going to have to answer for.

“What are we going to do?” she cries, and I can see the shine of tears in her eyes. Each tear is like an acid sting to my body, and I vow that I'll make someone pay for them.

“Where else would they go? Would they go to Nathan's house?” I ask.

She hums and looks off to the side, thinking. “I think we should call Emma's sister. She'd know what to do, maybe even where they are.”

“Why would she know?”

“She's an FBI agent. A really good one,” Carly explains. “Claire's a beast with a badge.”

I hum, the letters FBI triggering an instinctive defensive reaction in me. I've done some shit in my time, and the further I can stay from the eyes of *any* law enforcement, the better.

“I don't like it. I don't want the FBI involved, if you know what I mean.”

She looks into my eyes, seeing what I'm trying to

say, and nods. “I’ll be careful, not overshare but see if she knows anything. Emma is close to her sister, and if there’s something I don’t know, Claire does.”

I don’t argue, but I still don’t like it. Stepping back, Carly calls Emma’s sister, Claire, but I can only hear her side of the conversation.

“Emma’s in trouble with Nathan. He’s a bad guy.”

There’s a pause and I suspect Claire is telling her something.

“I’m at Emma’s apartment, but she’s not here.”

Emma hangs up and I turn to her. “What’d she say?”

“She said to wait here, she’s coming over. Didn’t want to share over the phone.”

Great. I don’t plan on saying a damn thing once she gets here then. Guess I’ll be my normal self.

I’m jumpy as we wait, the walls of the hallway closing in a bit. But I watch Carly’s chest rise and fall, even and slow, forcing myself to mimic her pace and calm myself. I’m using her, and though she’s unaware, I feel guilty somehow. But with a slower heartbeat and easier breathing, I’m not going to apologize for it.

While we wait, Carly tells me about her friend, how she and Emma grew up privileged but hating it. She even makes a sarcastic joke about the ‘poor little rich girls’, but I know there’s more to it than that, considering why Carly left home.

She leaves behind the joke and instead tells me more about their adventures, sneaking out to go watch movies and go to museums.

“What about you? That sounds like things Emma wanted to do. You ever sneak out to do something you wanted?” I ask.

She smiles, remembering. “Most of the time, I was more than happy to go along with the things Emma wanted to do. My payoff was in the sneaking out. But I did drag her to an underground fight one time.”

“Underground, huh?” I tease. “Where’d they dump the bodies afterward?”

Carly laughs lightly, shaking her head. “Not *that* underground, just not licensed by the state. My karate instructor was a fighter, and I’d overheard him talking about it. Money gets you in just about anywhere, so there we were, underage and alone at a packed, rented warehouse on the Jersey waterfront that said it was an import/export site. We were shoved in like sardines with all sorts of

people in the audience, but there was an overwhelming number of greasy wannabe mobsters and a surprising number of college frat boys. We made a few minor bets just for fun, watched my karate teacher win big, then got the hell outta dodge before he saw me.”

She snorts and I ask, “What?”

“Oh, he saw us, all right,” Carly admits, rolling her eyes. “I ended up having to do so many burpees to pay him off so he wouldn’t tell my parents I’d been there and then promise to never go again. It was a pretty sneaky way for him to get me to not go again. He was right. It wasn’t safe. For Emma. I would’ve been fine, of course.”

Her confidence is bigger than she is.

I smirk, thinking of some of the underground fights I’ve been to. “Of course.”

Before we know it, thirty minutes have passed and the sound of hushed voices on the stairs quiets us immediately. I push away from the wall I’ve been leaning on and adopt a semi-defensive stance, putting Carly behind me.

A woman and a man come up the stairs into view. Definitely not a couple, but they’re together.

She looks like a Fed, all business pants and blouse,

low bun, and no-nonsense boots that she can probably run in for miles if needed.

He looks bland in low-slung khakis, an untucked polo, and Adidas, and I wonder if she brought her Tinder date to this little meet and greet. The only memorable thing about the guy is his red hair. And his dark eyes. I've seen eyes like that . . . in the mirror.

Carly rushes forward, neatly sidestepping me before I can react. "Claire! Took your damn time, didn't you?"

For her part, Claire hasn't taken her eyes off me. Not because she's checking me out but because she's doing a threat assessment. Smart woman. "Carly, who's your *friend*?"

Carly stops, then glances back at me, sheepish. "Oh, sorry. Claire, this is Kyle. Kyle, this is Emma's sister, Claire, and . . ."

She lets it trail off and Claire jumps in. "This is my partner, Matt. Why don't we go inside to talk?"

It's not a question.

Claire uses a key to let us into Emma's apartment, which seems intrusive, but I don't have a sister, so what do I know? Maybe they're like that and swap dresses or something.

Claire and Carly start chattering about Nathan, talking over each other and making noises of shock here and there. I hang back, getting a glass of water from the kitchen and listening, absorbing it all while keeping myself as unobtrusive as possible.

Claire is interesting. She's talking to Carly like old girlfriends catching up with all the giddiness, but her questions are direct and pointed. It's like I can see the two sides of her converging before my very eyes, her personal and professional lives tangled in her words and in her very real fear as she talks about Emma.

"So I fucked up majorly, went off the tracks, and got Em tied up in this whole mess," she says finally as she goes on to tell us that Emma went undercover into Nathan's life but has fallen hook, line, and sinker for him. Everything she's telling me coincides with the research, rumors, and intel I've found, confirming my thinking about Nathan.

You can feel the guilt weighing Claire down but also her desire to right what she sees as a wrong she's done.

"What a mindjob," Carly says. "So what's going on now with her?"

"Well, let's see," Claire says, a little bitterly. "After the premiere of her show, I brought her back here

to cry it out because he left without her. I thought it was for the best, but you'll never guess what she did. She's gone running off to Brazil after him. I couldn't stop her even though I tried. I thought she needed a minute to calm down, and I knew Caleb—that's Nathan's brother—doesn't like her. I figured he'd send her home crying, so I let her go. And by the time I realized something was wrong and followed her to the Stone house, Caleb and Emma were both gone, and all I got was the butler, who I swear to God is as unshakeable as granite."

"So what happened?" Carly asks, and Claire shakes her head.

"What do you think? Poof, she's in the breeze! She sent me a text message from the plane, telling me she'll contact me when she's back. I'm gonna kill her for that. Like literally dead."

Claire rolls her eyes at the dark humor, but I get that it's coming from a place of fear. She knows exactly what Emma's gotten herself into.

Matt and I watch the conversation silently, not wanting to interrupt. For my part, I'm getting the information I need. Nathan is out of the country in Brazil. That rings all kinds of alarms in my head because I know the last assignment Anna worked on for Michael was about some caves in Brazil.



But I'm not sharing that with Claire.

Thankfully, Carly seems to sense that I don't want to share Anna at all. And she doesn't so much as mention my connection to the Stone family by way of their killing my fiancé and baby.

But as the women talk, I take more and more notice of Matt. He hasn't said a word, but I get a bad vibe from him, like he's a wolf in sheep's clothing. At one point, he almost seems bored and is looking around the apartment like he's considering buying it. At other moments, he seems overly invested in the conversation, though he holds his tongue.

But the weird part is that it's slick. To a casual observer, he probably seems bland, like oatmeal with all the excitement of a pat of butter on top. But I've seen guys like that before. Sometimes, it's real and a conversation with them is like pulling teeth because they're just so blah.

But other times, it's a practiced front.

And I haven't decided which this conversation is for Matt.

He excuses himself to piss, and I wait a beat for him to close the bathroom door. The girls don't even pause when I rise too, heading down the hallway to listen carefully. I lean against the wall,

waiting for the bathroom door to open.

I see the shock of surprise when he opens the door and the flash of anger in his eyes. But Matt hides it quickly, and very well, which is interesting.

I get the feeling that if I wasn't standing here, he would've snuck into Emma's room and started digging through the drawers. But he doesn't seem like an undie-stealing pervert. No, there's something different in his motivation. He's looking for something, but why would he be snooping around Emma's place?

I ask him and play it coy. "Wanted to talk to you away from Carly. What do you know about Stone? What do you think about Emma?"

Matt repeats what Claire said like it's the party line. Within two sentences, I've gotten my read on him. I know a coached soldier when I hear one.

"Okay," I reply, heading into the toilet before he can get a read on me. "I just don't want Carly to be scared, you know? Excuse me . . . gotta use this."

I close the door and lean against the counter. This situation, as unclear and twisted as it was before, seems to just keep getting more and more complicated.

I don't like complicated.

Complicated gets people killed.

And more often than not, not the ones who deserve it.

# Chapter 35

## Nathan

The entrance to the caves emerges out of the trees like a vision, but if you didn't know they were there, you'd miss it. Ironic, I know, but the truth is before my eyes as Francisco leads us out of the tree line into the small clearing.

I don't know what caused the pervasive Amazonian rainforest that we've been hiking through for the past day and a half to stop fifty feet from the sheer ridgeline in front of me like some god had used a ruler to measure the distance, but the line holds true for as far as I can see to my left and right, leaving a thin thread of pale, grassy green in the midst of the green-black jungle.

The cliffs themselves are dramatic, vaulting nearly two hundred feet into the air, making them some of the tallest hills in this part of the forest, like a barrier between the lower forest and the highlands that create the next level of jungle.

I'm sure a geologist could describe why the cliffs and the forest change are so sudden, but I honestly

don't care. What I care about is the waterfall in front of me, relatively narrow but so high that the water turns into a fine mist as it cascades to the bottom of the rockface. It's there, almost mundane compared to the beauty of the scenery around it, that the cave entrance awaits me.

I know the inside, from countless hours studying Dad's notes. I've memorized every turn and twist, and I know that even then, there's another entrance inside the entrance . . . easily overlooked, easily dismissed, and containing treasures beyond description.

"Stop," Francisco says, raising a hand just to get the point across. "Rest."

"Finally," I murmur as I lay my bag down, taking out the urn that contains 'Dad's ashes.' "I can honor my dad's dying wishes."

I have to force my voice to sound mournful and hesitant, as if the words pain me, playing the part of the dutiful son.

"Not now," Francisco says, pointing off to the left. "You've had a long day. You should rest for a few minutes, clear your head before you scatter your ashes. You have all day. We head back after breakfast tomorrow."

I didn't realize that was the plan, and the length of time here is more than I could've hoped for. An overnight opportunity onsite? As long as I can get away from the guys and have some alone time in the cave to search for the diamond, I'm almost assured to find it. But when I move toward the dark opening, flicking my light right and left, the two guards move with me.

I look at them and then to Francisco. "What?"

"Set up camp first. But today is the Sabbath, good for spirit."

The man's sudden admission of a spiritual side touches me, and part of me feels bad for deceiving him the way I am.

I nod and set my bag down. "I just want to look, maybe find the best place for him? Can I do that alone? It's not like I'm a threat, but I need to make some peace with my father."

I throw the dad card out with a fake tremble to my voice, hoping for some leniency. Francisco grunts, and I can see the pity in his eyes. I don't know if he still thinks I'm an insane *norte* or if I'm a good son, my dad such a good father that it's driven me to come this far, to do this much to honor him.

I don't really care, but the man hasn't done me any

wrong, and enough blood's been spilled in my father's memory. I don't want either of us to do something stupid.

“Set up camp first, then go,” Francisco finally says, and I lift my chin in silent thanks. If only he knew just how false my paternal dedication is. It doesn't take us long to set up our camp, which mostly consists of Francisco scraping out a fire pit while my guards and I gather appropriately sized stones from the river to ring the space before finding wood.

Eventually, I move off again, and the guards ignore me, taking up posts near the small clearing while I approach the cave, my flashlight and the urn in my hands.

I duck behind the misty waterfall, going inside the cave hesitantly. The dark seems to suck the light from my LED flashlight, and the temperature's easily twenty degrees cooler than it is outside. It's such a dramatic change that I start to shiver even though the cave's still at least eighty degrees.

The first 'room' of the cave is small, barely more than a depression in the cliff face. Moss covers most of what I can see, with rocks scattered around the floor. To my right is a large crack, though, and I approach it, reaching out to touch it as the memories start to come back.

*“I’ve found it!” Dad says, ranting wildly and excitedly in the library. It’s nearly two in the morning, and I’m exhausted with football practice tomorrow, but Dad doesn’t seem to care that his sons have been doing two-a-days all summer and still have another week of them to look forward to.*

*Not that he’s been here most of the summer. He’s been somewhere, chasing something again. Same as always, same song, different day. “Dad,” I call out, pushing open the door. “For God’s sake, it’s —”*

*“Look,” Dad says, almost running across the library to grab my wrist and drag me to the big map table he’s got set up in the middle. “The forensics team just got back with the key to it all!”*

*I look at the large picture spread out, blinking slowly as I try to make sense of it all. “What the fuck am I looking at?”*

*Normally, I wouldn’t curse in front of my father, but it’s two in the morning and I’m sick of this shit. He doesn’t notice, though, his eyes wide as he focuses solely on the picture instead of his eldest son . . . as usual.*

*“It’s the hiding place,” Dad says, showing me what looks to all intents and purposes like a hole in a door. “It’s hidden, son. Even five hundred years*



*ago, they knew such a gem couldn't just be lost in the jungle forever. So he hid it. What you're looking at is the door to the real hiding place."*

I blink, shaking my head as I pull my hand back from the crack. I hadn't even known then what he was talking about, but I do now. There's a lot more to this 'door' than just a crack in a rock face, and I know that because of the last conversation I'd overheard from my father.

*"Dad, I'm home," I call out, brushing off my pants as I walk down the hallway. I'm still in the same gear I wore down in Mexico, dealing with some cartel, but I don't really care if I'm getting dust all over the carpet.*

*It's not like Dad will notice, even if Grant doesn't have it vacuumed within the next half-hour. I thought that going merc instead of staying in the Army would get his attention, but it hasn't done much to change him or his level of attentiveness.*

*"I don't care what it takes, we have to get in there!" he calls, and I'm too wise to his game to delude myself that he's actually talking to me. I enter his library and see him standing in front of the computer monitor on the wall, his hair twisted up like it gets when he's really in his mad scientist moods. "What do the geologists say?"*

*I look at the monitor and see Anna, Dad's assistant. She's one hell of a historian. Dad's often tapped her encyclopedic knowledge, although I'm pretty sure he's never even considered tapping her in other ways. His mind is consumed by one thing . . . that damn gem. It's all he's thought about over the past few years, though he makes other excursions and discoveries to feed his manic need for treasure hunting. But this Brazilian gem has become his obsession.*

*"Mr. Stone, I hardly—oh, hi, Nathan."*

*I'm glad someone at least acknowledges my presence. "Hello, Anna. How's the weather . . . wherever you are?"*

*I can make a few guesses based on the fact that it's daylight where Anna is and she's wearing light tropical clothing, but I won't stick my foot in my mouth. Dad sends her all over the damn place. Which seems to be just fine with her, for whatever reason.*

*She doesn't answer me. She knows Dad's chomping at the bit waiting for her answer.*

*"Mr. Stone, the geologists have come back with the ground penetrating radar, and they are certain that this is the cave we've been looking for. Do you want them to—"*

*“No!” Dad yells, his eyes burning with madness. “No. I’m going to be the one to open that door. Get the entire team back here. Are you sure they’re trustworthy?”*

*“For all they know, sir, this was a search for oil deposits,” Anna confirms. “I’ll be on the next plane back to La Guardia. Uhm, I know this might be a bad time, sir . . . but when I get back, I’d like to talk about taking some time off. Personal reasons.”*

*“Of course, of course,” Dad says, cutting the link. He turns to me, grinning wildly. “You hear that, Nathan? It’s mine! MINE!”*

*In the dark of the cave, I can almost feel his presence, and in my mind, I talk to him. No, Dad, it’s mine. And once I find it, I’m going to destroy it. It’s brought down empires, if your stories are to be believed. It brought you down, and I’m going to make damn sure that whatever curse might exist on that stone stops with me.*

I study the rock face some more and slip my hand in the lock. The mechanism is tight, sculpted for hands much smaller than mine, but the crack in the door actually helps.

As I twist and pull, the stone door slides open on bronze hinges, slightly frozen from years of disuse,

but the very rock has protected it until I have a crack that I can wiggle into. It almost seems anticlimactically easy, knowing how long and hard Dad had to work just to get to this point—this jungle, this cave, this doorway, this lock—and I'm waltzing in to make the overtime winning touchdown and be the hero.

Taking advantage of the time I have, I slip inside, figuring that if I can't find it quickly, I can always try again, saying I wasn't ready to let go yet. If I sob just right, I think Francisco will allow me to come back in and spend some time mourning with the *ashes*.

The inner cavern is large. Crystals glitter in the beam of my LED, and I stop, knowing I'm looking upon a cave that no human has laid eyes on for nearly five hundred years.

It's so beautiful, and I could truly look at the natural wonders around me for hours, but I'm still going to have to do a lot of searching the old-fashioned way so I need to get started.

The ground penetrating radar wasn't exactly clear on where the diamond was inside the cave, and pirate riddles and X marks the spot are unfortunately not real, so I'm left to scavenge and scrape along the walls, looking for any nook or cranny where a diamond might've been hidden

centuries ago to never be seen again.

I narrow my beam, hunting for that flash of raw diamond I know so well . . . but I can't tell. My eyes are too dazzled after the two days in the jungle, from hours of hiking and exhaustion, so after a quick search, I head back out the way I came. I could spend hours in here.

I might have already. I've lost track of time, and if Francisco asks questions, I'll have to come up with some verbal tap dancing, maybe saying I was interested in the crystals. They already think I'm an idiot.

But when I reach the mouth of the cave, the commotion I hear brings me to a halt. Whatever's going on, it doesn't sound very peaceful, and I bring my knife to my shoulder, ready to deal with whatever I find beyond the waterfall.

At first, as I hear Francisco and his men yell in Portuguese at someone, I think maybe Nikolai's burly guard's come back. Maybe he thinks he can squeeze me for a little bit of extra juice.

But suddenly, Francisco yells out in English, "Stop! Hands up!"

What the fuck?

I creep around the waterfall to peek out.

But nothing prepares me for what I see emerging  
from the jungle beyond the clearing.

# Chapter 36

## Emma

*What the actual fuck, Miguel?*

I stare in the direction he's just disappeared in, wondering . . . did he just lead us into an ambush and then bolt?

He's grown exceedingly careful and quick as we've gotten deeper and deeper into the jungle, but just like that, he pulled a branch aside and guided us through.

Only for us to be captured.

And of course, Miguel himself is nowhere in sight now. Whether he's a traitor who sold us out, a coward hiding in the jungle, or something else, he's melted into the thick undergrowth with ninja-like skills.

I look to Caleb, who's stone-faced and obviously bottling up some fury of his own. His fingers tighten on the gun in his hands, but he sees the numbers and the odds. It may be two on two, but it's far from a fair fight. The men holding us are big and

powerful, with weapons already up and ready. On the other team is us, and Caleb is stuck with me and only the gun in his hand since I'm inexperienced with firearms.

Gruff voices yell in accented English for us to put our hands up, talking over each other so much that I almost can't distinguish who's yelling what.

Caleb glances at me and sighs, judging my safety against his odds of winning a gunfight before setting his rifle down and complying. Meanwhile, my hands immediately shoot for the sky. Real Lara Croft move there, I guess.

Even though Caleb and I are compliant, stepping away from Caleb's rifle and spreading our feet wide, we're both grabbed by rough hands.

The men, one large and one larger, twist our arms behind our backs.

The big guy holding me is especially rough, holding so tightly that I think my wrists might shatter from grinding against one another in his big paw. I won't give him the satisfaction of crying out, however, and clamp my lips tighter, taking strength from Caleb who gives me a look of support.

Big guy presses a gun to my temple. It's surprisingly warm from the heat and humidity of



the forest, and I'm suddenly so frightened that I nearly pee my pants in fear.

But even with the danger and discomfort that I'm in, I can look over and see that Caleb is getting it much worse.

The guy holding him must see that he's a more significant threat than I am, because he's working hard to make sure Caleb is at a disadvantage. While Caleb isn't resisting too much, the guy really cranks on his wrist before suddenly kicking the back of Caleb's knee, forcing it to bend and shoving him to the ground.

As soon as Caleb hits the dirt, he brings his boot down hard on Caleb's calf. I don't think it's broken, but Caleb's eyes tighten and he makes a grunting noise as he holds back the pain.

Both men pull back the hammers on their pistols, and in that moment I'm certain I'm going to die, right here in the Brazilian rainforest.

God, what a crazy tilt-a-whirl turn my life has taken.

But even with the wild spins and lurches in unexpected directions I've taken, I honestly have to say that my biggest regret would be dying without ever having a chance at seeing where

Nathan and I could go.

That, and not seeing him one more time before my brains get splattered all over the jungle.

Caleb's guard yanks him to his feet before the two of them push me and Caleb through another layer of branches, and I see another man, remarkably lean and skinny, with darkly tanned skin and a smile that tells me he's missing more teeth than he has.

He's sitting on a rock, like this is just a normal afternoon.

Hell, maybe for him it is.

Though I doubt there are many Americans strolling into cartel territory unexpectedly.

The guards look to the small old man for orders, talking so fast that I can't catch a single word.

*Calm yourself. Read the men, not the words.*

The mantra helps me focus. And soon, the shock and fear burning adrenaline through my veins starts to wear off as I watch them like a ping pong match, and the whole situation suddenly strikes me as funny. Not in a sense of humor sort of way, but in a 'no way this is my life' way.

The utter ridiculousness overwhelms my fear, and I

begin to giggle uncontrollably. It's not a typical response, and I probably look a little mad, but I feel a bit crazed and disoriented.

Caleb hisses at me, "Shut the fuck up."

I look over to him, my eyes leaking from laughing so hard, and I realize that he's watching the same ping pong match, and I go to object when I stop and read *him*.

I think he understands them. Of course he does. He's probably fluent in all of this.

How is this my life?

I take a deep, hitching breath, trying to help, but nothing keeps the madness back until I see him.

*Nathan?*

It is him, and he peeks out from a dark crevice by a waterfall I hadn't even noticed. I swallow my laughter instantly.

He's here.

I found him.

Now what?

I have no fucking clue.

He holds a finger to his mouth, telling me to shut up

like Caleb just did, and this time, I listen. Holding a big black knife I know will be useless against our captives' guns, he creeps around the waterfall, quiet as a church mouse, and gets into a better position behind a rock.

My eyes are locked on him, but his eyes flick from me to Caleb, who has a sudden bout of blinks and I wonder if they have some weird super-duper mercenary soldier language that communicates with blinks.

The thought makes me laugh again, and the guy's hands tighten on my arm, making me gasp in pain.

Nathan's eyes track the movement like he wishes he could rip the guy's hand off for daring to touch me, much less hurt me. But when he steps from behind the rock, his full attention is on the old guy.

“Stop, Francisco.”

As I look at him, shoulders half turned, eyes narrowed, and body relaxed but ready to unleash a maelstrom of violence, I'm aware of how much I know about Nathan but also, how much I don't know. Because in this moment, he looks like a complete badass. A single warrior against a group of three.

I'm ashamed to say that it's doing fluttery things to

my core. I'm not some flaky girl with a superhero complex, but Nathan like that . . . hell, maybe I don't know some things about myself too.

“Francisco, let them go.”

Francisco must be the old guy, I think. With *huevos* the size of grapefruit, he turns casually to face Nathan and spits at the ground. “Why? Trespassers get shot. Dead.”

Francisco looks away from Nathan dismissively to scan Caleb coldly, almost like he's measuring how big of a hole they'll have to dig to fit him in it. Then I realize that they won't even need to bury us.

Nobody would find us out here anyway, except for the animals.

And that's a better way of dealing with evidence anyway. Not that I think the local police ever come out here.

I shudder at the thought and it's weird. I can face death, I can face getting shot, but letting my body rot out in the open to become puma food and monkey nuggets for some reason creeps me out.

The slight movement catches Francisco's attention and he turns his focus to me, his lips tilting up as he looks at my breasts, his tongue peeking out as he looks at my hips, and then he adjusts himself as he

scans the rest of the way down my cargo pant-covered legs.

“Maybe not dead.”

Every filthy, scary innuendo possible is contained in those words, and I swear I can smell the arousal of the guy holding me over the scent of sweat and body odor he’s wearing.

His hands tighten again, pulling me back against him, and I feel his erection at my back. What sort of sick fuck gets aroused at holding a gun to a woman’s temple?

I struggle to get away even though I have nowhere to go if I get out of his grip, but my pride and sense of self-preservation won’t let me just stand here.

“Stop,” Nathan commands, and I’m not sure if he’s talking to me, Francisco, or the guard.

Regardless, we all freeze. Somehow, with one word, one deep voice, he’s taken control of the entire clearing.

“My arrangement with Nikolai is safe passage for me and my group. I came *alone*, but these people are my group. Caleb and Emma. *My* people, Francisco. *Comprendo?*”

His words shoot like daggers through my gut. With

his emphasis on 'alone', he's telling me quite plainly that he doesn't want me here.

*Well, fuck that. I am here. I don't run out when things get hard.*

Francisco purses his lips. "Nikolai will not be happy."

"That's my problem, not yours. His word is my group. Or do you not follow his orders?"

It's a challenge, an obvious one, that Francisco may be the big man in this forest, but even he's got a boss to answer to.

The tension is nearly more oppressive than the humidity, pressing in on us from all sides, seeping into my pores. My life is hanging by an invisible war of wills between two men, and death is slowly circling the clearing, wondering who it's going to take.

Are they going to kill us? Or not?

I can feel the anticipation of the guy behind me as he nearly grinds against me, but I don't move away this time. I'm too scared to rock the boat because I can feel the precarious balance we're at right now.

A balance that could be lost with as little as an unexpected movement, a whisper, or a heavy

breath.

Finally, Francisco spits again and lifts his chin to the guards. They release us immediately, although they shove us both away roughly, and I can feel my heartbeat in my arm where he was squeezing so tightly.

I can hear the roar of my blood rushing through my head, a message repeating with every heartbeat.

*Not dead.*

*Not dead.*

It feels like a prayer of thanks and a reaffirmation of life all at once.

“Welcome to the jungle,” Francisco says and then laughs.

It’s a bit maniacal, but he certainly thinks we’re the crazy ones. He might be right.

An uncomfortable tension reigns between us, especially when Nathan looks at me like he’d hoped to never see me again. Still, he slips his knife into a sheath and then glares at Caleb.

“Caleb? A word,” he says. “Over there.”

They step away, but I’m unwilling to be left alone with the guards and Francisco, so I step closer too.



I'm trying to give them a modicum of privacy for the conversation to come because I'm betting it's going to be a doozy, but I can still hear every word.

“What the fuck are you doing here? And why'd you bring her?” Nathan hisses.

Caleb flashes that white-toothed grin, like all we did was crash a house party or something. “She wanted to come. Seemed like a good time, and I figured you could use the help.” Caleb looks over to the guard, who's picking up his gun. “Think I can go get my AK now?”

“You know you're not getting that back,” Nathan scolds. “And I left her to keep her safe and you damn well know it. But you brought her here, of all places? I know you wanted to watch the shitshow from the front row, but this is cruel even for you.”

I pause at that. Caleb hasn't been onboard with Nathan and me from the beginning. I know I pressured him into bringing me, but could he have been playing me right back?

Is this his attempt to get me killed, or even just to make Nathan see what a risk I am so he'll back away from me permanently?

But then I think about Caleb helping me through my moment of panic and his words that maybe he

liked me just a tiny bit. Even that small give seems important from him, an unlikely kindness. He's not the type to give false praise, I don't think. So while he's not happy about Nathan and me, I do believe he brought me to be nice, not cruel.

“Thought you'd want to see your girl. Fuck knows, she wanted to see you. And since she was willing to tell her sister to fuck off and run down here by herself, I figured the safest play was to stick by her side. So here we are.”

Caleb glances at me, his eyes unreadable once again, and I question myself again at his motives.

“How did you even get here?” he asks Caleb, but before he can answer, Nathan turns to me.

“Didn't you have a play to perform in?”

I growl, stomping over to him and getting right in his face before Caleb can speak. “It was one hell of a helicopter ride, and fuck the play. My guess is they got the original actress back, but I don't know for sure, and I sure as fuck don't care right now. I ditched *Cleopatra*, ditched my sister, and ditched it all so I could be here. So Caleb could be here. For you.”

A bird screams, but it's the only sound that interrupts the sudden silence, and Nathan's eyes

burn into mine. Risking it all, my voice cracking, I force the words out. “I love you. And I want to help you.”

He doesn’t say it back, and the crevice created in my heart when he left widens, gaping deep and dark and pain-filled.

But I force the tears back, unwilling to break here in the jungle surrounded by dangerous men.

Something about it makes me think of the nickname he calls me . . . kitty. Not Kitty, but kitty. I’m a lost kitten trapped by junkyard dogs in a world bigger and scarier than I’d ever dreamed.

Still, I’m latching onto the biggest, scariest dog I see and not letting go. I’m gonna ride this out and see where it all ends.

Caleb’s voice is full of sarcasm. “I love you too, Nate-y Wate-y.”

“Fine, let’s fucking bury Dad then,” Nathan says with a sneer.

Still, before he steps back, he puts his hand over mine, and I feel . . . something.

It’s torture, not knowing exactly what it means.

But I’ll take it.

# Chapter 37

## Nathan

The three flashlight beams play on the walls, but despite the extra light, I feel the situation pressing in on me more, more stifling than even the cave walls. I'm searching around aimlessly and occasionally speaking loud enough to make it seem like we're holding some sort of strange funeral for a man I didn't care enough about to hate.

Okay, maybe that's not entirely true because I do feel something about my father and his death. Whether good or bad, ill or beneficial, he had an impact on my life that's brought me thousands of miles from home, with three armed men outside.

I'm just not sure what label to smack on the outside of the jar of those emotions.

"Damn it, Dad. Why?" I cry out, my body in the gap between the inner and outer caverns. The dramatics are for Francisco, who I'm sure is paying a lot more attention this time. Considering he was holding onto Caleb's AK-47, he's certainly being cautious.

From the entrance to the inner cavern, Caleb whispers, “Too much, dumbass. You sound like a pussy. Tone it down a notch. Or ten.”

I grin but fake a snuffle like I’m crying while keeping an eye out to see if Francisco is thinking of interrupting us. He did solemnly offer his condolences as we entered the cave, so I’m guessing he feels like he’s done enough, but I’m taking no chances.

Meanwhile, Emma and Caleb are poring over the papers they brought, re-familiarizing themselves with the information I have memorized. Emma is comparing what she sees on the walls to what’s on the map using a magnifying app on her phone, looking at every inch, and then she gasps. She covers her mouth, but I can see by her wide eyes that she’s figured something out.

I look to where she’s pointing at the wall. There’s a small picture, almost a hieroglyphic, though this isn’t the right civilization for that. I didn’t see it before because it’s so faint, it’s more like a watermark on the wall. Now that she’s pointed it out, it’s as plain as day.

I cross the inner cavern, but Caleb is to her first, grabbing her shoulders and turning her to face him. “What? What does it say?”

Her eyes flick past him to me, and I push him out of the way. Thank God he moves willingly or I would have to beat the shit out of him for touching her. I'm still going to beat the shit out of him for bringing her here, but that can wait till we get home still alive.

“It’s a sunstar design, unusual for this area, but . . .”

She goes on, quietly rambling something or other that’s way above my head about the civilization of the area and the development of their written language. I learned the details of the treasure, not the history of the local indigenous tribes. But she obviously did the homework I asked of her.

“Sum it up,” I demand. “What’s that mean?”

She sighs, realizing that no one has understood or even listened to her. “It’s basically like ‘the light within’ or ‘light bursting through’, so I think it means—” She looks around the cave, and I do the same even though her words are basically gibberish to me.

She shines her light around, looking for something, but I don’t see anything other than the same brown rocks we’ve been looking at.

“What do you see?” I whisper, trying to figure out what Emma’s looking for. Caleb’s moved back to

the door, and we're both shocked when she bends down and crawls through a gap I hadn't seen before, an almost impossibly tight squeeze.

“What are you doing? Don't go back there!”

My words are harshly whispered so as not to alert the guys outside, but I want to scream them. She's going deeper into the cave where we can't see, where Caleb and I can't reach. There's no way my body's fitting through that gap, and Caleb's a little taller than me, so he's no help either.

If something goes wrong, we can't get to her.

She pauses, and I can hear the excitement and the fear in her voice as she says, “It's okay. I'm going to get this diamond for you.”

She shuffles on, her flashlight beam disappearing while Caleb looks at me worriedly. I know what he's thinking. It's the same thing I am. What the fuck do we do if she's stuck in there?

I watch, shocked, as the crystals we were focusing on start to light up again . . . this time from the other side. I can almost imagine it's my eyes playing tricks on me.

“What the hell?” Caleb whispers, then chuckles. “Of course. You don't leave your valuables in your fucking entryway.”

He's being his usual joking self about a scary situation, but then the crystals darken again like Emma's moved to a different area of the cave where we can't even see her light. Even that small sign of her is gone. And the reality of her disappearance hits me like a ton of bricks. I don't want her to be gone.

I want her by my side.

Always.

Forever.

*Shit.*

I tried to do the right thing, to get her away from the madness that is my life even though it hurt me. I knew I was becoming the thing I hated most . . . my dad.

But Emma deserves more than this, and I tried to give it to her.

Freedom, the one thing she deserves most of all. Which is why I pushed her away.

But like a puppy that doesn't know any better, she came back for more.

No, not a puppy.

Like a kitten. A kitty.



A kitty that lets you pet her on her terms, approaches you when she wants, but will scratch the shit out of you if you fuck up. And the definition of fucking up is strictly written on her say-so.

She's let me play at being in charge of us, at her following orders when it suited the situation, but look at us now. She's the one making the big steps, and I'm freaking out that I'm going to lose her.

She chased me down to fucking cartel territory in Brazil to help me. And I'm on her hook so damn bad.

I knew it, but I didn't know it deep down to my core like I do right this instant.

I turn back to Caleb.

I know he can see the realizations blooming like fireworks in my dark eyes, and he sighs.

“You really want to walk this path, man?”

Not helpful. I'm looking for assurance.

Assurance that I didn't just kill her by bringing her here and letting her go traipsing off alone into an uncharted cave, looking for a diamond.

A diamond I just want to destroy.

“Caleb,” I whisper, and his face softens. We’ve fought, but now that I’ve made my decision, he’s going to back me one hundred percent.

Caleb holds up a reassuring hand. “Give her a minute. She’s stubborn.”

I understand, but still, I’m worried. How deep does the next cavern go?

Why didn’t it show up on the geological reports?

What if . . .

My eyes scan the deep darkness, and then I see the white light bouncing through the crystals, coming back toward me, and hear the quiet echo of her running footsteps. My heart stops as a slightly dirty but unmarked arm sticks out of the crack.

“I need something to dig with, something sharp.”

Caleb and I both offer her our knives from our sheaths, and I take some small joy that my knife is bigger, more serrated than his.

We set them down, and I can see her face, so beautiful in the dark crack. She looks at them and then takes them both with a smirk, like she could read my thoughts.

“What did you find?”

She doesn't answer, just winks and disappears into the darkness again.

Caleb and I look to each other, and he grins. "It's not the size of the blade but how you use it."

It's a bad joke, but it helps with my worries as from behind the crystal wall, I can hear scraping noises and a few grunts.

"Give her a minute," Caleb repeats, and it sounds like he's reminding us both.

He's a good guy, would never infringe on something I have going with a woman, but I can sense that he feels some responsibility for bringing Emma here.

And he knows she's mine . . . and he'll defend her to his last breath because of that.

"Thanks," I whisper, one word encompassing so many things. For being my brother, for always having my back, for bringing Emma, for coming himself. All of it, none of it. It doesn't matter.

Caleb simply nods, and two agonizingly long minutes later, Emma is back, a grimace on her face.

"Did you find it? Holy shit, did you find it?"

"I did. But uhm, it's not what I expected." The look on her face is one of confusion mixed with awe.

“Let me see.”

She reaches into her pocket, where she pulls out . . . her sock?

She unwraps the balled-up sock, and I see it. The gem’s beautiful, a hue of iridescence that I’ve never seen before, and it’s somehow carved. The pattern is almost chilling, a figure twisting and entwining itself in a way that’s almost an affront to the sane mind.

“I can see why you don’t like it,” Caleb whispers. “Ugly fucking thing.”

“Fucking finally,” I growl as I reach out, taking it from her. I turn it over in my hands, looking at it, through it, studying it. It feels heavier than it should, like the density of the stone is higher than that of a typical diamond.

Caleb holds up a hand, not to take the gem but to ask, “Where we gonna hide it?”

I look at Emma, who shakes her head as I scan her body. “Not *there*, you’re not! I ain’t *that* helpful.”

Caleb rolls his eyes and interrupts. “I don’t care if you smuggle it out of here San Quentin style or shoved up your twat. Though Nathan . . . don’t go sticking your dick in there again or you’re risking some serious cave cooties.”

He grins like that's high-brow humor, and I can't help it, I chuckle.

I push him, and he stumbles but finds his footing. Emma giggles the smallest little laugh, like she finds our brotherly battles entertaining. While we're goofing off, she solves the problem, shaking the urn with dad's 'ashes'. "Looks like it'll fit in here. No need for questionable smuggling."

We stage the ground to look like we've had some type of ceremony for dear old Dad, and we even sprinkle the ash throughout the cave to cement our cover story. Then we slip the gem in the urn. It fits like we planned it that way, but it's truly just the best of luck. A tiny voice whispers that maybe Dad had a little something to do with that good fortune, but I dismiss it.

"Looks good, yeah?" I ask.

With a nod, we leave the cave to the dusky night air of the jungle.

I fully expect Francisco to have double-crossed us and be waiting with guns drawn to take the diamond from us.

But instead, he's sitting on his rock by the campfire, drawing shapes in a patch of dirt with a stick. The guards are several feet away, snoring

lightly on the grass, feeling secure that the fire will keep away any predators.

“You do your *padre* right?” he asks. Like most men in this region and this line of work, he’s willing to let the difficulties from before slide, it seems.

I swallow thickly and hope it looks like I’m choking on grief. “Yeah. We’re good. Thanks.”

He nods. “Get some sleep. We’ll leave early, with sunrise.”

We do as he says, Caleb going to secure his gear while I slip the urn into my pack before using it as a pillow, lying down next to Emma.

There are so many things I want to say to her, but I don’t want them overheard, especially by Nikolai’s guys.

So I pull her to me, spooning her and keeping a protective arm wrapped tightly around her waist, whispering, “I’m sorry.”

She seems to understand the need to keep any gestures small right now, because she nods and snuggles back into me. “Me too.”

With a small, satisfied smile, one my mind says is almost kittenish, she drifts off easily. I’m sure she’s exhausted, because I am too. But I can’t sleep.

Caleb sits down beside me, leaning back on a rock where he can see Francisco and the two guards. “I’ve got watch. I’m good.”

Francisco shakes his head, smiling a little. “I guard. They later.” He tosses a thumb in the direction of Tweedle-Big and Tweedle-Bigger. “That’s what money is for.”

Caleb and I know better. Those guards are to watch for danger in the jungle, to make sure no one and nothing sneaks up on us while we’re vulnerable.

Caleb is watching for danger right here in our little group. He’s watching out for me, for Emma.

I do think he’s starting to like her. Maybe. He admires her guts, at least. So even if he doesn’t trust her yet, he’ll watch out for her because I care for her.

That’s what brothers do.

I check my watch and do some quick mental calculations. “Three hours. You catch rack before daybreak.”

He nods, already in stealth mode. Still and quiet, he sinks into the shadows.

He’s watching, and he’s not going to let anyone hurt his family.

That knowledge lets me close my eyes, glad he's on my team.



# Chapter 38

## Emma

The sun is barely peeking over the horizon when Nathan shakes me awake. “Time to go.”

I stretch, my body arguing at the abuse from sleeping on the hard ground overnight. It’s been too long since I’ve been in the field, and even then, it was a lot more ‘civilized’ than this. If this is what Nathan’s idea of roughing it is, maybe I’ll stick to excavating at a Holiday Inn.

With a toilet and a long, hot shower. Ah, plumbing . . . I miss you.

On that note, I sneak behind a tree and take care of some morning business, glad Grant included a pack of biodegradable body wipes and a small bottle of hand sanitizer gel.

I take care of my morning needs, freshen up, and retie my messy ponytail, vowing to make a hair appointment as soon as I get back to New York. With a deep breath, I’m ready to tackle the hike back.

I think my body might disagree a bit though, as just about everything hurts, and when I slide my pack on, I swear I've got muscle cramps on top of my aches.

“Don't worry,” Nathan says quietly as he helps me adjust my straps. “We'll take it slow.”

The hike back out of the jungle is déjà vu inducing in its similarities to coming in, even though we're going in a slightly different direction. I'm just following Francisco instead of Miguel this time. But Caleb is in front of me and Nathan behind me, so it's the same black backpack landscape for my eyes.

After about two hours, we stop for a breather and to refill our canteens from a stream. Caleb leans over and whispers in my ear, “Did you see Miguel?”

My brows shoot together in confusion and he smirks. “Saw him hiding in a tree last night, gave him a thumbs-up. He did his job.”

It feels like an olive branch because Caleb knows I've been waffling between being mad at Miguel for deserting us to Francisco's goons and being worried about him alone in the jungle.

But apparently, he did what Caleb hired him for,

and that's good enough. Men are weird . . . or maybe it's unique to soldiers?

I don't know, considering I have minimal experience with either.

We walk until sunset, and as the last rays of sunlight filter out of the sky, we come to a clearing and I see an old beater Jeep. It's a four-seater at best, especially considering the size of the guys, but we pile in.

"Faster going out than in," Nathan says to Francisco, who grins his jack-o-lantern smile. "Direct path?"

Francisco nods and points. "In."

Francisco drives, Tweedle-Bigger in the passenger seat, leaving Nathan, Caleb, and Tweedle-Big in the back.

It's a tight fit for the three of them, made even tighter when I perch in Nathan's lap. If it weren't so tight and all five of us didn't smell like we've been hiking in the jungle, I might think it's actually fun.

The ride back into town is blessedly short but extra-bumpy, and I find that I have to hold onto the metal bar above me to keep from bouncing out. Even still, I rap my knuckles between the bar and my head

more than once, and I know I'm going to need a Tylenol later.

We finally hit a paved road and Francisco makes a turn, but Nathan speaks up. "No, take us straight to the airport. In Belem."

Francisco looks back, surprise etched on his face. "You sure? It takes many hours to drive. Nikolai's airstrip is closer. Your pilot can meet you there."

Nathan shakes his head, determined. "Belem. We'll both throw in our knives if you can make it happen. Consider them a tip for a job well done."

Though it sounds like a kindness, I can sense that it's a test too. If Francisco insists on returning to Nikolai's airstrip, we can be sure that there will be nothing good waiting there for us.

But Francisco looks happy, a smile moving the lines of his tanned face. "Thanks, *Norte*."

Francisco's grin widens as he makes a call, speaking so fast I don't understand a word until I hear him say '*aeroporto*'.

Nathan cuts his eyes to Caleb, who blinks slowly. They do have some weird blinking language going, and they understood at least most of what Francisco was saying.

It feels like we accomplished the mission we set out to do. The diamond is in Nathan's backpack right now. But all of that will be for nothing if we don't get out of here safely.



\* \* \*

The airport in Belem is tiny, more of a private hangar and a long stretch of cleared grass and dirt. But there's a small private jet sitting there, waiting on us.

There's a black Land Rover too. As Francisco stops the Jeep and I give thanks to whatever spirits kept the decrepit thing together for so many hours, the Land Rover door opens and Nikolai steps out.

I can feel Nathan tense beneath me.

“You setting us up, Francisco?” Nathan asks through clenched teeth, his hand reaching for the knife still by his side.

Nikolai shakes his head, holding both hands up to show he's unarmed.

But he hasn't been the gun-toting threat the whole time, so the farce seems useless.

He calls across the small space, “Doing as I'm told. My father wanted visual proof that you were

leaving.”

We get out of the Jeep, and almost as soon as our feet touch the ground, Francisco peels rubber as he floors it.

Okay, the rubber doesn't peel out because I don't think the Jeep could peel rubber even on its best day, but for a vehicle older than my mother, Francisco certainly jammed the pedal through the floorboard.

*That doesn't bode well, I think.*

Caleb and I stay one step behind Nathan as he walks to Nikolai. They shake hands, but the tension is pulled taut between them.

Nikolai's face is stone, his voice barely audible even to us. “Just a reminder that this is a one-time deal. Daddy ashes only.”

He says it calmly, but I wonder if he knows something.

To cover my nerves, I ask, “Where's Maritziana?”

Nikolai laughs, his barrel chest shaking. “She is right where she wants to be, Kitty. She is a city girl. The closest she'll come to Brazil is the Copacabana.”

I don't like that he used the old name now that he

knows my real one. It feels like a threat of sorts.

He's evil incarnate in a way I wish I didn't know existed, but when he talks about Maritziana, there's a slight softness to his eyes like he does actually care for her.

I guess even Hades had his Persephone.

"You won't hurt her." I mean to say it like it's an order, but the upward lilt to my voice at the end makes it sound like a question.

He smirks, shaking his head softly. "*Nyet*, not unless she begs nicely for me to. Do you do that for your Nathan? Spread your pussy wide and plead for him to fuck you hard? To give you his cock as you scream his name and cry for his cum? If not, you should. It's rather . . . inspiring."

He's trying to shock me with his crass words, but I can only hope that Maritziana is getting her version of a happily ever after. It's not okay, but maybe it's okay for them? I have to believe that.

I choke a bit on my own spit and shrink back behind Nathan, which makes Nikolai laugh again.

Nathan draws his attention back, his voice tight with barely repressed anger. "As you said, one-time passage to the caves and out safely in exchange for the pink diamonds for Mama Romanov."

Nathan sets his pack down and digs into an interior pocket, pulling out a velvet satchel. He tosses it to Nikolai, whose eyes go huge as he catches it by reflex. “You had them with you the whole time.”

Nathan’s eyes gleam in triumph. “Insurance policy. You needed me to get them, and I would only give them as I’m leaving the country.”

Nikolai takes the satchel and pours a few into his hand, the small pink chunks of diamond gleaming in his hand. As he inspects them, Nathan asks, “We good?”

Nikolai takes a deep breath, and I’m nervous that this is his moment. He’s got it all now . . . the diamonds and us still in his territory. “*Da*. I do give you great condolences on the loss of your father. I hope you were able to do his wishes justice. Though fathers and sons may not always get along or agree, we do things for our families, simply because they are our family.” He nods sagely like that’s a great nugget of wisdom and then looks back at the Land Rover.

My eyes follow Nikolai’s, as do Caleb’s and Nathan’s.

There’s an older white-haired man sitting in the back, barely visible. But when he sees our eyes looking his way, he lifts a hand in a small salute.



“Travel safe, Nathan Stone,” Nikolai says, and it’s all the dismissal we need.

The flight back to the States feels different this time with Nathan beside me.

But shortly after take-off, the brothers start arguing lightly about me.

Again.

“Could’ve been dangerous,” Nathan says.

“Could’ve? It *was* fucking dangerous! But we did it anyway,” Caleb argues. “Would have been safer from the get-go if *someone* hadn’t been a stubborn ass about things.”

I interrupt, pulling the big stone out of Nathan’s bag and setting it on the table in front of me.

Instantly, their argument ceases and their attention is on the rock.

In some ways, it’s not as impressive as I thought it’d be. It’s smaller than a tennis ball, and rather flat as well, not even a half-inch thick.

On the other hand, the carvings etched into the face are repellent but also oddly attractive. Looking at them, whispers of dark things, darkly sexually disgusting things, filter through my mind.

I shiver, my stomach clenching as I turn away from the gem.

When Nathan had talked about the caves and had me do research on the people and artifacts, I hadn't known why.

But then I'd read a myth about an ancient diamond believed to be hidden in the caves and I'd realized his intentions.

From what he'd shared about his dad, I'd known this was the reason for his trip to Brazil.

And then I'd known it was the reason for Nathan's trip as well.

But regardless of the mythological powers, despite its making me feel anger and lust and rage and power all rolled up into one twisted lump, it's still just a chunk of pretty rock.

It stops the argument immediately, the talismanic presence filling the small cabin.

"What are we going to do with it?" Caleb asks.

"Destroy it," Nathan says immediately. "I know a guy with a hydraulic press, two hundred tons of pressure. Turn the damn thing into dust."

"What would your dad have wanted to do with it?" I ask carefully, although Nathan's vehemence

seems to be unchangeable.

Nathan and Caleb lock eyes. “Do you remember?” they both ask at the same time.

They grin, and Nathan turns to me, explaining, “When Caleb and I were little, whenever Dad would have a successful trip, he’d come home so excited. We’d have a whole evening at least of him rambling so fast as he told us the story of how he came to possess *This Great Thing* or *That Ancient Relic*. There was always some element of danger he’d had to battle, some unexpected riddle he had to solve before the booby trap would kill him. He made it all up, but to my mind, it seemed real. I was just a little kid, so it made his absences feel important somehow. And when he’d come back, to celebrate, we’d have ice cream sundaes.”

Caleb whispers, “Sprinkles and fudge.”

They disappear into the past together for a split second as I can see their shared history playing out in their eyes. All the excitement, all the pain, all the disappointment, all the anger.

“So ice cream sundaes tonight?” I venture.

Nathan thinks for a moment before he finally shakes his head. “It feels dirty to do that without him. Besides, by the time we were teens, his stories

were like Santa Claus . . . tarnished with the adult understanding of everything he gave up to find those treasures.”

Caleb walks over to the bar and pours himself a drink. “I haven’t had fucking ice cream in ten years, and I’m not starting now.”

He sits down on the long bench that takes up half of one side of the small cabin, pulling the shade and staring at the twinkling lights thousands of miles below. I can see him shutting off the emotions, doing his best to deal with his past.

# Chapter 39

## Nathan

I watch my brother for a few minutes, not sure if I should go over and sit with him, let him drag me down into whatever pit he's spiraling into. Emma would give us the privacy, I'm sure . . . or at least as much privacy as this jet allows.

But I can tell by the set of his shoulders, the way his body's stiff as a board and the clench of his jaw, that he wants to take this journey alone, at least for now. I can respect that.

Dad fucked us both over, but it landed on us in different ways. I tried to buffer things for Caleb as the older brother, but in some ways, I think I did him a disservice. He didn't catch onto Dad's bullshit until much later, and so the betrayal hit him that much harder.

So if he needs to fortify his shields and lock that moment of memory away a little more securely, I'll give him time to do so.

Instead, I turn to Emma, who's watching me watch

Caleb. Her eyes are perceptive, blue and deep, no judgement or pity, just interest.

And love.

She said she loves me, and though I heard her, I guess I sort of always thought it was just words. But this doesn't feel like lip service. It feels . . . real.

I take her hand, pulling her up and into the back of the plane.

The sleeping quarters aren't much, a full-sized bed wedged into a tiny space behind the refreshment station, barely large enough to stand up in.

But the bed isn't why I brought her here. I dragged her back here because I have a lot I need to say and I wanted what little privacy can be found. Somehow, the small space helps to corral the wild emotions running through me, letting me express what I need to.

"I'm sorry, Emma. So fucking sorry," I murmur as I sit on the bed, the words tied in emotions as they float into the air between us. She sits next to me, and I want to say more, but first I have to let her understand.

I chase my apology, leaning into her and stealing a kiss and her breath as I press my lips to hers.

She's soft for a moment, pushing back into me, and I swallow her little sounds, but then she pulls away and stands up. The small distance between us feels symbolic of what I've done to us, a situation I created.

"No, wait. I need to know . . . sorry for what? For leaving me? For lying about it? For not trusting me? What exactly are you sorry for?"

I wince at the pain I can hear laced through her words, and I know I have to turn away from the path I've been on. I won't hide from her. I won't be my father.

"All of it."

"More," she demands, and I look at her in confusion. Emma's mouth pinches and she explains. "I fucked up, majorly. But when I apologized, I laid it all on the line, bared my fucking soul. I expect nothing less from you."

Shit. She stands in front of me as judge, jury, and executioner, a look in her eyes that tells me I need to get my shit together, and do it quickly, because she's right. She deserves nothing less than what she was willing to give.

But in all my years on this planet, I've never had to really do what she's asking. Even when I was in the

military or a merc, if a superior chewed my ass, they would tell me why and how I fucked up and rarely demanded an apology beyond another set of push-ups.

This is going to be hard.

“I shouldn’t have left you,” I start slowly, chewing over every word in my mind before I say it, “but I thought I was doing the right thing. Thought I was protecting you, and when I saw you being held at gunpoint, a small part of me said, ‘I told you so,’ because that was exactly what I’d been trying to prevent. My heart literally stopped because I knew I couldn’t get to you in time. If I’d moved toward you, that asshole would’ve pulled the trigger and I would’ve lost you. I died a little in that moment too, just from the thought that you could be hurt.”

Emma’s posture relaxes a little, but her eyes are still so intense, so demanding, that I know she needs more. She needs it all.

“But I wasn’t. I’m fine. I’m here. Now what?”

She asks the question like I have some say-so in our next steps, but I know my answer is a test.

I’m answering the question, but she has all the power.

If I can find the strength, the courage, to open up to



her fully, to go all in and return her love, she'll stay. We'll go home, and life will be messy, it'll be weird, but it'll be wonderful with her by my side.

If I can't . . . she'll get off the plane in New York, and that's the last I'll likely ever see or hear from her.

And I can't imagine that.

My life would become a cold, meaningless nightmare, and I can't live like that anymore. Not now that I know what it could be.

So I swallow every single drop of pride I have and tell her the truth. It's not pretty, and I don't know if it'll be enough, but it's all I have. I stand, feeling like I'm facing a firing squad as I lay myself bare.

"I'm not really sure what love is. I don't think what my dad felt for us was love, more like obligation. And my mom died when I was young, so a lot of the memories are hazy, like happy fuzzies in my mind. I'd say I love Caleb, but that's different, like a responsibility and hope that he's eventually happy. I've never . . ."

I sigh, searching for the words that won't form into coherent thoughts when I need them most. "I don't have a name for what I feel, but I don't want to lose it. Lose you. Songs and books say love is

supposed to be like butterflies and sunshine and pink hearts, you know? But that's not what I feel, not at all."

I lean into her, running my thick fingers into her messy bun and grabbing a handful of her blonde hair as I rumble, first to her lips, then against the satin skin of her neck, and finally into her ear.

"What I feel is deep and scarily obsessive. Emma, you're working your way into every crevice, every cranny of my soul, and I want the same. I want to own you, to be owned by you. I want your breath to carry my name and my name only for the rest of your life. Because from the moment I saw that gun to your head, it's all I can think of, and I can't live without you. I want to live, Emma. I want to live inside you like the way you've wiggled into my soul."

It's more dark poetry than what I think love is supposed to be, but maybe my perception of bubblegum love is wrong?

And isn't that the point? I don't fucking know.

I have no idea how love is supposed to feel.

The cold reality is a slap to my soul, and Emma's silence is another hit. I sink to the bed once again, defeated and broken. More broken than I ever have

been before.

Slowly, I feel her fingers start to stroke my hair, and she bends over me, wrapping her arms around my head to whisper in my ear, “I’ve never had pink heart eye love either.”

I pull back, and she sits, placing one of her hands on my chest and one on hers, over our respective hearts. “But whatever this feels like to you, it feels like love to me. I love you. And what you feel, that’s enough for me. I want that, all of that.”

I swallow because I’m about to say something I thought I’d never say. If those are the words she uses to describe what I’m feeling, I’ll give them to her. “I love you, too.”

She smiles at me, sweet and sultry and satisfied. And that I can give her all that with such a small gesture of the depth of what I feel mystifies me to no end.

I need to tell her more, but there simply aren’t words for it in any spoken language.

So I kiss her, hard but slow, letting everything I feel pour into her. I’m still not sure of the labels, but if she is, that’s enough for me.

And I’ll make sure she never questions the power of what I feel for her, whatever name she wants to

call it.

The kiss catches fire, and she presses into my chest, trying to get closer to me, almost climbing me. I wrap my hand through her hair, pulling her tight, and the two of us share one breath, one heartbeat.

Emma tries to push me back, but I'm in love, not whipped. After a moment of playful struggle, I push her back onto the mattress. "Uh-uh."

The moment of laughter dies on her lips when I follow her, aligning my body with hers and grinding my cock against the cradle of her core. She moans, finally wrapping her legs around me.

I kiss along her neck, grazing the soft skin with my teeth, wanting to stay true to my word and mark her all over.

But I settle for sucking kisses, knowing the redness will fade before we even leave this bed. It's enough for now.

She mewls beneath me, just like a kitten. She is my kitty.

With her next wave of writhing, I push her shirt off her shoulders and yank her tank top over her head.

She's the one that reaches back and unhooks her sports bra.

And then she's bare to me. Taking one nipple into my mouth, I tease and pluck at the other, inhaling her salty skin.

But as I try to go lower, licking and biting down her belly to her pants, she stops me. "Nathan, I haven't showered in days. Literal days. I love it when you go down on me, but I love you enough to know that we don't need to do that right now. I need you, deep inside me and making me yours. Just fuck me, please."

The last word is a plea, but I can deny her nothing.

"I thought you'd want me to make love to you now," I tease, though I'm curious to her answer. In my head, I guess along with the rainbows and glittery image of love, I expected her to want something a little sweeter than our last encounter.

Still kissing her belly, I wait for her to answer as I undo her pants, sliding them down her legs and working at taking her boots off. Finally, I get the knots undone, and I'm able to remove the last stitches from her body.

Once she's naked, I stand up to take my clothes off too, shirt flying and pants dropping as I forcefully kick off my own boots, which I'd thankfully untied as soon as I got onboard. She hums as she thinks and watches me hungrily.

When I'm just as bare and exposed as her, she answers. "Firstly, I fucking loved what we did before. I hate that you felt like you needed to punish me, but the result was something I'd repeat anytime you like. But I don't think 'I love you' sex has to be any certain way. I mean, soft and slow is good, and hard and fast is good. We could do this in a bed, in the shower, or you could take me in the middle of the jungle we just left. You can take an hour or pound the shit out of me in five minutes. Just hold my hand while you do it and we're good."

The blush on her cheeks and smirk on her lips are like a pure shot of lust.

"Say it again," I demand.

She blinks once, twice, and then gets it. "Fuck me, please. Make me come on your cock."

There's no beg, no pleading tone this time. Her words are just as much a demand as mine.

I tease my crown along her slit, groaning at the slippery heat. "Fuck, kitty. Already so wet for me."

Pushing into her feels like getting squeezed by a vice, velvet walls gripping me and sucking me in. "And so damn tight. Relax, let me in this pussy."

I give her an inch at a time, going slow so she adjusts, and finally, I'm seated fully in her.

“You good?” I ask, leaning forward to brush a lock of hair from her face.

She whines, trying to roll her hips on the thin mattress into me. “No, I need you to move.”

I’m enough of a bastard to admit I like that tone to her voice, like I’m driving her crazy with need and I’m the only one who can satisfy her. I like her bossy tone too, but this is the one that makes me lose control.

I pull out and slam back into her, watching her tits bounce as I pin her hips in place. “I’ve missed fucking this pussy, missed you.” It feels like different confessions but equally important.

Her hands scrabble at the blanket, looking for purchase, and I grab them. Pulling them up over her head, I pin her but hold her hand like she asked. And then I pound the shit out of her like she said to.

In and out I thrust, finding a roughshod rhythm that makes her cries grow louder and louder. I kiss her hard, cutting her off before whispering in her ear, “Shh, kitty. I’m sure Caleb knows what’s going on back here, but those noises are mine, just mine. Bite that lip or I’ll have to shove something in your mouth to keep you quiet.”

Her eyes light up like she likes that idea. So I keep her hands pinned with one of mine and cover her mouth with my other. I can feel her smile against my palm, and then I feel her hot tongue stick out and lick me.

I raise an eyebrow and laughter dances in her eyes. But it disappears instantly when I stroke into her hard, bottoming out and grinding there for good measure.

My voice is a hissing punishment. “I’m gonna fuck you so hard you can’t walk for days, kitty. Just keep you sexed up in my bed until I feel like you understand all the dark, depraved, filthy things I want to do to this body.”

I let my eyes trace down her luscious skin, taking in the dirt from our adventure, the freckles that have popped out from a couple of days in the sun, and her sexy curves.

But as much as I want her body, my eyes trace back up to meet hers.

And I can see it, feel it shining in the depths there. Her love.

I wonder if she can see it in mine too.

Because every wall is shattered between us. Every lie, every falsehood from our past is washed away



in this moment, and it's just us. Real and true, heated and needy.

“I love you,” I cry as I bottom out a final time, exploding deep within her as I'm swept away in the feeling of being completely accepted and loved by another person. I'd never imagined it would be this powerful, this healing of the cracks and splinters in my soul.

Emma's words are locked behind my hand, but I feel her kiss my palm and know she feels the same way as she tightens beneath me, her pussy milking every last drop from my balls.

# Chapter 40

## Carly

I am a rebel, a wild animal that refuses to be caged ever again.

I've lived in captivity, gotten the T-shirt, and I'll pass on an encore performance, thank you very much.

And as soon as someone tells me I can't do something, I want to do it twice as much.

Just to prove them wrong.

But somehow, that's ended up with me here.

Where's here?

Oh, you know, wearing all black and carrying a backpack full of gear toward Nathan Stone's house. No big deal.

Except it is.

A really big fucking big deal.

First of all, I'm not usually one for major B&E

adventures. With my penchant for avoiding cages, jail seems like the prime example of something I don't want to do.

Second, considering what they're telling me about Nathan Stone, jail might be the least of my worries.

But here I am.

When Claire told us all about Nathan's trip to Brazil and Emma chasing after him, Kyle had seen an opening to get some firsthand knowledge.

The only problem is we don't know how long Nathan will be gone.

It's not like we're guests here and can wander around and use the facilities.

The only saving grace is that Kyle's recon had shown that there's no one in the house. He'd suspected there'd be staff here, but it seems they've taken the opportunity of having no master in the house to escape too.

So, we're making our move. Kyle breaches the security at Nathan's estate house first, which was no easy feat. I don't even *want* to know where he got the laptop he uses to get past the electronic security systems, and watching him pick the physical locks shatters any misconceptions I might have had about his being a 'good guy'.

Now we wait, in the darkness of Nathan's home office. Kyle spent a while shuffling through papers and digging in drawers, looking for any evidence he could find. But eventually, he just sat down in Nathan's chair, like he was channeling his own personal Boogeyman. On the desk in front of Kyle is a handgun, the intent very clear.

"Are you sure about this?" I whisper.

Kyle's eyes glitter in the dark and I see a flash of white as he talks. "He's not mourning his dad, no matter what he told Emma or she told Claire. Nathan's a workaholic. Whatever he's there for, he'll come to this office first when he gets back. At a minimum, just to put his laptop down, but likely to go back to work. He's cold like that. This is our best spot."

"I didn't really mean 'is there a better spot to ambush him?' I meant 'should we be doing this?' in the broader sense, but I think you just gave your answer anyway."

"You can go if you need to. I won't hold it against you." His voice is gruff, and though I think he believes he means the words, they're lies. He'll absolutely hold it against me.

Kyle is here to exact revenge for the loss of his Anna, a mission I hope I can help him recover from

once he's succeeded.

And I'm here to save my friend, the only person who's ever been there for me and has unknowingly gotten tangled up with a man who will kill to keep his family money, traditions, and secrets.

If that means I need to get my own hands a little dirty . . . that's a price I'm willing to pay, but maybe, just maybe, I can stop anyone from getting killed.

"I'm staying."

Kyle

Even after sitting here for hours, there's this sense of anticipation permeating every second, a faint tang in the air, like I can taste the justice I'm planning to serve.

It might be cold and belated, a bitter flavor at best, but it is still warranted, and I believe I'll find just as much satisfaction as if it'd happened immediately after Anna's death.

It's been so much work to catch this bastard, to truly find my way out of the depths of depression and then work angles and find resources to help me get answers. Raul started the process, finally giving me a direction, even if he refused to investigate

further.

But now it's time to make Nathan pay.

I never dreamed I'd be doing it with someone else at my side, especially not a woman I care about. It complicates things, but Carly is also that important to me.

I didn't think I'd ever care for anyone again, figured the black hole in my soul was a vacuum that'd destroy anyone who so much as got close to me.

But Carly hasn't been destroyed.

At least not yet.

But after tonight, after she sees the truth of what I've become, she'll likely run for the hills if she's got half a brain.

And she definitely has a brain. She's smart.

Selfishly, though, I want to keep her, this woman who has brought me back from the dead, breathed life into the cold corpse of a heart that lives in my chest. But that's not really my decision to make, only the wish of a reawakened heart.

If she runs, I'll let her. It'll hurt, but I'll live and always be thankful she bumped into me, challenged me, made me face reality when I wanted to burrow

away in my anger and pity party of one.

The moment of truth arrives when lights flash over the building, and I can hear the low rumble of a garage door opening.

Sitting forward, I pick up the Glock from the desk blotter as I hear sounds below. The front door opens and closes, and then hushed voices carry up the stairs.

A female squeal bursts out, and I see Carly's eyes shoot wide in fear before they settle as she registers that the sound was one of happiness, especially given the giggles that follow.

I hold up a finger, telling her to steady herself. Seconds later, the wait is over.

The office door opens, and I train my gun on the shadowy shape filling the door.

The light switches on, and I speak gruffly, "Stone."

He drops his cargo, a blonde woman with blue eyes. Emma, judging by the pictures at her apartment.

She yelps in surprise and pain as she just barely catches herself from falling ass first to the carpeted floor, but my gaze stays locked on the man before me.

In front of me is the man who took my Anna, took my baby, took my life though I'm still illogically upright.

Nathan moves Emma behind him, but she peeks out, exclaiming, "Carly?"

The girls are both nearly gasping in fear, but Stone and I breathe evenly, our training evident as we take each other's measure.

Our muscles are coiled tight, but we don't move an inch, knowing that the slightest twitch can set off an attack.

Our jaws clench in fury, eyes hard as we stare each other down.

I hear Carly beside me, her voice trying to remain calm and failing utterly. "Emma, come here. You don't know what he's done. Nathan is a bad man, a dangerous man. I'm here to save you."

She stands in the edge of my vision, reaching out for Emma, trying to encourage her away from Nathan's side, but he has a tight grip on her wrist. But I see something else, something Carly can't see yet. Emma's moving *closer* to Stone.

Emma shakes her head, trying to hug her man. "What are you talking about? Nathan's not a bad man. And who is this? What the hell are you



doing?”

They’ve had their girl-talk moment and it went exactly as I’d expected, unfortunately. Nathan’s got Emma under his spell, likely using his good looks and money and sweet words.

She probably never had a chance against his charm.

I lift my pistol up. I don’t want to hit Emma, and that means I have to be very precise with any shot I take, and Nathan’s eyes narrow as he bargains.

“Whoever you are, I’ve done some shit in my life, some bad shit, but you can let Emma go. Whatever it is I’ve done that brought you to my doorstep, she had nothing to do with it, so let her go.”

His voice is steady, like he’s trying to calm a rabid dog, and that’s probably a pretty accurate description of me right now with the emotion and rage that are boiling inside me.

“Like you let *her* go?” I challenge. “You took my woman, my child, like they were just . . . trash to be tossed aside. Like they meant nothing! What if I did the same to you? Kill her first, let you live with that as your last thought, last image before I kill you too?”

Carly growls under her breath, and I know she’s mad because that is definitely not part of the plan.

She's here to save Emma, not let me use her against Nathan. In fact, I doubt she'd be happy if I were to kill Stone, even if I told her that's what I wanted to do.

But the threat is too easy, and it's sure to get a rise from him. I want him to lose control, to push her away so I have a clean shot, and hopefully even admit his deeds so I can finally get some sort of closure.

Instead, I see the confusion on his face, and it only makes me angrier, like he's killed so many, he can't even remember the ones who meant so much to me.

Like they were nothing.

"Anna Russo," I growl, reminding him. "Say it. Say her name."

But he doesn't.

Instead, his eyebrows lift, and he licks his lips. "Dad's historian? What about her?"

Dismissive prick.

I should just start shooting, stop his lies, stop this madness, but the pain in my core demands to be unleashed. I need fucking answers.

I come up and close the distance with Nathan

before staring into his soulless, evil eyes. He doesn't so much as stutter a breath as I press my Glock against his forehead, but his head does whip to the side as I reverse my pistol and backhand him with the butt of the gun. Sick pleasure fills my heart when I see blood fly, and he grunts in pain.

I knee him in the stomach, doubling him up as Carly and Emma cry out and then Emma is trying to pull me off Nathan. But I'm unleashing all my pent-up fury and anger and can't be stopped.

"Kyle!" Carly yells.

I ignore her and instead throw more punches, knocking Nathan to a knee that I follow up with a kick that snaps his head back, sending him sprawling onto the carpet. Standing over his semi-conscious body, I scream into his face.

"You son of a bitch, you killed her! She was my life! And you killed her!"

Somewhere through the fog, I hear Carly and Emma both yelling at me, "No! No!"

But my rain of terror continues, connecting with him every opening I get as he starts to fight back, but I'm on top, still in control.

It's Emma's words that break through my tunnel vision when she yells, "I was sent here by the FBI

to investigate him for killing her. He didn't do it!"

I already know about the undercover part from Claire, but her vehemence that Nathan is innocent gives me a tiny bit of hesitation.

It shouldn't, not at all after what I've learned about him.

But her certainty is compelling.

I hold Nathan down, my one hand tight on his throat, my gun hand cocking the hammer back and pressing it once again to his chest, right above his heart.

"Explain."

# Chapter 41

## Emma

The words rush out as I try to explain fast enough to get this monster of a man off Nathan.

The monster that's with . . . Carly?

What in the everloving fuck?

Is this the guy she's been talking about, Kyle?

But I shake my head, focusing. Save Nathan first, exchange names later.

“My sister is an FBI agent, and she had me come in undercover because he was meeting with Nikolai Romanov.”

He growls, his eyes still fixed on Nathan, and his hand squeezes slightly. “That has nothing to do with Anna.”

I try again and keep spilling. “I know, but when she wanted me to find out about the meeting business, she also told me they believed Nathan had Anna Russo killed because she may have known too much or had something to do with Nathan's dad's

murder.”

Kyle’s cold gaze flicks to me, angrily biting out, “She had nothing to do with it. She cared for Michael, would never have hurt the man.”

I think he’s looking for Nathan’s reaction to my words and to his statement, but Nathan already knows the full truth of what I’m saying at least and just nods, pressing his chin against the hand holding him down.

“Nathan knows about my sister, about why I was sent here. But he didn’t do it. He had nothing to do with Anna and has been trying to figure out who killed his dad. Maybe it’s the same person?” I hypothesize. “They killed his dad because of a gem. Did she have anything to do with that?”

Kyle’s eyes look back to Nathan, searching, and it feels as if he’s scanning him like a lie detector.

Nathan must get the same sense because he forces out, blood bubbling on his lips, “I swear on the only good thing in my life that I didn’t kill Anna.”

I can see Kyle’s grip loosen incrementally. “Speak quickly, Stone.”

Nathan takes a deep breath, fully aware that while Kyle’s hand on his throat’s loosened and he can speak easier, the gun hasn’t moved an inch. “I

admit, I hated Anna somewhat. I was jealous because my Dad talked to her even when he wouldn't give us the time of day. He had this *thing* in common with her, this treasure hunting. Still, I didn't kill her or my dad . . . but someone did. I don't know who yet. I've been investigating my dad's murder, but I don't know who yet." The intensity of Nathan's statement must resonate with Kyle on some level because I see his slow blink.

Then Kyle growls, the sound an expression of grief and pain tied up in anger.

But he pushes off Nathan, standing to pace, and Nathan staggers to his feet to block me protectively. I ignore him, pulling his arm over my shoulder and guiding him to a chair to sit down. Kyle turns, his eyes beseeching.

"Fuck. Fuck. I knew it was you. You're a goddamn merc, like me. Killing's too easy for us. If it's not you, then fucking who?" His words are muttered, more to himself than to anyone else in the room.

But Carly goes to him, placing a steadying hand on his arm. "We'll figure it out. I promise."

The tension in the room has changed, and after a few steadying breaths, Nathan stands up, moving slowly toward the bar in the corner, pouring four generous glasses of scotch. "Drink? Seems we

could all use one.”

Kyle comes over and takes one of the glasses, tilting it back in one gulp.

Nathan nods and simply pours him another. “You were a merc too?”

Kyle nods. “I’d faintly heard of you before this. You liked to play in the sand, mostly.”

“I did. You?”

“Southeast Asia, for the most part. Little bit of Africa.”

The two men seem to study each other for a moment and reach a temporary truce. Taking a glass apiece, Nathan brings me a scotch while Kyle offers one to Carly, and we all sit on the leather couches facing one another warily.

Carly, with all her wild weirdness, laughs and says, “Well, this is awkward. *Sorry for pulling the guns on you* doesn’t sound right on a Hallmark card, and I don’t think there’s an emoji for this. Uhm, would an ‘oopsie’ suffice?” She shrugs, sipping her scotch as she looks off to the left.

In her look, I realize that it’s up to me and her to get this derailed train back on the tracks. These two men are soldiers, used to working alone, being



alone, not depending on anyone or anything.

But they're both learning to lean on us, me and Carly.

“Hey, Carly, remember that double-date we went on with Max and Ben?”

She looks at me, her eyebrows almost touching her hairline. “Uh, yeah. Not really a forgettable evening, ya know. Why?”

I can see the guys' muscles ratcheting up when I mention other guys, the opposite of what I want to happen, but I'm going for a progressive plan.

“Remember how we were so excited to go out with them? Thought we were so grown up.”

Kyle interrupts, looking to Carly. “This before or after Gunze?”

It's my turn to raise my brows, and I sip my scotch. “You told him about Gunze?”

She blushes, and it's the cutest and most innocent thing I've seen on her face in ages. Her blush alone is enough to give me pause, but her next words make me reevaluate Kyle altogether. Looking at him with total devotion, a look I've caught in my own mirror recently, she says, “Before.”

She turns to me. “He knows everything, my

parents, Gunze, Europe. All of it. He beat the shit out of Robert at the Broadway gala for taking unwelcome liberties.”

Kyle rumbles dangerously, obviously not liking Carly’s reminder about the party.

But I smile at Kyle, a genuine one, silently telling him thank you for getting into her heart enough that she’d share that way. She needs that, needs him, apparently.

And he jumps up a notch in my estimation. Gun ambush aside, he looked out for my girl. Besides, this wasn’t my first gun ambush . . . *although I would like to make this the last*, I think with a barely suppressed eye roll.

Whose life is this?

“So Max and Ben. What a clusterfuck that party was. Broken mirrors, a smashed TV, and two guys who make you two seem like choir boys.”

I look around at the blood and the gun and think maybe that’s taking it a bit too far.

“Well, in a way. Just roll with me here. We worked together and got out of there. And no one was any the wiser about what happened and we didn’t get in any trouble.”

*The party is insane. Kids going upstairs to bedrooms and drinks are flowing like water. It's probably par for the course for a lot of our classmates, but not for Carly and me. We're fish out of water and virtually gasping for air at the new and scary environment we've been thrust into.*

*We'd been so excited when Max and Ben asked us out on a double-date, spending hours on outfits and deciding who likes who better. But now that we're actually at the party, the boys are handsy and obviously trying to get us drunk.*

*I keep sipping on the same trashcan Kool-aid punch cup for over an hour, and Carly poured most of hers into a potted plant when no one was looking, so at least we have our wits about us. But the aggressive touching and repeated requests to go upstairs are just too much.*

*"I need to freshen up first," Carly says finally, giving me a single eyebrow lift.*

*"Oh, me too!" I exclaim, jumping up from the couch and hooking my elbow through hers. We're barely around the corner when I hiss, "Oh, my God, what are we doing here? We have to get out. Now."*

*Carly grins, an evil one that tells me she's up to something. "Definitely, but first, come on."*

*She drags me to the kitchen, refilling our plastic cups damn near to the brim. "I don't want another drink. We didn't drink the first ones."*

*But she leads me to the stairs, and like a dork, I follow her up to the second floor. She moves us to a point by the railing where we can see Max and Ben below us.*

*"Okay, on the count of three, dump and run to the bathroom." She points down and then behind her.*

*My eyes widen. "No, we can't."*

*But she's already counting, and on three, I do it.*

*Our cups fall through the air, landing right in Max and Ben's lap and splashing the very red and very alcoholic punch all over them and the couch. The very expensive-looking, antique ivory couch. Red everywhere.*

*We quickly and quietly make our way to the bathroom, and where I'd slam the door, selling us out, Carly closes it silently, like we've been here all along. The footsteps stomp up the stairs, yelling voices rising with them.*

*Then doors start opening. In the bedrooms, people cry out in surprise at the interruption. My breath catches in fear, the knowledge that we're going to be caught already settling in.*

*But Carly drops to her knees in front of the toilet and spits thickly into it, a hint of red from the punch she did sip.*

*When the door opens, she moans. “Oh, God, I don’t feel so good.” She looks up, somehow faking glassy eyes at Max and Ben. Their pastel polo shirts are covered, dripping in punch. “Oh, no, you too? What was in that?”*

*Surprisingly, the guys buy Carly’s lightweight drunk act and keep looking around for who did this to them. In the mayhem, I shuffle Carly out into the night. She got us out safe and sound, although at the crash of broken glass from somewhere in the house behind us, we did break into a sprint. Odd looks be damned.*

*I’d kept waiting for someone to rat us out, for us to have to pay for the expensive couch. But no one ever did. And with a bit of teamwork and some ingenuity, we’d gotten away scot-free.*

“And Max and Ben never talked to us again,” I finish. I look over at her, offering a high-five. “We’re a good team, girl.”

She smiles back, smacking hands. “Yeah, we are.” And then I see her swirl her drink and mouth, “One . . . two . . .”

“No! That’s not what I meant!” I call out, stopping her just as Kyle catches on and starts to bail out of his seat.

Her brows lift, and she huffs in mock disappointment. “That’s obviously what the moral of that story means. Dump the punch and run.”

She spreads her arms wide, palms up, telling me ‘duh’ without a word.

I look pointedly at the guys and repeat, “We are a good team. Maybe it’s about time we try *that* now too. What do you say?”

Nathan’s and Kyle’s eyes narrow, obviously not onboard with the plan but not negating the idea outright either. So I agree for all of us. “Good, that’s settled then. Let’s lay all our cards on the table then, shall we?”

There are a few grumbles, but I dive in full-steam ahead. “Here’s what we know. Michael and Anna worked together. Michael was killed here in the States, Anna a few days later in Italy. The only connection between the two is their work together. The FBI thought Nathan killed them both to inherit the company. The power.”

Nathan growls, his hands tightening around his tumbler. “I would never. I wasn’t even in the

country when that happened.”

Carly hums, working it out in her brain, “But if you didn’t, someone else did. Who? Didn’t you look into your own dad’s death?”

Nathan looks to me, questioning whether he should share, and I tell him with my eyes that I trust Carly implicitly. And if she trusts Kyle, I trust her assessment of him.

“I said we did . . . *are*, but we’ve come up empty. Admittedly, we didn’t have a great relationship, so it’s not like I was a grief-stricken zombie. What I was, was pissed. Angry that even in his death, he’d gotten his way, what he always wanted. Me at the family business. He died, and I had to leave a life I enjoyed, come home to be the dutiful son and do a job I knew nothing about and wanted nothing to do with. So yes, I investigated and paid others to investigate. But when they turned up with hands outstretched for more money with no leads, I just let it go so I could focus on what my life had become.”

Kyle asks, “And Anna?”

I can see the sharp stab saying her name causes, and I wonder if Carly has gotten herself tied up with a man who is unavailable to her. But that’s something we’ll have to figure out later since the

guys are finally talking.

Nathan frowns. “The Italian police called me but didn’t think it was related to her work for my dad. They were the ones on the frontline with all the intel there, so I trusted it when they ruled it a random act of violence. For all I knew, with her area of work, she could’ve had all sorts of expensive things in her apartment and was a robbery victim. Or some guy could’ve followed her home from the market. It didn’t seem connected, even though the timing was suspect. But now, knowing more about the work they were doing . . .”

Kyle nods, his mind letting go of his anger at Nathan temporarily as he focuses on trying to find his real target. “It’d have to be a big player to hit both in the US and in Europe. It’s not like your friendly neighborhood accountant with a wetwork side gig can jet halfway across the world for a contract.”

Now that the gates are opened, even a small bit, the waters rush in as the words rush out. The guys talk, sharing information and rehashing the same stuff over and over from different angles. They’ve got similar backgrounds, but I can tell as they discuss things . . . they’re different.

Nathan’s a born leader, an officer in military parlance. He thinks strategically, mapping out



objectives. Kyle's not a follower, per se, but a loner. Or maybe their circumstances have made them into what they are.

Ironically, if Caleb were here, I'd say they'd have a complete team, all three complimenting each other in their own way. Although if he were here from the start, things may have gone badly. He's definitely quick to act, so we're probably lucky he wanted to escape to his apartment in the city for some 'alone time' to deal with the 'aftermath of Dad's shit', as he'd called it. After our plane landed, he'd left with his trademark two-fingered wave, which is probably a good thing or tonight would've been very different.

My eyelids are getting heavy. I didn't get enough sleep on the plane, but I do hear Kyle ask, "You really didn't kill your dad to take over a billion-dollar company?"

Eyes closed, I hear Nathan answer. "I never wanted his company. I was finally happy with my life, Caleb by my side, the two of us taking on the world. But now that I have it, I'm determined to grow it in ways he was too small-minded to consider, ways he couldn't make work because he was too busy jetting off to chase some storybook Infinity Stone bullshit. No, I didn't kill him, and certainly not for the albatross of a company he

slipped around my neck with his death. But I'll bear it and thrive, not just survive him.”

My heart swells with pride.

Not at what he's done for the family business, I had no doubt about his leadership skills there, but at his openness in talking about it all.

That's new.

That's progress.

That's healing.

And that's my man.

I try to stay awake, but their voices lull me to sleep.

# Chapter 42

## Nathan

It's been a long night, full of revelations and painful memories, for both me and Kyle.

Somehow, we've both been in mission mode, and while I didn't know his name from the merc world, it's a wonder our lives never crossed.

If we were still in that line of work, I'd have chastised him that he should have shot me while he had the chance. It's only fate, and maybe luck, that he wanted a moment of verbal vengeance and hands-on justice last night because if he'd fired his gun, I'd have been dead.

He wouldn't have missed.

We've been holed up in my office for hours, hushed murmurs as we share everything that we know, interweaving our intel and stories but keeping it down so as not to wake the girls who crashed out on the couches after what seemed like mere minutes.

I can't blame them. From what Kyle's told me, it'd

been a long day for Carly, most of it spent with nervous imaginings of what awful things I was doing to her friend. And I know Emma was trembling on the edge of exhaustion when we got off the plane. Another round of adrenaline crash, when we'd just left the dangers of the jungle, was more than enough to put her out of commission, though her quiet snores have been a balm as my conversation with Kyle has kept us both on edge. The information has been a hard share on both our parts.

“Coffee?” I offer, hoping the ubiquitous equalizer can help keep us on the same side and awake long enough to figure out what the hell is going on.

We've managed to plot out that my dad and Anna were working on finding the stone I just recovered, though I keep that tidbit to myself, and that my dad made a secret trip to Brazil, though it doesn't appear that he went into the jungle.

Most likely, it seems he was getting the map that progressed Anna's understanding of what and where the stone was.

That's the tie between them both.

The stone. The map.

So if someone wanted the stone, they needed the

map. And to get the map, they'd need to get it from either my dad or Anna.

It's the best motive we can come up with and it seems to fit all the elements. It's ironic that two soldiers have done in a few hours what two international agencies and countless private investigators couldn't accomplish. But they didn't have the pieces we do. More importantly, they didn't have the motivation to see this through and get answers. Those investigators and agents probably shrugged their shoulders and closed up the files on Michael Stone and Anna Russo, simply moving on to the next case. But for me and Kyle, there was no 'next'. These questions have weighed on us. Maybe even more than we realized.

But who knew about the map? It wasn't like it all came from one source. Dad used researchers, geologists, and more to compile the whole thing into one unit.

And who knew about the stone's existence? The stone isn't exactly as famous as the Holy Grail. There haven't been ten thousand assholes tramping around the Amazon looking for it.

Answers that only lead to more questions, frustrating us both.

Coffee, though, that's universal, and Kyle nods.

“Fuck, yeah. Black and forty-weight, if you can get it.”

I lead the way to the kitchen, looking back as I pass the doorway, “Also, you hun—“

My question is cut short by a soft *pfift-pfift* sound and then Kyle’s roar of surprise and pain.

Instincts take over instantly, my brain recognizing the silenced shots before my ears even register them fully.

I duck and slide toward the island for cover as Kyle dive-rolls, sliding past me but still ending under cover.

Even in the dim lighting, I can see his eyes narrow at me.

I shake my head and silently ask him the same question, *Did you do this?*

He shakes his head, and I hear a tiny creak as a cabinet door opens.

With barely a nod of his head, Kyle and I are on the same page, and he goes around the island one way and I go the other, converging on the small black-dressed shadow that’s creeping through my kitchen.

Kyle roars again, this time for distraction, and an errant thought races through my mind that I’m

thankful I don't have neighbors because they'd surely hear him and call the police.

I see Kyle's fist connect with the masked assassin, the two of them almost dancing as they move across the tile. Kyle drives into the man, smacking sounds of fists hitting flesh sounding loudly through the tiled room.

The assassin stumbles backward, directly into my arms, and I lift him, preparing to slam him to the ground.

He's flailing, fighting against me and fighting against Kyle with obvious training, but he's overpowered and outmanned. With a grunt of effort, I drop the attacker to the ground, driving my weight on top of him.

Whoever my attacker is, he slumps semi-conscious as I drive the wind out of him, and I get up, furious that someone dared to attack me in my own fucking house.

Again. Twice in one night, for fuck's sake. At this rate, I'm going to be asking Caleb to live here full-time just for the safety factor.

But something tells me Kyle was telling the truth and he had nothing to do with this. In anger, I give the prone body a kick and he recoils into a fetal

position.

The girls must've been woken up by the noise because they appear in the doorway, safe and whole, but their eyes and mouths are wide open as they turn on the lights.

At least Carly had the wherewithal to grab the gun Kyle left in the office.

I reach down, picking up the silenced pistol our attacker dropped while Kyle carefully plucks his weapon from Carly's hands, jamming it into his waistband for now. I do the same with the assassin's gun.

With a look, Kyle and I go by standard procedure, picking the guy up and setting him in a chair. Kyle makes quick work of tying him up with some rope I get from the garage.

“Oh, my God, what's going on?” Emma finally asks, her eyes going wide.

She and Carly clasp hands and step back, away from the assassin but also away from Kyle and me.

We follow, step for step.

I don't know what Kyle's situation is with Carly, but I grab Emma, pressing her against the wall and holding her chin tight to force her eyes to mine. I



don't need her freaking out on me right now.

“Don't look over there. Look at me. Just me. Are you hurt?”

She pulls her wild eyes from the black-dressed man and shakes her head, unable to form words. And though I believe her, I need to confirm for myself so I pull back slightly. I keep her pinned to the wall and trace along her arms, legs, and body with my eyes and hands.

I can see the tears glittering in her eyes and know she needs the same reassurance.

“I'm okay,” I promise, showing her my unmarked body. “He didn't shoot me.”

The words make me realize that Kyle's first roar was with the shots, and I look to him. He's got Carly pulled up tightly against him, but the bright red I couldn't see on his black T-shirt is visible against her skin.

“You okay?”

He nods, his voice rough. “Caught a scratch on my right arm, just a graze. Little gauze and some peroxide and I'm good as new.”

Carly growls and grabs his face in her hands, more forward than I would think a tiny thing like her

would be with a beast like him, but he allows it. She kisses him fiercely and he gives in to her. It's like she's melting an iceberg with the heat of her kiss.

It's a surprising peek into their dynamic.

Emma seems to have found her tongue and whispers, "Who is it?"

Her eyes glance toward the masked figure, and it's the most important question in the world right this moment.

Kyle guards the girls while I approach our prisoner, who's still half slumped over. I pull the mask off and don't recognize the man.

But judging by the sounds behind me, they do.

"That's Matt! Claire's partner," Emma says. Confusion and shock color the declaration.

I glance back to her and the split second of question in my eyes is distraction enough for Matt to make his move. Apparently, he's been playing possum and is good at it, too.

He surges from his seated position, having gotten free of the restraints somehow, and plows into me, driving me chest first into the kitchen island.

We wrestle, struggling around on the floor, and I feel the gun slipping out from my waist as he makes

a grab for it. I fight him desperately, trying to keep control of the pistol, not only to avoid myself getting shot but also to protect Emma and Carly.

This is between me and him. Whoever sent him, whatever he's doing here, this is about me.

Not Emma.

I sense Kyle joining the tussle, his powerful grip on my shoulder pulling me back and his other pushing at Matt to separate us. But the anger is burning hotly and I fight to disable Matt myself.

“He's got the gun!”

I no sooner shout the warning than a shot goes off and heat blooms across my belly.

# Chapter 43

## Emma

The shot might as well be a gonging church bell for the impact it has on my heart.

Time stops flowing and clicks by in frozen frames.

I scream out and Kyle grunts, “Fuck.”

There’s a moment of stillness, where I can physically feel the loss of everything I thought I’d finally found with Nathan.

But a tiny seed of denial fights through the pessimism and breeds hope.

I pray to anyone and anything listening . . . *please let Nathan be okay. Please let him live.*

Kyle grabs Nathan with brute strength, pulling him back, and I see the blood, my gorge rising.

*No, no, no, no.*

What seems like a lifetime later but is probably mere seconds, Nathan moves, his eyes wrinkling as he winces. “I’m good. Got some powder burn, but

it didn't hit me. It must be . . . him.”

I can see it now that there's space between them. Matt's belly is half torn open beneath the tight black shirt he's wearing, the fabric looking wet and slick as the blood gushes out with every slowing heartbeat.

But all I can think of is Nathan.

Now that I know he's okay, you'd think my heart would slow a bit, but the sight of a shot man bleeding out on the kitchen floor is panic-inducing in a completely different way.

Kyle kicks the gun away from where it fell when their fight took the turn for the worse, and it skitters across the tile.

Nathan doesn't give Matt a moment's reprieve, grabbing his collar and demanding, “Who sent you? Why?”

Matt's look is one of pained anguish, his voice rough and stilted as Nathan drops to his knees, pulling off his shirt and pressing it to Matt's belly. “I had to. He made me. He'll send another. Wants it.”

“Who? What does he want?” Nathan shakes Matt, whose eyes are starting to roll in his head.

He slumps under Nathan's hand, and after a moment, Nathan lets Matt down slowly. I'm not sure how to feel, part of me glad that Nathan survived another assassination attempt but confused, with more questions than answers filling my mind, and horrified that I just watched a man get shot in the stomach.

Maybe it's just shock that's overwhelming me.

“When will this nightmare of a night end?”

Fate seems to answer as the back door bursts open, banging against the wall from a powerful kick.

“Hands up! FBI!” Claire moves in, fully engaged in the badass boss mode I always figured she had but have never truly had occasion to see.

Her service weapon is trained on Nathan, who's still looming over Matt, but her eyes flick to Kyle, who is the only one armed in the room. He's already raised the pistol, his reactions even faster than I could imagine.

I can see the moment where she has to choose to aim at Kyle, can see the hesitation because though Kyle is armed and the obvious threat, she wants to nail Nathan.

That's what she wanted all along, why she sent me in to his party in the first place. Maybe not literally

like this, but on some level . . . maybe? It's a dark thought about my sister and I have to hope a false one.

“Claire! It's okay. It was Matt. He tried to kill Nathan!” I try to explain, but my voice is shrill, laced with hysteria, leading her to dismiss my words.

Nathan suffers no such nerves and calmly holds his hands out wide as he stands and speaks to her. “Claire, Matt was hiding in my kitchen. He tried to shoot me. Hit Kyle in the arm. We fought, his gun went off, and he was shot. I'm trying to find out who sent him.”

He slowly moves back down to Matt, and Claire aims the gun back to Nathan when Kyle lowers his, slowly setting it on the floor and kicking it away.

“Step away from him.”

But Nathan doesn't back off. He needs answers and is willing to risk Claire shooting him to get them.

“Who?” he demands of Matt.

But it's no use. In the moment of delay with Claire, he's died.

Nathan's eyes go dark as he glares at her. “You cost

me time. Time I needed to get information.”

Claire spits back coldly, “You seem awfully calm about just killing an FBI agent, Mr. Stone.”

“The FBI’s using assassins on civilians now?” His words are barbed and laced with venom, but they do give Claire pause.

“Tell me what happened.” She hasn’t lowered her gun, but at least she’s listening.

It’s a step in the right direction because this is such a big clusterfuck I can’t imagine how we’re all going to leave this room alive.

Well, not Matt. But the rest of us.

“Claire,” I start, moving toward her, but she instinctively aims at me.

I see the flash in her eyes at the movement, though, and know it kills her to do it, but her training is all about risk assessment, and right now, we’re all a risk.

Even me, her sister.

Nathan growls and shoves me behind him. “No, me. I’m the one you want. Aim at me, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

She levels the gun at Nathan, a challenge in her



eyes but also the smallest glimmer.

She's so imbedded in what she thinks she knows about Nathan that she wants him to make a move.

But she's wrong, so wrong.

“Talk fast.”

Nathan nods, all business. “I came home and discussed business with Kyle here in my office.” I'm surprised he's covering for Kyle, and judging by the slight lift of Kyle's brow, he is too.

But Nathan forges ahead before Claire can ask questions about that. “We came into the kitchen, and Matt popped off two silenced rounds. He missed. You can find them in the door frame or wall, most likely. Clipped Kyle with one, too. We wrestled for the gun and it went off. It got him instead of me. I was questioning him, and he said, ‘He made me. He'll send another. Wants it.’ That's when you barged in.”

Claire is looking for holes, for answers. “Wants what?”

Nathan's answer is sharp, and more than a little hostile. “I don't know. You interrupted my interrogation.”

She nods toward the chair and ropes. “That's what

you're calling that? I notice you left that part out of your story.”

Nathan scoffs and kicks the chair over. “Hell yeah, we tied him up. But he got free. That’s when we fought. I was trying to *not* kill him, though I was well within my rights to do it. He was trespassing with ill intent. Self-defense.”

Claire’s eyes do meet mine then, the question clear. “He’s telling the truth, Claire,” I confirm, doing my best to keep my voice level and unpanicked, even if I feel anything but. “That’s what happened. I don’t know what Matt was doing here today. Do you?”

Though she stays stoic, I know my sister and see her internal startle as she realizes what we’re saying. “I have no idea,” she finally admits painfully. “I’ve just been watching the house, coming by a couple of times a day, hoping I’d catch Emma here as soon as you two came home from traipsing all over to play Lara Croft. I heard screaming and came around the back to investigate.”

She finally lowers the gun and the room breathes a collective sigh of relief. The power dynamic instantly changes as well, Nathan taking the reins.

“I’m calling Caleb,” Nathan says, grabbing the phone. “He may have wanted some alone time, but

this sure as fuck takes precedence over a pussy pity party.”

I only hear his side of the conversation, but at first Caleb seems pissed at being disturbed when we only just got back.

Nathan keeps it short. “Come now, and bring Jake.” That seems to be a turning point, and Caleb realizes it’s serious because Nathan repeats, “Yes, Jake. Now.”

Without another word, he hangs up. “Caleb will be here in ten minutes.”



\* \* \*

After Nathan’s phone call, we manage to get everyone moved into the living room, which helps us girls with the whole lack of a dead body in the middle of the floor. Even Claire, who I know has seen dozens of dead bodies, seems understandably affected by it being her partner lying motionless this time. Carly and I huddle on the couch, untouched tumblers of scotch in our hands, as Nathan and Kyle stand facing Claire like some sort of Old West showdown.

Thankfully, Caleb and Jake arrive in minutes, and I wonder how close they live. Claire has been

demanding answers and Nathan has been putting her off, saying he'll tell the story once his brother gets here.

Caleb struts in like he's making a red-carpet appearance, obviously confident and trying to throw a few more ripples in the pool, probably to break the tension.

“Ladies and gentlemen, what's shaking?”

But he catches the tight vibe of the room, that jokes aren't going to lighten the mood, and immediately drops the act. “All right, what do we have here?”

Caleb's eyes narrow at my sister. “FBI, huh? You don't look like an FBI agent.”

“Like I haven't heard that before,” Claire sneers dismissively. “It's 2019, asshole. Agents can look however they look as long as they can shoot.” She doesn't lift her gun, but I see it twitch slightly like she's fighting the urge to aim at Caleb. “Shirts up. Spin.”

Caleb's grin is pure flirt, machismo, sex, and eye rolling goofiness all rolled into one. “If you wanted to see me topless, all you had to do was ask.”

But he and Jake pull their shirts up, spinning to let Claire visually check for weapons.

“Pants legs too,” Claire says, all business. The guys slowly bend down, hiking up each leg to show they don’t have weapons stowed in their boots either.

“So do I get the same? Are you going to pull your shirt up and do a spin for me? I apologize for not bringing any cash,” Caleb jokes.

Claire flushes in anger, and for once, she looks like she’s going to shoot someone besides Nathan. “I’m already armed and dangerous. No need for me to hand out free tit shows to prove it.”

Caleb laughs loudly and talks sarcastically out of the side of his mouth, eyes on Claire. “Emma, I like your sister. Probably better than you, even. Not that I like you in the least.”

I roll my eyes at his antics, knowing it’s his schtick to make people underestimate him. I saw how smart and slick he was in Brazil.

Claire cuts her eyes to Nathan. “Spill it.”

Nathan looks at Caleb, who keeps his face relatively impassive for him, although I can tell he’s got plenty of questions.

“Kyle and I have been talking tonight,” Nathan starts with a sigh. “By the way . . . Caleb, Kyle. Kyle, Caleb. Jake, can you go take a look in the kitchen? No touching.”

Jake nods, turning to go, but Claire calls out again, “Don’t touch him.”

Jake looks from Claire to Nathan and then disappears down the hall.

Nathan starts, “Like I was saying, we’ve been talking. Anna was Kyle’s fiancé. He’s been investigating her murder, the same as we have Dad’s. Some pieces we were each missing, the other had. And now, we think whoever killed Dad also killed Anna. They were hits. And with a hitman dead in my kitchen—”

Caleb interrupts, “A what, where?”

Nathan gives him the short version of our kitchen calamity, Caleb’s eyes twitching as it sinks in what he could’ve lost tonight.

Nathan finishes, “I’m guessing it was Matt who made the hits on Dad and Anna.”

Claire makes a weird noise in her throat, shaking her head. “He didn’t kill Michael Stone or Anna Russo. *You* did.”

Nathan glances back at me, not asking for help but maybe permission to be harsh with my sister. I nod, knowing that Claire is hard-headed. It’s one of her best qualities, that stubbornness that got her through school, helped her become an agent, and

makes her good at her job. But no matter how many times I've told her that Nathan didn't have anything to do with the deaths, she doesn't believe me.

It's too much of a paradigm shift for her. And the only way Claire changes her mind is with a little directness and maybe a shove in the right direction.

A thought occurs to me, and I speak up. "Claire, who told you Nathan killed Anna? Who planted that whole scenario in your head, that he'd killed his dad for the company and she was asking too many questions so Nathan needed to shut her up?"

She doesn't answer, but I see the shifty way her eyes flick to the kitchen.

"It was Matt," I declare, pointing at the kitchen. "What if he's been playing you, me, and the FBI all along?"

Claire purses her lips, thinking, and Nathan jumps at the opening. "Really, so if Michael was killed by a hitman and Anna was too, and if Matt had something to do with that, what better way to redirect suspicion? And he said, 'He'll send someone else. He wants it,' so what if the 'it' is something only Michael and Anna knew about? The hits were about that."

“That’s a lot of ifs,” Claire scoffs. “And what did they have that someone wanted so badly?”

I’m not sure if Nathan wants to go there, so I let him take the lead. “A gem. Or at least a map to one. Matt must be working for someone who wants the map.”

“You mean *worked*, past-tense, since you killed him.” Her tone is sharp, biting again, but I can see it’s because she’s listening to us. The twisty turns her mind must be making are painful, ones of betrayal by her own partner, and that has to be hard. “You do realize I have to call this in.”

“If you feel you need to, do it,” Nathan says nonchalantly, although I’m sure he’s shitting bricks inside. “An FBI agent hiding in my kitchen on what is obviously an assassination assignment of a private citizen. And trust me, I have plenty of security cam footage that would back me up. How do you think that’s going to play out? For him, for the FBI, for his partner?”

The threat hangs heavy, and before things can get out of hand again, I step in between them. “Claire, I don’t know what’s up with Matt, but he did try to kill Nathan. You know that’s not how the FBI works, or at least not how it should work.”

“There will be questions. It’s not like this can be



shuffled under the rug if an agent goes missing,” Claire protests. “Nathan will have to answer for this.”

“Please, Claire,” I plead. “Work with us.”

She hears the meaning. ‘Us’ is Nathan and me, not me and her. I’ve picked my side. The only thing left is for her to choose hers. Me or the FBI?

Claire gives Nathan a hard look then turns to me, crossing her arms. “Maybe he didn’t kill Anna, but he’s still not a good man, and tonight doesn’t change what he *has* done. I put you here to find out about his business dealings because he’s shady, Em. I know he is.”

“I’m not some squeaky-clean charitable do-gooder,” Nathan admits, speaking up to defend himself. “I run a company successfully and proudly. One that, I’ll admit, I’ve spent years trying to clean up in a dirty fucking industry. And so far, I’ve done pretty well using skill, foresight, and maybe a bit of luck.”

“Guess my new nickname is Lucky now,” Caleb mouths off, smirking. No one responds but Claire rolls her eyes at him.

“Has Stone Corp always been on the right side of the law? No,” Nathan reiterates. “Some of that

echoes of my father's legacy, and some of it's the nature of the international gem trade.”

“My heart weeps for you,” Claire growls, and Nathan glares at her.

“But it is as close as I can get it when I’m dealing with an industry that is decidedly ugly. And I’m breaking no laws, US or otherwise. I promise you that.”

“And Nikolai Romanov? Why would you have dealings with a man like that? We both know there is no doubt about him,” Claire asks, trying to jab back.

“I’m not responsible for his business,” Nathan replies. “My father had business with the Russians previously, and I made a one-time arrangement for a trip with Nikolai to pay my father his last respects. That’s all.”

Claire’s smile is smug, “You mean Daddy Stone’s ashes? Tell me again how you got those since he was buried?”

Nathan pinches his nose, reaching the end of his rope. “Yes, I told everyone it was to spread his ashes. Because telling people that I wanted to go there and spit on his legacy isn’t exactly the image I want to give people, about him or me. I made that

deal with Nikolai for safe passage so I could drain the black scourge of anger my dad left me with and hopefully start fresh. And I did that. Only to return to an agent attempting to assassinate me in my own home.”

I nod, begging her to see the truth, to let this go. Nathan has done nothing wrong, at least not tonight. As for Brazil . . . that’s not germane to Matt getting shot.

For the first time ever, I see Claire lose her cool. She slips the gun into her holster and throws her hands down, yelling out, “Fuck!”

She starts pacing, and I can see her lips moving as she works through everything we know.

She’s got to believe us. It’s the only way, and I absolutely think it’s the truth. Or at least part of it. Someone sent Matt, so there’s more, but this is where we’re at. Nathan didn’t kill his Dad or Anna, and we all know that. Even Kyle knows it, and he rightfully wants blood for Anna’s death.

If only Claire will realize it too.

The moment grows as she works her way through every angle, and when she sighs glumly, I know she’s finally arrived at the same conclusion.

“I’ll go to Matt’s apartment, see what I can find.

I'll be back shortly." It's a big concession on her part, a sign that she believes us.

"Thank you, Claire. So much. But how can you get in Matt's apartment?" I ask.

She looks at me miserably, and my heart breaks at what I see in her eyes. Oh, no, Claire, not that . . . not that. "One, I'm an FBI agent. Two, he's my partner. If something happens to one of us, the other knows the basics to make sure everything is taken care of. We don't use the emergency access, or at least I never have, and I don't think he ever has, but I can pay his bills online and have a key to water his plants. Shit like that."

I want to go with her, but Claire shakes her head no, that it would be too suspicious.

Claire looks toward the kitchen. "Matt?"

"I've got him," Caleb says. Claire's dark glower broadcasts that Caleb just put a big target on himself. Claire will be looking into him for sure. But he stands tall, no hint of fear on his face as he stares her down.

"Don't touch him. Not until I know what's going on. That is an order." She points at Caleb, standing tall and authoritarian.

"I have to," Nathan interjects. "The seeds have

been planted and sown. Matt led everyone at the FBI to think I'm guilty of some really damning things. There's no telling what else he planted or who else he told."

He looks to Kyle, who had shown up tonight under the same contrived story of Nathan's actions. "And judging by his presence tonight, he's willing to go pretty damn far for this. For me. If he turns up dead at my hand, even with all the footage and witness accounts, you know there are going to be lots of questions. Ones neither of us want right now."

He's going back on his earlier threat, giving her some mercy in the hope that she returns the favor.

He waits a beat, letting that sink in, then with more kindness than I'd expect, he says, "What we do with his body doesn't change who he was to you."

"I'll be back in one hour."

She can't bear to give the go-ahead, and maybe she thinks her previous order will hold fast, but Caleb nods, hearing the deadline to have this place cleaned up and cleared of anything questionable. As soon as Claire leaves, out the front door this time, Caleb looks at Nathan.

"You sure about all this?"

He briefly looks over at me, Kyle, and Carly, and I

can tell he knows there's more to the story there, but the ticking of the countdown clock is weighing on us all.

Nathan dips his chin once, and that's enough for Caleb. Jake comes back in wearing black coveralls, a soldier awaiting orders. "Caleb?"

"Full clean-up. We've got forty-five," Caleb says, stripping off his T-shirt. "Get the gear."

I lift an eyebrow, but Nathan shakes his head as Jake and Caleb disappear. Nathan keeps us all in the living room, though we can hear an occasional thump as they wrap up Matt's body. They're talking, making plans, I assume, but their voices are too low to distinguish.

After about twenty minutes, Caleb pokes his head into the living room. "Basics are covered, but there's wood damage. Jake needs help with the next step, so I need to bounce too. I'll be back soon. Probably not before Claire is done, so I'll check in."

The cold realization washes through me as I understand they're taking Matt's body to dispose of it somewhere, somehow, and they're doing it so efficiently, as if it's a regular day at the office.

I want to know if that's true, but I also don't want

to know. Ignorance really is bliss, and I don't want to change my view of Nathan and Caleb. But I'm begging Claire to, so I need to be willing to do the same. I force myself to ask.

“Is this something you and Caleb have done before?”

“Caleb and I have been through some dark shit,” Nathan confirms, his voice and face haunted, “have done some things we'll never be able to take back. Both for our country and for money. But those stains are on my soul. I won't sully yours with them too.”

His non-answer is answer enough, but as the truth settles in my heart, I'm surprisingly not freaking out. I trust that he's done what he had to do, and if he hadn't . . . he wouldn't be here, wouldn't be mine. Fate would have conspired to keep us apart.

From beside me, I see Carly place her hand on Kyle's, and the same look echoes in his eyes, like there are ghosts surrounding him. But Carly obviously cares for him, maybe even loves him and his ghosts. It gives me the strength to nod to Nathan, letting him know that everything's okay.

Day by day, ghost by ghost, we'll figure out how to overcome whatever's in his past and deal with the consequences together.

Time ticks by until Claire returns. She looks paler than when she left and is holding a stack of papers and a laptop. “Is there a place I can spread this out to show you what I’ve found?” she asks.

Nathan leads us all into the dining room where the additional change of scenery does us all good, I think. The holding pattern of waiting in the living room was getting to me without my even realizing it.

Claire takes the spot at the head of the table, opening and booting up the laptop as she speaks. “I found bank statements from an account Matt didn’t have on his emergency list with me. It’s an offshore account, with way more than he should have as an FBI agent in it.”

“How much?” Kyle asks, and Claire’s lips press together. “I see.”

In seconds, Claire logs into the computer. “How’d you know his password?” Nathan asks.

“I know him. And paid attention every time he’d lecture about password security,” Claire says, her voice still pained. We haven’t discussed it, but that conversation is coming. Hopefully, it’ll be between just the two of us. “For all his righteousness, I figured it out in three tries.”



The screen fills with a beach wallpaper and surprisingly few icons. Matt was neat and tidy, apparently. Claire clicks to open the file explorer and then finds what she's looking for.

Moments later, Claire is showing us a bank statement.

“Look.” She points at an account owned by John Mattison. She reaches into the papers she brought with her and holds up a passport and driver's license with Matt's picture, but the name on both is John Mattison. “Seems he was using an alias for the account and for his travels.”

Nathan and Kyle stand, moving behind her to peer intently at the screen. “Travels?”

She points at the screen again, highlighting a handful of airline charges. “Once you get somewhere, you can use cash and be untraceable, but you can't book a flight without some form of account tracing. There's always a record.”

Kyle locks onto Claire, his voice tight. “Where'd he go? Italy?”

“I already thought of that,” Claire says, her voice bitter now. “He was here tonight and had insulated himself and me into this case so well that it was my first thought.” She clicks a few times, getting

further and further back in the transactions and then stopping, a sad look on her face. “Here.”

Kyle’s choked cry is gut-wrenching as he collapses into a chair, and Carly is instantly in his lap, holding his head to her chest as he breaks down.

Claire’s voice is soft, sympathy lacing through it. “Eighteen months ago, he made a trip to Nice, France. Seventy-two hours later, he flew out. From Nice to Rome, there are trains . . .”

Her voice catches, and she sighs. “It matches the timeline for Anna’s death. It tracks that he killed Anna, or at the very least, was there.”

Kyle’s grief washes through the room, stopping us all in our tracks as our hearts break for his loss.

He sobs quietly, and Carly whispers against his hair, “He’s gone. She’s at peace now.”

Kyle slams his hand on the dining room table, his voice rough with fury. “I want to bring the fucker back to life so I can kill him again. Nice and slow, the way he deserves.”

But Carly soothes him, kissing his brow gently. “She wouldn’t want that and you know it. You’ve done her memory justice. Now let her be. Live for her. Live for me, Kyle.”

It feels voyeuristic, but none of us look away. His arms wrap around her waist and he squeezes Carly so tight, I'm surprised she doesn't break, but it seems to ground him and his shuddering exhale is one of release and relief.

Before our very eyes, though, his shields come back up, muscles coiling, shoulders broadening out, and jaw clenching. It's like his moment of vulnerability never happened, and while Carly maybe still sees it, the man who stands before me is professional, detached, his eyes once again revealing little.

He nods and Carly looks back to us. "What else?"

Claire takes the cue and keeps scrolling. "There are payments, more influxes of cash well beyond what an FBI agent makes. A handful over the last couple of years. But there are two incoming payments last year. The timelines mesh, so I think one is payment for services rendered for Michael and the other for Anna."

"Motherfucker!" Nathan explodes. "He really did kill them both!"

# Chapter 44

## Nathan

I pace back and forth in the dining room as Claire keeps talking, my mind clicking through the past.

It feels good to put a face with the crime, to know who snuffed out my father's life. Despite all the hard feelings I have for him, for all the stress as I figured out how to recover the company he was running into the ground, and so many nights as I lay awake in bed, the little boy inside me still angry over a dad who'd left again.

I'd expected to feel relief, but instead the answer only provides more questions. It's a never-ending quagmire, just like how my dad lived his life and that infuriates me.

I need to stop.

I need to break myself free of this cycle, caring about what he did or didn't do. If I'm going to be a man worth a damn, I need to stop living in the past.

Especially when my present and my future is right here beside me. She deserves more. I deserve more.

“Enough. That’s enough,” I declare, standing up. “Matt killed my father, something he probably deserved a hundred times over. He killed Anna, whose only misdeed was in knowing Michael Stone. And for that, Kyle, I grieve for you from the bottom of my heart. But Matt is dead, my father is dead, and Anna is dead. No more. It ends here tonight. No more death.”

I turn around and drop down to my knees at Emma’s feet, taking her hand as I look into her eyes. “You and me, Emma. No treasure hunting, no past. It’s over. From this moment, it’s just you and me and forever. I want a new life, one where I’m yours and you’re mine, and we build a life around that. Around us. I love you.”

The words come easily this time, the label more certain but the need just as all-consuming.

Emma hugs me to her, dropping to the floor beside me to wrap her arms around my neck, squeezing tight. “I love you too, Nathan.”

Vaguely, I realize we’re putting on just as much of a show as Kyle and Carly did, but I can’t seem to care.

Claire clears her throat, piercing the fog of happiness but sounding reluctant to do so. “As touching as you two may be, there’s one more thing

you need to know.”

I shake my head, turning to look her in the eyes. “It doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

“Nice sentiment, but you think whoever sent Matt here tonight is going to feel the same way? It doesn’t just end here,” Claire argues, her voice hard and accusatory.

“If it were just Matt, I’d overlook all this, let Caleb do . . . whatever the hell he’s doing . . . and put all this shit back in his apartment and let the DOJ think he’s a dirty agent who got double-crossed by his employers.” She chokes the words out, and I wonder about her relationship with her partner. “But you’re putting my sister at risk by stepping away from the plate at the bottom of the ninth. You need to see this shit through.”

I sigh, wishing she were wrong, but she’s not. Though I might wish to stop playing this twisted game, be unwilling to gamble when the stakes are so high, I’m not the only player in the game.

“Fine. What?” I say, rising and helping Emma back on the chair next to me.

Claire points again at the screen, her voice once again professional. “The payments come from a shell company. I’ve never heard of it before

tonight, but Matt knew a lot.” She clicks into a Word file and a document glares brightly on the screen. “While you four have been playing house, I’ve been working.”

A quick scan tells me it’s Matt’s full confession about how he didn’t know who he was getting into bed with when he borrowed funds to cover a gambling debt. It details out jobs, favors he was asked to do, evidence he was told to lose or cover up. And lastly, it shows his work in deciphering who was the puppet master pulling his strings.

“Son of a bitch!” I swear, seeing the name on the screen.

Kyle is just as quick, his voice acid as well. “He’s untouchable. No way we’ll get close enough to him to take him out.”

To her credit, Claire doesn’t so much as blink at our plotting to murder a man in front of her. Instead, she looks to Emma and then to me, resolve in her eyes.

“You’re a smart man, Nathan. You know how to use your resources under the table, behind closed doors, and turn people to your side even when they know it’s not the smart thing to do.”

I get the feeling she’s not talking about my business

dealings anymore but about how I used Emma to get FBI info. She's smart, though I wonder when she figured out that Emma was telling us both everything.

She turns to Kyle. "I did my homework on you after our meeting. I know your type, your style. Don't go in guns blazing. Subtlety is sometimes the most effective and efficient style of warfare."

Standing up, she slaps the laptop closed, pulling out an SD card and handing it to me. "The docs. It seems I've got quite a bit of work to do to cover my own ass with my *missing* partner. You've got about twenty-four hours before people start looking into him. I'll do my best to make sure what they find doesn't lead them to your doorstep. You do your best to make sure he's *never* found."

I nod and offer her my hand, knowing what it cost her to say that. "Thank you."

She takes it but pulls me close, squeezing the life out of my hand. "Hurt her, and you'll be the one lying dead in your kitchen."

She leaves and the tension fills the room once again.

Suddenly, our ragtag team of four is back at the plate. I ask the question first. "What do you want



to do?”

Kyle looks from me to Carly, his eyes hard, and I know his answer even before he gives it voice. “I’m done. You have balls in play still, but I feel like I can step away. I’ve got the answers I wanted and the justice I needed. The man who pulled the trigger paid with his life, which was my goal all along. Anna would want me to move on, and I’m going to honor her by doing that. With Carly.”

I nod, understanding his role in this. He didn’t sign up for international conspiracies just to avenge his dead fiancé and baby . . . and he’s done so.

“I can respect that, but it seems I can’t do that. Not yet.”

Kyle frowns, looking uncomfortable but set in his decision. “I know. Sorry. For everything.”

He stands and pulls Carly to her feet with his good arm. “We’ll get out of your way.”

I stop them, holding out a hand. “Plenty of bedrooms upstairs. It’s been a long day, a really fucking long day. Just crash here. You’re safe.”

Kyle laughs darkly, lifting an eyebrow. “Safe? You’ve had two breeches in the last twenty-four hours.”

I snort at the dig. “True, but I figure with both me and you around, we’re a lot better off. And still safer than a Holiday Inn. Higher thread count too.”

Emma and Carly grin, and even with the pendulum swinging over my head, there’s a moment of levity. Carly steps forward, hugging Emma tightly and questioning her. “You sure? 110% pinkie-swear you’re sure about him?”

Emma looks back at me and then smiles big at Carly. “Abso-fucking-lutely. You sure too?” She stage-whispers, “He’s kind of a monster, you know?”

Carly’s smile is pure devilment, her eyes sparkling as she bobs her head up and down. “You have no idea. This is the trained version. I’ve domesticated him to this level with pure focus and never-ending steadfastness, even when he tried to push me away.”

I swear I see the slightest blush on Kyle’s face, but he doesn’t seem the type to get embarrassed about any damn thing. I decide it must be a trick of the light when he swoops Carly up and tosses her over his good shoulder.

“Which way?”

Though Carly is screeching, she seems to be right

where she wants to be, or at least on her way to it.  
“Upstairs, second door on the left. Not right. That’s  
Caleb’s room when he stays over.”

I would *not* want my brother walking in on what I  
suspect is about to happen.

# Chapter 45

## Kyle

I meant what I said. I'm done with the past. Done wallowing in self-pity and self-loathing, in pain and misery.

I have been reborn in her eyes, and like any born-again convert can tell you, there is freedom in that new beginning.

I toss Carly to the bed, not even taking notice of the fancy shit that surrounds us.

All I see is her. All I am is the me that she sees, a better version of myself than I'd ever hoped to be again.

I'd given up. I hadn't even admitted to myself that I was going to find Anna's killer and then wither away, or maybe more proactively, give up. I just kind of figured when I did find the man, that'd be the end of me, and I had accepted that fate. But I have a reason to live, to be, to continue this existence with Carly by my side.

Her eyes meet mine, and she cups my face. "Are

you sure, Kyle? I love you. I can wait if you're not sure."

I haven't even told her what I'm intending to do to her, but she can feel my intentions. Can feel that I'm all-in. With her.

I lie on top of her, pinning her with my weight so she feels the heaviness of my plans, of my very soul. "You're not the future I'd planned, but you're the one I want with my entire soul. I will always love Anna and our baby, but I love you too."

Carly's smile is bittersweet as she strokes my tired, scruffy face. "I don't begrudge her place in your heart. I'm not jealous. In a weird way, she brought us together. I wish you'd never had to experience the pain of losing her, but I promise to do whatever I can to make your future beautiful and crazy."

"Just like you," I reply with a small smile, "beautiful and crazy."

I kiss her. There's no need for words anymore. In this moment, there is only us. I'm choosing her, choosing us, and she's doing the same.

Fully.

Openly.

Powerfully.

Our passion ignites in an instant, all the weeks of barely-held restraint rushing in on me, and I yank and pull her clothes off.

“Careful of your arm,” she groans, but she’s helping me get us naked too.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” I tell her reverently, taking in her lush curves and the tawny rose nipples already peaked up for me. For weeks, I’ve studied the way her body moves with feline grace, but now she’s even better than I imagined.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she says with a wink and a laugh in her voice.

I nip her breast, and she shrieks, arching under me. I like that she makes me lighter, that even in a moment like this, with her, there’s always a laugh just beneath her surface.

I want to tease them free, listen to her joy every moment of every day.

But as I suck deeply, drawing more of her nipple into my mouth, she moans. And I think I want to pull more of those sounds from her too.

I switch to the other breast, tasting and taking and marking her pale skin. “Fuck, Kyle. God, I’ve wanted you. Please . . .”

I don't think this girl has ever begged for anything a day in her life, and that she would plead for me is an honor I cherish deeply. And a responsibility I take gladly.

I should take this slow, but I can't. Too much has happened. I've waited too long for her, fighting back against the inevitable. I need her *now*.

I tease my head along her slit, reveling in the slick evidence of her desire as it coats me, preparing me for her. "You have no idea how many times I've imagined fucking you, how many positions I've dreamed of bending this sexy body every which way so I can get at your sweet pussy."

"Mmm, challenge accepted. Though my fantasies tend toward you holding me up against walls with those tree trunks you call arms," she says, every word a breathy half-moan. I make a note to do that next time, because there's going to be a next time.

Lots of them.

I lift up from her, looking down at my cock, where it's just edging into her, wanting to sear this moment into my memory for all time. Her hips buck, trying to suck me in.

"Look at that pretty pussy, so hungry for me."

I move my hands, pinning her hips down and

feeding her a slow inch at a time.

Her whimper brings my eyes to her face, and our gazes lock, both of us groaning at the sensation of her velvet walls opening for me. I've had sex, I've made love, and I've fucked before. And this is . . . us making vows with our bodies. Committing in a way that means more than just a physical connection.

Fully seated inside her, I whisper her name, "Carly."

"Kyle."

I roll my hips, bottoming out inside her, and she moves in waves, meeting me every time.

When she cries out, I lose every last grip on my control. Our bodies speed up, the tempo growing with every thrust, every slap of our skin, harder and deeper and more powerful with every thrust until our hips are smacking together haphazardly.

Her arms and legs wrap around me, holding me to her, but I'm not going anywhere, not ever again. I want to stay with her, inside her.

I shudder, overwhelmed at feeling so much, physically and emotionally. "Goddamn, Carly. You feel so good. I didn't dream it'd be . . ." My voice fades off as her inner muscles squeeze me, pulling a



guttural grunt from me. And pure pleasure takes over my brain and body, sparking white lights at the edges of my vision. “Yeah, fuck me back with that sexy pussy. Take my cock.”

“Give it to me. I want it all,” she demands, ever the bossy girl I love. Fuck, I do. I love her. I didn’t see that coming, didn’t see her changing my destiny. But in every way, small and large, she’s changed it all.

We ride it together, reaching higher and higher until there is nothing in the world but the two of us.

No past, no present, no future. Just us awash in this moment, in each other’s skin and soul. With eyes wide open, we come together.

The release rushes through me, hot jets of my cum filling her in pulsing waves, and I watch intently as Carly’s face tenses in rapture. Her walls flutter around me, butterfly kisses of satin that keep me falling. Falling into the abyss of pleasure, into her. Her joyful cries echo around us, letting me know that she’s with me all the way. Always.

And though I’ll never be the same man I once was, I’m something different, something better with her now.

She’s mine. And I’m hers. Light to dark, flight-er to

fight-er, rebel to rule-maker, but somehow, it works.  
I don't think she'd accept it any other way.

Carly

Kyle draws me in against his body, whispering my name against the skin of my shoulder as he breathes me in. Even in his sleep, he is mine now.

But he was hers, too, and I'll always be thankful for the love she gave him, even if it almost broke him to lose it.

I make a silent promise to the darkness.

*Anna, thank you for loving him. Thank you for sending him to me. I will love him, cherish him, and take care of him like you would've. Stay in his heart, there with me. You're his past. I'm his present and future, and together, we can love him forever. Deal?*

Though there's no magical sign that her spirit heard me, I do feel a sense of peace in my core and I'd like to think that it's her agreement.

Kyle lets out a small, soft snore, something more befitting a mouse than the giant of a man that he is, and I try to suppress my grin. I don't know what adventures the future holds, but I'm excited to

experience them all with him at my side.

# Chapter 46

## Nathan

Finally alone with Emma, I look her in the eyes. “I have to finish this.”

The weight of this responsibility rests heavier than anything I’ve ever withstood. I’ve done some risky things, but the only blowback was on me. This time, it could potentially harm Emma.

But I’m damned if I do nothing and damned if I do something. And passively letting others decide my fate has never been my style.

She nods, resolutely agreeing. “I know.”

She’s giving me nothing, so I have to ask, even though I’m scared of the answer. “I was telling your sister the truth. I try to run the company as above-board as I can, but the gem industry is notoriously dirty. Filthy and ugly. Riches born on the backs of the workers who risk themselves in the mines, on the margins businessmen in fancy suits exploit to make even more money, on a culture that sells people on the myth that a stone somehow

signifies what's inside their heart. It's . . . my business. But even before this, I wasn't a good man, a good son, a good brother. I've done horrible things in my life, but they were all before you."

She swallows, holding her breath. "And now?"

"And now, I'm about to do something awful, either by my own hand or by forcing another's, and I need to know if you're going to still be standing here with me after I do that. I can't lose you, not when I just found you. If I do this, will you still love me?"

The answer will either gut me or set me free because I have to do this either way.

Emma moves to me, pushing me to the couch and straddling my hips.

Though gentle, her hands on my shoulders keep me motionless, defenseless to her verdict. She bites her lips, like the judgement pains her, and a fissure trembles in my heart, threatening to crack it in two.

"You are who you are, and I love you. No matter what. It's not a variable. It's not conditional based on your actions. It just is. Do what you need to. For you, for me, for Caleb, even for your dad. This is the final step in your mission. Avenge him, wash away all trace of his sins so that you can be free to

live your own life the way you want. You and Caleb, as brothers. And you and me too. I love you, will always love you. No matter what.”

I shudder beneath her, some magical balm soothing the jagged edges of my soul. “How is it that you can see me, truly see me, and somehow find something redeemable?”

She starts to answer, but it’s rhetorical. I don’t need to know how. I’m just thankful that she does.

I silence her compliments with a kiss, telling her with my tongue that I appreciate her acceptance. A welcoming that no one has ever shown me.

“I know we’ve talked about it already, but I want to say again, the past is the past. I wouldn’t change how you came into my life, kitty. You were willing to risk everything, even yourself, to help Claire, however misguided it may have been. And then you helped me, selflessly, bringing me to life in the process. Today is just another step for us. But the thread that connects them all is that I love you. I didn’t think I even could love, but you’ve taught me how, and I plan to spend the rest of my days showing you how grateful I am that you saw possibilities in me.”

I grip the back of her neck, pulling her to me, but instead of kissing her, I lay her forehead against

mine. Eyes intense, breath shared, hearts beating as one. A single tear rolls down her cheek, but her lips lift.

“Do it,” she says.

Nodding, I pick up my phone and call a number I’ve only dialed a handful of times, almost expecting him not to answer, but the line connects.

“*Da?*”

“Nikolai, it’s Nathan Stone.” He hums a noise somewhere between curiosity and leeriness. “We have business to discuss.”

He chuckles dismissively. “*Nyet*, safe passage in and out was given. My mother appreciates the pink diamonds.”

I purse my lips, trying to decide how involved he is and wondering if I should’ve waited to let Caleb look into this more, but the chance for that is gone, so I play fast and hard.

“That *was* the deal. Are you telling me that you allowed safe passage, only to renege and send an assassin after me on US soil?”

The choked gasp of rage he gives is all the answer I need. “What? No, I did no such thing. What are you talking about?” His accent thickens in his

shocked anger, making the words run together.

“I thought you’d say that. In that case, I have some info you need to know. It could potentially help us both or greatly harm . . . you.”

“What is this info?” he asks suspiciously.

“How involved is your father in operations these days?”

He doesn’t answer as I expected. He’s not going to share family secrets with an outsider, but I need to set the stage.

“Back in the day, it seems our fathers had occasion to do business from time to time. But somewhere along the way, things got messy. Papa Romanov hired a man—you’d know him as John Mattison—to kill my dad.”

I let that bomb sit and detonate fully, but instead of the whoosh of surprise, Nikolai sighs, letting me know he was already aware of this.

I forcefully corral my anger that he knew and continue coldly, “And then he flew this man to Italy, where he killed Anna, one of my father’s resources. An innocent—pregnant—woman.”

I hear creaking on the line, and I can picture Nikolai rearranging himself in his chair. “Da, I



know this.”

He sounds bored, like he’s just placating me by listening.

“You knew all this?” I growl. “Then I’m sure you already know why I’m calling.”

“*Da*, to declare war or whatever shit you think must be done before you ride in like a cowboy,” he says nonchalantly. “Americans always go for the drama.”

I grin because he’s right, and I certainly considered doing just that. But I’m a smart man. I’d like to think smarter than my baser instincts, even. So while I’ll have revenge, I’ll do it a way that most benefits me while cutting possible risks.

“I have something a little different in mind.”

That gets his attention. His voice is tight when he asks, “What?”

“So as I see it, for ordering my father’s murder, your father needs to die. It’s as simple as that and exactly what you would do in my shoes.” I pause to let him disagree, but he says nothing, knowing I’m right. It’s the Russian mafia way. Eye for an eye, nothing more, nothing less.

“I’m not an American cowboy, and this isn’t a

Hollywood movie, so I'm not flying to Russia to exact my vengeance under cover of night. What I'm offering is an opportunity. A truce. I need him to die to pay. You need him to die so that you can truly rule. Do that, and we'll be even, perhaps even able to do business in the future if the need arises."

His chuckle is dark and wet, almost disbelieving. "Kill my father? You want me to simply kill my father?"

His incredulous tone makes me smirk because I know he's thought of a million ways to kill the man already. It's the nature of his business. I'm just pushing up the timeline.

I shrug, though he can't see me, leaning back on the sofa to feel more comfortable than I feel. "I'm sure it's not the first time you've thought of it. He's old, and you run the family now, but with him alive, he still wields power. Make it a coup. Make it a quiet passing in his sleep, whatever you wish. But he will die. At your hand or at my behest. The question is, how many men will die along with him if there is a war?"

He sneers, spitting out the word. "War?"

But I can hear that he's considering it, so I push harder. "How would it look for the family of an American businessman, with almost limitless

resources, to come in and start slashing through your strongholds? Perhaps the fields of Brazil that you need for your operation, or the streets of Moscow, or right here in Brooklyn? I understand you have a few weapons warehouses there, as well as a data mining force.”

I use the intel Caleb pulled on Nikolai before our first meeting to show that while he knows about me, I know all about Nikolai too.

He’s quiet, though I can hear his quickened breathing. Growling, I deliver my final argument. “Your reach is considerable, so I would prefer to *not* become enemies. But I have friends in both high and low places as well. Consider my proposal carefully. And quickly.”

I hang up, hoping that it’s enough. I may not have cared for my dad, but even I would’ve been hard-pressed to put a gun to his head and pull the trigger. I simply couldn’t have done it.

Killing anyone isn’t easy and leaves scars on your soul, but your parent is a whole different degree of damage, and doing this will likely leave unknown trauma on Nikolai’s heart. Especially since their relationship is one of strain but not hate.

Setting the phone down, Emma kisses me, telling me with her smacking lips that she’s proud of me.

It's a twisted, convoluted pride that by not killing Papa Romanov with my own bare hands, she feels like it's acceptable. But whatever illogical reasoning is running through her mind, I'm appreciative for it.

Caleb chooses that moment to come back, walking casually in the door and covering his eyes melodramatically. "Whoa, get a room. There's literally more than a handful upstairs to choose from." That he is able to joke around after what I'm sure has been a difficult night is testament to the strength of his spirit and the coping mechanism he's perfected.

I move Emma from my lap, and she curls up in the corner of the couch, watching with bated breath.

"Claire came back. She found some stuff . . ."

Telling my little brother about how our father died is harder than I'd thought it'd be. We both live with hatred for the man, disappointment in how he left us over and over again, but even so, he was our dad. And though he had his faults, we all do, but at the end of the checks and balance sheet, the result is the same.

He was our father, and that alone makes his death painfully hard. Both for what we lost and for what we wished we'd had.

“Why would Papa Romanov do that?”

I shake my head, rubbing my face. “I don’t know. We thought this was all about the map and the stone, but they had business dealings in the past, according to Dad’s papers, so we may never know what the real motivation was. Matt said, ‘He wants it,’ and while my mind automatically jumped to the map and stone because that’s what we’re researching, there could be countless other things from Dad’s years of treasure hunting. Who knows? Maybe he didn’t like Dad going to Brazil, or maybe he did want the map, though there’s nothing that says he even knew about it. Chances are he didn’t, or we’d have never left there alive. I don’t know. The important thing is that he’ll pay.”

Caleb tilts his head questioningly, unconvinced. “You think Nikolai will do it?”

I glance to my phone, replaying the conversation in my head. “I think that despite his bluster, he’s a smart and strategic man. He knows his dad is going to die over this. The only question is whether he can make it benefit him and the family somehow. If he decides not to, we’ll have to handle it.”

Caleb blinks slowly, his mind pondering the implications of what I’m saying. “I’m with you, Nathan. Whatever we need to do.”

Impulsively, I give him a hug. Not a bro side-hug but a full-on, arms wrapped around him hug. I don't think I've done this since we were boys, but as we vow to move forward, the two of us, no matter what, it seems timely. He squeezes me back so I think he feels the same.

Pulling apart, I see the shine in Caleb's eyes and feel the sting behind mine. He shakes his head, blustering, "All right, fuckers, I'm out then. Gonna head home. Still haven't had a nap or pussy since we got back from Brazil. Holler if you need anything."

He tosses a two-fingered wave to Emma and then throws over his shoulder, "Glad you're not dead."

The door shuts quietly behind him, and it takes me a second to realize he was talking to *Emma*.

It's not a welcome to the family party, but it's progress. And we've got time because this is where she belongs. With me.

"I think Caleb has the right idea. Come on," I say, holding my hand out to her.

Her nose crinkles cutely, and she glances toward the door. "Right idea?"

But she places her soft hand in mine, trusting me and letting me pull her to her feet.

I bend down, swooping her into my arms. “Pussy and a nap. In that order, kitty.”

She blushes hotly, but as I carry her up the stairs to lay her on my bed, the heat turns to arousal. I rub my hands up her legs from her ankles to the soft juncture of her thighs, and she squirms sexily.

“Are you sure? It’s been a crazy day. Do you need to, I don’t know, process or something?” But even as she’s giving me the out, offering me a chance to hit the pause button, I don’t want it.

But I know what I do want.

“Take your clothes off now.” My voice is no longer soft and sultry but forceful and demanding.

Emma senses the change and pulls her shirt over her head. I need this. She knows it . . . but she’s still going to make me work a little bit for her obedience, giving me a little bit of mouth.

“How come I’m the one getting punished? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

She’s teasing, but I can feel the way her body is begging for this. And the pounding pulse in my ears tells me just how much I need this too.

She’s right. Today has been more than a lot. It’s been Earth-shattering and foundation-changing. My

entire world has tilted on its axis in the past twenty-four hours, and in thirty or forty years, I can look back on today as the day my life changed forever. I can't control a lot of the fallout from those changes, but this I can control.

No. This is a new world, a new *me*. Because there is no more me. There's only *us*, and with Emma, with *us*, I can *lose* control and set her free right along with me.

“You'd better quit your backtalk, or I'll have to stuff that mouth with something so you're not able to sass me.” The dark promise brings sexy sparkles to both of our eyes, and Emma grins.

Emma shoves her leggings down and off, and once naked, she climbs off the bed. Lowering to her knees and sitting back on her heels, she looks up at me. “Promise?”

Gripping her hair, I tilt her head back, and she waits with her mouth open while I undo my pants and take my cock out with my other hand. Her tongue is dancing behind her lips, desperate for a taste of my cock.

I trace the shape of her lips with my head, leaving a shiny smear of pre-cum. But I don't let her lick her lips for the treat, instead shoving my thickness into her waiting mouth until my balls rest on her chin.



She gags slightly, and I pull back just enough to let her breathe.

“You’re mine, kitty. And I’m yours.”

I hold her there for a moment, and Emma looks up at me, her eyes bright and her lips lifted in a hint of a smile as they stretch around me.

I thrust into her hot mouth as she sucks me down like a fucking vacuum cleaner, and all too soon, I’m on the edge. But I won’t come until she’s totally wrung out, every pleasure possible twisted through her body until she breaks and I shatter along with her.

Instead, I grab under her arms, hauling her up and placing her on the bed. “Face down, ass up.” And though she hurries to get into position, I slap her ass hard, loving the way my pink handprint shines on her skin.

“Get inside me,” she orders, adding a new side to our ‘game.’ And though I shouldn’t give her what she wants, should tease her to the edge again and again just to prolong this for both of us, I can’t right now.

She’s right. We’re a team now, and I need to give in, let all the emotions and mental games be washed away in pleasure and her body.

And in our love.

So I slam into her, stretching her tight pussy as her slickness tries to ease my way. She cries out, and in her, I am lost once again.

Not Nathan Stone. Not Michael Stone's son. Not the man asking a son to kill his father. Not a monster of his own making. Just simply me. The me I am with her. The me I want to be.

And her, the beautifully imperfect, quirky, brave woman who wants me.

Us.

# Chapter 47

## Emma

“A re you sure about this? Like really sure-sure?” Claire asks for the millionth time. Actually, I think we’ve moved into billions now. Yeah, for the billionth time.

Just like every other time, I pause my packing and give her my full attention. “I’m sure, certain, and positive. If you want more than that, you’ll have to unpack that box and get my thesaurus back out. I love him.”

“What about your plans? Your dreams? The play?” she asks, trying a different tack. She’s already blown through arguments that Nathan is a bad guy again, even though she helped him when push came to shove. And then she’d played on his being a spoiled rich boy, also not true, and that he was trying to boss me around.

She stopped that one real fast when I’d saucily told her that I liked it like that and maybe she should try letting someone boss her around for a change.

Now it seems we're moving away from Nathan and into the dissection of me portion of the evening.

"I blew it on the play front by leaving," I admit, but I honestly don't care. "I'm just glad they got the original actress to come back on such short notice and she got rave reviews. I definitely torched that bridge, but I wouldn't change what I did. And it worked out in the end."

I can't believe I'm actually saying that, much less feeling it, but it's the truth. I was over the moon with the opportunity, but I'm glad I spontaneously flew to Brazil to help Nathan.

"So, what's next for you?" Claire asks, her voice slightly defeated.

"Now I'm going to keep working for Professor Ford, and I've decided to go back to graduate school." Excitement coats the statement, but Claire balks.

"What? Back to school?"

"Yeah, I'm going to get my master's at NYU . . . at least, that's the plan. I really enjoyed the adventure and mystery of working on this for Nathan. I want to see and do more with that."

"Adventure? You mean going into cartel territory and almost dying?" Claire says incredulously.

“Yeah, that sounds fun. And what about acting? You could do both like you have been. Just work for the professor and audition more.”

Claire argues, obviously not satisfied with a reasonable plan that most sisters would be over the moon about.

“I love it, and maybe I’ll still do some, but I don’t feel the same pull to be on Broadway. I feel like there’s more out there in the world that’s real, not pretend. I think a part of me was using that to escape my life, be someone else so I didn’t have to be myself. Now, I’m kind of excited about who I am and what I can do. Does that make sense?”

“Shit, you’re playing hardball with the self-actualization,” Claire says, turning around to hug me before she steps back and stares deep into my soul. I stand, locking eyes with her openly, hoping she sees the truth.

With a heavy sigh, she gives in, and I think maybe our relationship’s changed a little. Not that we won’t be as close as ever, but we’re more equal now than ever before.

“Fine. I still have reservations about Nathan and his business dealings, in particular, but I’m not the one to pass judgement on him. At least not now. Not until I can separate my emotions from the facts.”

The warning that she's not giving up is so her. Her utter commitment is something I've always admired about her, but the flip side is that her stubborn streak is a mile wide and full of rapids that'll sweep you under if you try to fight them.

So I don't fight and accept her for who she is. "He's a good man. You'll see, I promise. I don't know a lot about his business, but I trust that he's just as good there. I trust him."

"He'd better be a good man, to you and in general." She plops down on the edge of my bed, fidgeting with the buttons on a sweater. "I guess it's not like I'm apparently the best judge of character anyway."

I can read her eyes, and I know that there's a subject that I need to clear between us because I don't want it to fester. "Claire . . . Matt?"

She reads my question and swallows, turning to look out my apartment window. "Yeah. We knew we weren't supposed to. But we were partners, and there's a closeness there that . . . we were on a case, a human trafficking ring upstate. We were undercover, the stress was off the charts, and after a close call, we just . . ."

"Claire, you don't have—"

“No, you asked, and you deserve the truth,” Claire says. “I thought he was a rock. It was just a one-time indiscretion, but we were more than partners. We were *friends*. But I was blind and that nearly got you killed. Emma, I don’t blame you for what happened to Matt. I don’t blame Nathan . . . too much. I blame Matt, and I blame myself.”

“You don’t need to blame yourself,” I tell her, sitting beside her and hugging her close. “You’re my big sister, and you’re one badass agent. That doesn’t mean you’re perfect.”

Letting her go a bit, I keep my arm around her shoulder. “Your judgement is just fine. Matt had everyone fooled.”

She snuggles into me, and I hope she’s taking my absolution to heart and not beating herself up too badly.

“What’s happening with that?” I ask carefully. After the admission about her relationship with him, this is still shaky ground.

“You know I waited a couple of days and then went to my boss, told him I was worried. It took about a week for alarms to be fully raised, and I told them I’d been looking into his disappearance. I turned in his laptop and let the forensic techs have their way with it. They figured out his secrets pretty fast.”

Her head drops, and I worriedly ask, “You didn’t get in trouble too, did you?”

“No, thankfully not. They’re digging, but nothing implicates me because I had no fucking idea about any of it.”

She spits the words out like they burn her tongue. “They questioned me, but I think it’s likely they’ll have enough to keep them busy with the Russian mafia intel. Nothing will get traced back to here. Even if it did, Nathan could threaten to come after the bureau.”

Nathan would never do that, but it’s a similar threat to what he’d implicated that night. An FBI agent on an off-book assassination mission is a black eye they definitely don’t want.

“I’m sorry about Matt. I know the shock and everything he did still hurts. He was your partner and he betrayed you. Thank you for trusting Nathan and me that night. I know it was a big risk, but I think you can see that it was the right thing. He’s a good man. I love him.”

I know I’ve already told her that repeatedly, but I think she’ll need to hear it a billion more times for it to truly sink in.

She smiles ever so slightly, glancing over at me. “I



guess we'd better get the rest of your stuff packed if you're moving in with him. Unless you want to move in with me? You're always welcome at my place."

I return her smile, shaking my head. "I don't want you to be subjected to walking in on us. But I'll take you up on that for a sister sleepover sometime. For now, though, I'm ready to go home."

Home.

Something I don't know if I've ever truly felt. With my parents, I was always just a little outside. With my friends, even Carly to some degree, I didn't know myself enough to truly fit in.

But now I feel like I've discovered who I am. Not because of Nathan but because I'm finally willing to be honest with myself. He was just the shove I needed to fully jump off the safe path I'd been tip-toe traversing for so long.

Now, I'm skydiving without a parachute . . . and I love it.

# Chapter 48

## Nathan

I'm on edge. I'm not used to a waiting game while others make moves.

Emma is packing her apartment up to come here.

Permanently.

A smile crosses my face at the thought, though a wiggle in the back of my head makes me question whether she's going to show back up. I'd even offered to go with her and help as a way of reassuring myself, but she'd said she needed to do it with her sister.

I wonder if it will always be that way, a majority of my heart trusting but that scared little boy in my past setting up screens and shields. Because that's what it was, and Emma's smile as she kissed me this morning told me she recognized it, shredded it, and tossed it in the trash.

I've kept myself busy this morning, checking on what progress is being made thousands of miles away in Russia. Another man is dealing with his

own Daddy issues at my behest.

It can't be easy for Nikolai, though his family dynamic isn't exactly healthy either. But murdering your father will leave a stain on your soul for eternity. I wonder how dark his soul already is to undertake this as a business transaction.

My phone rings, and I answer, hoping that it's news and not a double-cross. "Hello."

Nikolai is stoic, his voice level. "It is done. We are, as you say, fair and square. *Da?*"

I'm glad he can't see me because my jaw drops in surprise. I know he'd agreed, but to see it through . . .

"To be clear, you are telling me that your father, Papa Romanov, the one who ordered the murder of my father and Anna Russo, is dead. And this is confirmable information."

I'm not stupid. The Romanovs have wealth and privilege, fear and power on their side. To fake a death and keep Papa Romanov in hiding is well within their means.

"I said it is done, so it is done," Nikolai barks. "I will not send you pictures of my father's corpse, but his death will be in the news."

Nikolai sighs. “It is a great loss for our country.”

He may sound sad about it, but the satisfaction is audible underneath his outer mourning. I may have used him to do my dirty work, but he used me as an excuse to do exactly what he’s wanted to for years.

I only hope that doesn’t come back to haunt me. There could come a time when blaming a foreign competitor would prove advantageous to a pressed Nikolai. I’ll be prepared, in any event.

In the meantime, I play on his ego, the one constant with him. “I can understand that, but I’m sure they will soon see that the better Romanov is in control now. Your father had his time, but it is yours now. Much like it is my time to run my father’s company and do it better. I do hope we can agree on not letting the sins of the fathers taint the future of the sons?”

“I am comfortable doing what I need to do for the family, though working together in the future would be doubtful,” he says with a small chuckle. “I don’t think all the pink diamonds in the world will ever make Mama forgive. Papa, me, or you.”

“Understood. I just do not want any of your friends or family breaking into my house again.”

“Deal. No one besides us knows, and no one will.

As long as you do not threaten my business or me again.”

The threat transmits through the line as if he were right in front of me, and I make a hum of agreement.

“I need to ask you one thing,” he says curiously, which immediately alerts me to the seriousness of his inquiry.

“What?”

“My father, he tells a story as he dies. One about your father, about an old diamond lost long ago in the Brazilian rainforest.”

Fuck! I’d wondered if the gem and map had been the underlying reason for Papa Romanov to come after my dad, but the confirmation is surprisingly a relief.

Because I have it. I’m in control of the gem, and it’s been dealt with appropriately. If it’d been something else, the risk would still be outstanding.

“Sounds like a good story. My father used to tell loads of them, but I always figured he was full of shit. The man thought he was a real-life Indiana Jones.”

Nikolai sounds unconvinced. “Tell me, did you find

it?”

I contemplate telling him the truth, but there’s no use, so I muddy it in a way that amuses me. “It may have existed once upon a time. My father certainly believed it did, and it seems your father did as well. But if it did, it’s lost to time, of that I’m certain. The land has changed too much, tributaries flooded and remolded, and the Amazon claims what the Amazon wants to claim. His death was in vain and honored appropriately.”

Nikolai hums, and I hang up with a smile before he can ask any follow-up questions.

I stretch and get up, not admitting that I’m going to sit by the front door to watch for Emma’s return like a dog waiting for its owner. She does own my heart, after all, so it seems logical.

Grant stops me as I come down the hall, though. “Sir, Miss Daniels is waiting in the master chambers.”

“She’s here already? Why didn’t you come get me?” I ask, already anxious to get to her, to make sure she’s real and has come back to me.

Grant smiles, and I swear over the past week he’s looked happier than I’ve ever seen him. I’m not too sure, but I think he might feel a sense of

completion, seeing me with Emma. Like he's done his job right.

“She asked me not to disturb you, said she knew you had work and that she wished for time to prepare.”

My eyebrow raises. “Prepare?”

His eyes sparkle, but as always, Grant reveals nothing. He used to do that to guests, but I think there's a new head of the household now, and she has him wrapped around her little finger.

“Will there be anything else this evening, sir?”

I'm already halfway down the hall, but I call back, “No, thank you.”

Even though Grant said she's here, I'm afraid to believe. But when I stop in the doorway to my bedroom, I see her. Spread out in my bed—no, *our* bed—in black lingerie.

Lace cups her tits, serving them up for me to feast upon, and small straps cover her hips, begging me to snap them to gain access to her pussy.

She moves, and I see glittering light all around her. My eyes don't know what to make of it at first and then it hits me. She's lying in a bed of gems, pieces of the larger, ancient stone I had worn down into

smaller cuts.

It's not exactly crushing my dad's past the way I would've wanted, but Caleb and I had agreed it was enough to satisfy my need for destruction. He truly didn't care, had written off Dad years ago and wanted no part of the tainted stone he felt was the epitome of everything he hated about Dad.

Still, he kept one chunk when I offered it to him.

Emma had tried desperately to talk me out of doing anything to the stone, proclaiming the historical value of it was the most important thing, but she'd understood that I needed to do something. In the end, I'd compromised, though I know a hydraulic press would've obliterated it quite satisfyingly.

But now I have a large number of the uniquely beautiful stones, and Emma made me promise to keep them together and I agreed that was reasonable.

But it seems like tonight, before they're housed in the piece I designed especially for her, we're going to have a bit of fun among them.

If I were a better man, I'd tell her to go. I don't deserve her, am still too broken and scarred inside, and she deserves more than I can give her. Not the luxuries my money can afford, because I can give



her more than she'd ever want there. But emotionally, I'm still untested, unsure how to love, even if what I feel for Emma is all-consuming. She is all I need. I don't want her to ever doubt, ever question, and I'll do anything to be worthy of her.

Still, in my head, the good guy tries to save her from me, chanting *go, go, go*. But the selfish bastard is stronger, the echo louder . . . *mine, mine, mine*. And I know which voice I'm going to give in to.

She looks into my eyes and pleads. "Please, Nathan. I need you."

She says it like she knows the battle raging in my head, my heart. Her eyes beseech me to believe her, to trust her love, to know that I'm enough. And in her eyes, I see what I could be, what I'm already becoming, and what I already am.

Hers.

*And she is mine*, the voice whispers again.

It's my undoing, and I realize that I grew up in the wrong business. Gems are about perfection, about regimented structures that look strong but shatter when you strike them just right.

But people aren't gems. We're more like metals. Malleable, flexible, and if you blend them just right,

you have something stronger and better than either one was before.

All you need is heat, and sometimes a hammer to forge it with.

“Spread your legs, kitty.”

My Emma smirks, letting me know that she’s ready to play, ready for me, for whatever I’m able to give her.

Today, tomorrow, and forever.

# Epilogue

## Emma - Two Years Later . . .

I lie back on the lush blanket on the deck of the boat, feeling the sun sink deliciously into my already tan skin. A small sound makes me open my eyes behind my dark sunglasses, and I look over, smiling.

Nathan is standing a few feet away, looking out to sea. He looks hot in his own small suit, his tan skin stark against the bright blue Mediterranean waters.

I'm tempted to crawl to him, climb to my knees, and take him into my mouth right here on deck.

There's no one around for miles except for the skeleton crew below, but they've been well-compensated to stay away and be blind to anything that happens between Nathan and me.

But he sees the sparkle in my eyes when I slip my glasses up on top of my head. "Wife, you'd better get downstairs before I throw you over my shoulder."

I tease, toying with the knot between the cups of

my string bikini, grinning. “What if that’s what I want?”

Before I can even finish the words, he’s flipped me upside down and is carefully sprinting toward our cabin. It’s a large space considering it’s on a yacht, housing a king-sized bed, a seating area, and an intimate dining table we’ve yet to use since we chose to dine under the stars last night.

He tosses me on the bed and rips off his own sunglasses to toss them aside, as forgotten as mine that fell off somewhere on our trek downstairs. “You know you just have to say the word. I’ll give you anything you want.”

I smile and hold my arms out to him. “You, just you. That’s all I want.”

It’s the truth.

We’ve worked our way through the past few years together, learning and loving. Of course, he gave me an obnoxiously large diamond engagement ring almost immediately, saying he wanted to lock me down before I could change my mind.

That was never going to happen though. I love him and find his courage at battling through his past just to love me as sexy as his complete and utter dedication to our future.

Plus, he's waited, albeit impatiently, for me to finish my Masters. I simply couldn't plan a wedding and give school the attention it deserved. But as soon as that degree was in my hand, we traded it for a big binder of wedding plans.

And the wedding was perfect, with Claire and Carly at my side and Caleb and Grant at Nathan's.

Claire and Caleb had walked down the aisle together, and I swore I saw sparks between them, the same as I always do. But Nathan swears just as vehemently that the last thing his rule-breaking brother needs is a woman who is the definition of a rule-follower.

Still, for two years, they've butted heads from time to time in what I can only call muted heat, and I still think their occasional dinner table banter has more than argumentative fire to it. But I'm not playing matchmaker there.

They'll find their way if it's meant to be.

Of course, we'd had to make some last-minute alterations to Carly's gown since her belly had popped significantly over the last month. But her glow and Kyle's excitement about their soon-to-arrive daughter more than made up for the last-minute rush tailoring appointment. I'd never tell him so, but he'd been absolutely adorable, sitting in

the front row, his eyes never straying from my best friend, who has healed him amazingly well and in return has the support of a man who wants her to only be herself.

And Grant had almost teared up when Nathan had asked him to stand in as his father. Grant's not quite as stodgy as he used to be, but I think he'll always be a bit proper. Someone in our house should be.

My parents love Nathan, of course. He fits into their vision of who they'd choose for me better than they'd ever dreamed, though I don't think they realize there's so much more to him than his bank account.

I do think they see how much he loves me, but to them, it's just gravy.

But it was the wedding I'd always dreamed of. Simple and tasteful, small and intimate. And most of all, filled with love.

And now, we're off on our honeymoon to Greece. Starting, of course, with exploring the outer islands from Crete to Mykonos on a private yacht before we spend just as much time poking around the mainland.

Nathan has promised me time to explore the ruins and visit the museums, but we'll need plenty of

time just the two of us. Like now.

“Show me.”

The order reaches deep inside my mind, moving my hands before I even will them to. My fingers deftly untie the knot at my chest, my suit falling away to the bed. Nathan works the bows at my hips, baring me to him.

“Fucking gorgeous. I could eat you up.”

I bite my lip, then dare him knowing he'll follow through happily, “Do it.”

He pauses, not giving me the control even though he wants the same thing I do. Instead, he teases me, light touches along my sun-heated skin that bring goosebumps and shivers of desire.

He spreads my puffy lips wide and blows on my pussy, his scruffy cheek pressed against my thigh. He just looks at me, up close and personal, nothing to hide between us ever again.

And with a smile I can feel against my leg, he finally traces a fingertip around my clit. “Right here? Is this where you want my tongue?”

He won't do it, not until my challenge becomes a plea. But there's no need to deny myself the pleasure I know he can give me. “Yes. . . right

there, lick me. Please.”

The beg is his victory, his tongue is my reward as he follows the same circular path he made with his finger. Around and around, teasing me and pushing me more into madness.

But right before I come, he stops and instead blows a heated breath over me once again.

“Not yet, kitty. This pussy doesn’t come until I say so. Can you obey or are you going to be naughty?”

Every filthy fantasy I’ve ever had is contained in those two sides of the same coin and he knows it, knows every single thing about me. Inside and out.

I whimper, knowing another gush of honey just accompanied his words. It may have started off as a dangerous game, but we’ve carved out a softer version of that submissiveness for our own. One that represents our true selves and thrills us both.

Sometimes, I answer ‘naughty’ just to get the punishments he metes out, loving the way he marks me, fucks me raw and rough, and loses control.

Other times, like now, I obey. “I’ll be good. I’ll wait until you say,” I purr with a soft smile.

He moves up my body, pressing a hot kiss to my mouth before he rumbles against my ear.



“Good girl.”

He lies on top of me, bodies pressed together as we edge toward becoming one. “I need to be inside your sweet little pussy right the fuck now.”

And with no preamble, he shoves into my already slick slit, completing the connection we both need so desperately. I cry out, feeling him deep in my core the same way he’s deep in my heart, and when he runs his fingers into my hair, forcing my thrashing head still, I see the same in his eyes.

I love him. He loves me. I am his. He is mine.

We may have begun with secrets and lies, danger and threats, but we’ve left all that behind long ago. Now, here, with his ring on my finger and his hand in mine, our love is built on truth, adventure, and the knowledge that we are enough. Together.

# Epilogue

## Kyle - Six Months Later . . .

Holding my baby girl in my arms, I can't help but sway to music that only plays in my head. The tiny creature in my arms mewls and snuggles in tighter to my bare chest.

I haven't worn a shirt around the house in weeks. The doctor said skin contact was important for her to imprint or something like that. I don't know the science behind it, don't care, to be honest, but I'm happy to hold her.

My little Susannah.

My heart clenches at the name. It'd been Carly's idea. The heart in that woman is unbelievable. She'd searched baby name books for months until she found one that she liked that would also honor Anna. We've agreed to keep the full name, no nicknames.

So I sing under my breath, "Oh, Susannah, don't you cry for me. 'Cuz I love you more than you'll ever know, and that's the truth, you see."

It's a terrible daddification of the original song, but I like the tune with my little girl's name.

With her fully asleep, I carefully place Susannah in her bassinet. I watch her, memorizing the pure joy and peace on her face, letting it seep into me, fill the void inside me that had been gaping and dark for so very long.

The one that her mother began stitching up years ago.

Thinking of my delicious wife, another thought runs through my mind. One not quite so sweet or innocent.

With my baby asleep, I have a precious few minutes to spend with my wife.

"Carly?" I ask, walking into our living room. Not seeing her, I peek into the kitchen and then smile. She's already in the bedroom.

I make careful steps her direction, already tasting her sweet scent on the air, mixing with the vanilla candles she likes to burn. From the doorway, I see her.

Curled up in a nest of blankets, her hair longer than when we first met and spread around her like a dark halo, she reclines, her eyes closed. Her face mimics the same peace and joy Susannah's did, and

I have a slight sense that maybe I gave that to both of them.

It seems ridiculous that a monster like me could do that, but somehow, it's true.

I know she could use the sleep. She's been giving her all every second of every day. But we need this. I need this. And though I'm a better man than I once was, I'm not totally selfless.

I move the blanket, exposing her foot and calf. I lower myself to my knees beside the bed, and gently, I press my lips to her ankle. Slowly, I make my way higher, touching, tasting, worshiping her skin.

When I reach her inner thigh, she stirs lightly, unable to hold back her act any longer. Smiling faintly, she asks, "Is she asleep?"

When she looks down at me, her smile is soft like I've come to life from her dream. I still don't understand why she looks at me that way, but I'll do any damn thing to make sure she always does.

"Tick tock, my wife. Little Susannah is down for her nap, and her Daddy is hungry."

Her eyes sparkle, and she shifts, giving me more access to her body. "Hungry for what?"

I can feel the dare, her desire for me to tell her exactly what I want.

We may have started out the first time with whispers of love and promises of a future, and over the years, we've delivered on both time and time again. But she also loves it when I talk dirty to her. It makes her crazy. And I love nothing more than driving her wild.

I let the smirk take my face, nuzzling my nose along the crease where her leg meets her body, relishing the musky dampness I can already see glistening on her folds, inhaling her, taking her into my every pore.

“Hungry for this pussy, ravenous for your cream when you come on my face.”

She arches, her hands wrapping tightly into my hair and holding me immobile, forcing me to her like I'm not so fucking willing to be right between her honeyed thighs.

I lick a line from her ass to her clit, swirling there as she moans, wanting to draw that sound from her again and again. I drink her down, gulping her essence and feeling like the luckiest man in the world that she chose me. At a time when she could've had anything, anyone, she saw me in the deepest darkness and chose me to shine her light

on.

I'm a lucky motherfucker.

“Come for me, Carly. Cover me in your cum.” I flutter my tongue across her clit, stabbing two fingers into her so that her velvet walls can grip something and pulse against my heated skin as I tease that spot inside her that I know will send her soaring.

I feel the wave overtake her as she cries out my name, and I push her higher, wanting more, even as I shush her. “Quiet, don't wake the baby because I'm not nearly done with you.”

She slaps one hand over her mouth, muffling herself as the sounds pour from her lips.

Finally, I give her a reprieve, moving up her body to swallow the sounds myself. She moans at the taste of herself on my tongue, licking at my lips. My dirty girl likes that, says she adds sweetness to the dark flavor of my kiss, my skin.

Her hands grip my ass, trying to pull me into her where our bodies are aligned. I tease her, giving her just the crown of my cock, loving the way she stretches around me, trying to pull me inside.

“Please . . .” she begs, “More.”

I reach down, grabbing her legs and pulling them up. She smirks and bends her knees, letting them rest damn near by her ears. It's been a while since she's had to hustle on the streets, but she's kept up with her karate and stretching, and we take full advantage of her flexibility every chance we get.

This position puts her pussy on display before me, softly coral pink and so fucking slick she gleams in the afternoon sunlight as I hold her ankles.

I slip my cock through her folds, hissing, "This what you want?"

Her moan tells me she's reaching her threshold for teasing. So I give her what she needs, shoving my thickness into her in one thrust. "You want this cock filling you up, railing this pussy until you can't walk straight tomorrow?"

She bites her lip, nodding, and I know it's to keep herself quiet. I bend forward over her, kissing that lip, soothing the red puffiness from her teeth. "Tell me."

She grins, arrogance in her tone but lust in her eyes as she digs in with her fingernails into my ass, delicious pain behind my wife's order. "Fuck me, Kyle. I need you to fuck me."

I thrust into her, the feeling of being inside her

soothing the last vestiges of damage that remain from my past. With her, inside her, I am whole in a way I'd never dreamed would be possible.

I'm lost and I'm found with her.

“That’s it, take me deep in that sexy little pussy, wife. Squeeze me tight, milk the cum from my balls.” I can feel her clenching, walls tightening against my thickness and forcing me so close to the edge.

“I need you to come again for me. Touch yourself and fall with me.” She wiggles a bit, getting her hands between her legs, one spreading her lips wide and the other swiping across her reddened clit.

My eyes flick from her pussy to her eyes, back and forth . . . sexy as fuck in both places.

Her eyes roll, lids fluttering as she cries out loudly, “Oh, my God, Kyle!”

I don't shush her this time, too gone myself to worry about our volume. And her trembling walls do as I demanded, milking me in waves from my root to my crown, pulling the cum from me. With a sharp burst of pleasure that starts at my spine, I come with her, filling her with streams of thick semen.

“Fuck, Carly. *Yes.*”



We ride the current together, drowning in the riptide of orgasm, and in Carly's pleasure I find the joy and peace I see in my girls.

I let her legs down, setting them gently to the bed before collapsing on top of her, barely able to hold my weight off her. I smile down at her and her returning smile fills me.

The moment is shattered by a wailing cry and then our answering groans. "I've got her. You stay here."

She snuggles back into the mess of blankets, purring like a happy cat. I get up, grabbing my boxers, but I pause to look back as she calls my name. "Kyle?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Bring her back with you," she says. "Family hug time. Toss me a shirt."

I grab one of the loose-fit tanks that let her nurse easily, throwing it toward her before I turn to get our daughter, my heart filled with warmth.

I can't believe how deep I fell, how far I was willing to go after Anna's death. But after everything I've done, the true miracle is how far I've come now. From the deepest, darkest, ugliest pit fueled only by revenge and fury to an oasis of

beauty, love, and happiness. All thanks to my girls . . . *all* of them.

The End. Thank you for reading!

If you enjoyed Filthy Riches, want to see where they are in the future? Nathan is determined to be different than his father was . . . involved in his son's life. [\*\*Read the bonus short story free here.\*\*](#)

Also, if you haven't read it already, make sure to check out the Beauty and the Billionaire excerpt by flipping the page!

# **Excerpt: Beauty and the Billionaire**

# Chapter 1

## Mia

The electronic drumbeats thud through the air so hard that I can actually feel my chest vibrate as I look at my screen, my head bobbing as I let the pattern come to me.

I've had a lot of people ask me how I can work the way I do, but this is when the magic happens. I've got three computer screens, each of them split into halves with data flowing in each one. I'm finishing up my evaluations, I've done the grind, and now I'm bringing it all together.

For that, though, I need tunes, and nothing gets my brain working on the right frequency as well as good techno does.

I can hear the door to my office vibrate in its frame, and I'm glad I've got my own little paradise down here in the basement of the Goldstone Building.

Sure, my methods are weird, and I'm sort of isolated considering that I'm in a corner office with two file rooms on either side of me, but that's

because I need this to make the magic happen.

Frankly, I wasn't too sure if I'd be able to keep this job, considering the number of complaints I got my first six months working here.

Part of it, of course, is my occasional outbursts—to myself, mind you, and more often than not in gutter Russian so no one can understand me.

That, with the random singing along with my tunes, meant I was labeled as 'distracting' and 'difficult to work next to.'

But the powers that be saw the value that I bring with my data analysis.

So, as an experimental last gasp, I was sent down here, where the walls are thick, the neighbors are paper, and nobody minds that my singing voice is terrible.

It works for them, but more importantly, it works for me.

And here I've remained for almost six years, working metadata analysis and market trends, making people with money even more money.

Not that the company's treated me poorly. I've gotten a bonus for seven quarters straight, and I've always managed my own investments.

For a girl who still has a few years until she hits thirty, I'm doing well on the ol' nest egg.

But I'm pigeonholed. Other than dropping off files from time to time, I almost never see anyone in my day to day work, which I guess is okay with me. I've never been someone who likes the social scene of an office.

On the other hand, I can wear my pink and blue streaks in my hair and not have to see people's judging glares. And I don't have to explain what my lyrics mean when I decide to sing along.

"Another one for the Motherland!" I exclaim as I see what I've been looking for. This isn't a hard assignment, merely an optimization analysis for some of Goldstone's transport subsidiaries. But I prefer to celebrate each victory, no matter how small or large, with glee.

I swipe all the data to my side monitors and bring up a document in the center and start typing. I've already included most of the boilerplate that the executives and VPs want to see, the 'check the box' sort of things that my father would understand with his background.

After all, he is Russian. He knows about bureaucracy.

Finally, just as the Elf Clock above my door dings noon, I save my file and fire it off to my supervisor.

“In Russia . . . report finishes *you*.”

Okay, so it’s not my best one-liner, but it’s another quirk of mine. While I’m as American as apple pie, I pay homage to my roots, especially at work, for some reason. It seems to help, so I’m sticking to it.

Heading to the elevator, I go upstairs before punching out for lunch and jumping into my little Chevy to drive to my ‘spot’, a diner called The Gravy Train. An honest to goodness old-fashioned diner, it’s got some of the best food in town, including a fried chicken sandwich that’s to kill for.

As I drive, I look around my hometown, still surprised at how big it seems these days. The main reason, of course, is tied to the dark tower on the north side of town, Blackwell Industries.

Thirty years ago, Mr. Blackwell located his headquarters here in the sleepy town of Roseboro and proclaimed it to be the bridge between Portland and Seattle. A lot of people scoffed, but he was right, and Roseboro’s been the beneficiary of his foresight.

I’ve been lucky, watching a city literally grow with me. Roseboro is big enough now that some people

even call this a Tri-Cities area, lumping us in with Portland and Seattle.

I get to The Gravy Train just in time to see the other reason that I come to this place so frequently for lunch wave from the window. Isabella “Izzy” Turner has been my best friend since first grade, and I love her like she’s my own flesh and blood.

As I enter, I see her untie the apron on her uniform and slump down into one of the booths. Her normally rich brown hair looks limp and stringy today, and the bags under her eyes are so big she could be carrying her after work clothes in them.

“Hey, babe, you look exhausted,” I say in greeting, giving her a hug from the side as I slide in next to her. “Please don’t tell me you’re still working double shifts?”

“Have to,” Izzy says as she leans into me and hugs back. “Gotta keep the bills paid, and doing double shifts gives me a chance to maybe get a little ahead. I’ll need it once classes start up again.”

“You know you don’t have to,” I tell her for the millionth time. “You can take out student loans like the rest of us.”

“I’d rather not if I don’t have to. I owe enough to other people as it is.”



She's got a point. She's had a tough life and has seen tragedy that left more and more debt on her tab, and student loans are tough enough without all the other stuff in her life.

And even though she always turns me down, I have to offer once again, just on the off-chance she'll say yes this time. "Still, if you need anything . . . I mean, I've said it before, but you can always come live with me. I've got room at my place."

Izzy snorts, finally cracking a smile. "You mean you want someone to stay up with you until two in the morning on weekends playing video games?"

Before I can elbow her in the side, the bell above the door rings and in walks the third member of our little party patrol, Charlotte Dunn. A stunning girl who turns heads everywhere she goes with her long, naturally bright and beautiful red hair, she slides into the booth opposite Izzy and me, looking exhausted herself.

She settles in, sighing heavily, and Izzy looks over at her. "Tough morning for you too?"

"I think walking in the back and sticking my head in a vat of hot oil might just be preferable to working reception on the ground floor of Satan's Skyscraper," she jokes. "It's not like anything bad happened either."

“So what’s the deal?” I ask, and Charlotte shakes her head. “What?”

“I guess it’s just that everyone there walks like they’ve got a hundred-pound albatross on their back as they come in. No smiles, no greetings, even though I try. It’s just depressing,” she replies. “You got lucky, landing in the shining palace.”

“Girl, please. I work all by my lonesome in the deep, dark dungeon of a basement,” I point out.

Charlotte snorts. “But that’s how you like it!”

She’s not wrong, so I don’t bother arguing, instead teasingly gloating, “And I get to wear whatever and work however the hell I please.”

Our waitress, one of Izzy’s co-workers, comes over with her order pad. “So, what can I get you ladies?”

“Something with no onions or spice,” Izzy replies, groaning. “Maybe Henry can whip up a grilled cheese for me?”

“Deal. And for you ladies?”

We place our orders, and the three of us lean back, relaxing. Charlotte looks me over enviously again, shaking her head. “Seriously, Mia, can’t get over the outfit today. You trying to show off the curves?”

“What curves?” I ask, looking down at today’s band T-shirt. It’s just a BTS logo, twin columns rising on a black shirt.

“Hey, you’re rockin’ it.” Charlotte laughs. “It fits the girls just right.”

I roll my eyes. Charlotte always seems to see something in me that I don’t. Men don’t seem to find me interesting. Or at least, the men *I* find interesting don’t find *me* interesting.

Deflecting back to her, I ask, “How’re things looking for you? That guy in Accounting ever come back downstairs to get your number?”

Charlotte snorts. “Nope. I saw him the other day, but it’s okay. It’s his loss.”

She does a little hair flip and I can’t help but smile. She hasn’t always had the best luck with guys, but she never gives up and always keeps a positive attitude about the whole dating game. Her motto is ‘No Mr. Wrongs, only Mr. Rights and Mr. Right-Nows.’ Maybe not the classiest, but a girl’s got needs, and sometimes it’s nice to have an orgasm from a guy not named B.O.B.

We eat our lunches, chatting and gossiping and bullshitting as always. It’s never a big to-do since we share lunch together at least once a week, if not

more, but it's still nice to catch up. Izzy and I have been friends for so long, and Charlotte and I met in college. They're important to me.

“So, when do classes start up again, Izz?” Charlotte asks. “So you can, I don't know, get some sleep and not have fallen arches?”

Izzy snorts. “Too soon, I think. But if I can string together another two semesters—”

“Wait, two?” I ask in shock. “Honey, you're like the super-duper-oooper senior at this point. Seriously, some of the professors are probably younger than you by now.”

“Hey, we're the same age!” Izzy protests, but shrugs. “You know, I had a freshman ask me if I was a TA the other day?”

“Ouch, that had to hurt,” Charlotte says. “What did you say?”

“I pointed him in the direction of the student union and turned him down when he asked for my number. Seriously, I'm not sure if he even needed to shave yet. I don't have time to teach eighteen-year-old man-boys what and where a clit is!”

Charlotte and I laugh, and I punch her in the shoulder. “You'll get there in your own time, girl. But still, why the wait?”

“Mostly the internship,” Izzy admits. “I can juggle classes and work, or internship and work, but I can’t do classes, internship, and work. There’s just not enough hours in the day.”

I nod, understanding that Izzy has plans and dreams. But unlike most, she’s willing to sacrifice and work hard to reach hers.

We shift topics, like we always do, until we’ve covered all the usual topics and my tummy feels pleasantly happy without risk of an afternoon food coma.

Wiping our mouths with our napkins, I glance at my phone, checking the time. “So, Char . . . rock, paper, scissors?”

“Nope, this one’s mine!” Charlotte says, giggling as I lean into Izzy, preventing her from moving as Charlotte grabs the check and runs up to the counter.

“Hey! Hey, dammit!” Izzy protests. “I—”

“Should be quiet and let your friends pay for lunch for once,” I whisper. “Or else I’ll use my secret Russian pressure point skills on you!”

“Oh, fine, since you put it that way!”

Charlotte comes back, and she smiles at Izzy.

“Chill, Izz. You bust your ass, and you’ve snuck us an extra pickle more than once. You’re allowed to let me buy you lunch every now and then.”

“We could all use some more *pickle*.” Izzy chuckles. “Seriously, at this point, I’d settle for a one-nighter. No commitment, no issues, just a good old-fashioned hookup. As long he’s well into his twenties, at least,” she says with an eye roll.

“Mr. Right Now?” Charlotte asks, and Izzy nods. “Hmph. You find him, send him my way. I keep finding good guys . . . two months after they’ve met the girl of their dreams. Only single men I find are dogs.”

“You’ve just gotta make sure you give them a fake number and a flea dip, and enjoy the weekend,” I tease, though she knows I would never do anything of the sort.

“I’m lonely, but I’ve got rechargeable batteries.”

We all laugh, and my phone rings. I pull it out, checking the screen. “Shit, girls, it’s my boss. Says he’s got a rush job for me to complete.”

“How’s he working out, anyway?” Charlotte asks as I finish my drink quickly. “And have you started working for The Golden Child yet?”

“Nope, I’ve never seen him except for the publicity

stuff,” I reply honestly. “He’s the penthouse. I’m the basement. Twenty-four floors in between us. Anyway, I gotta jet, so I’ll talk to you girls soon, okay?”

“Yup . . . I’m going to relax for this next ten minutes before I need to clock back in myself,” Izzy says, stretching out. “Gimme a call later?”

I nod, blowing them a kiss, and head back to work.

# Chapter 2

## Thomas

Looking out over Roseboro, I feel like I'm looking over my empire.

Of course, I'm joking . . . but maybe not so much.

Twenty-five years ago, this town was just a suburb of a suburb of Portland. Though it was already up and coming, I'd like to think that over the past six years I've added my fair share to this place.

I'd finished my MBA at Stanford and set up shop in the growing town, watching the landscape change and cultivating the business interests that serve me best. Because I haven't just watched. I've worked my ass off to get Goldstone where it is today.

Still, I made sure to keep the competition in sight, literally.

My office faces the Blackwell Building, a one-mile gap separating the two tallest buildings in the city. It helps me keep things in perspective. I came to town because I saw potential, even if Blackwell had already created something big here.



But this place is too fertile for him to fully take advantage of. A rose that, if tended right, can provide more blossoms than any one man could utilize.

I watch the morning sun hit the black tower. I'll give Blackwell grudging respect. His design might be morbid, but it's also cutting-edge. All that black is absorbing the solar energy and using it for electricity and heating. The man was environmental before environmental was actually cool.

*Too bad you'll never be that. You're just a wannabe, another young upstart who'll never stand the test of time.*

I growl, pushing away the voice from inside me, even though I know it'll be back. It never really goes away, not for long. No matter how much I achieve, that voice of insecurity still resides in my center, ready to cast doubt and shadows on each success.

The soft ding from my computer reminds me that my ten minutes of morning meditation are over, and I turn back around, looking at my desk and office. It's nothing lavish. I designed this space for maximum efficiency and productivity.

So my Herman Miller chair is not in my office for lapped luxury, or for its black and chrome styling,

but for the fact that it's rated the best chair for productivity. Same with my desk, my computer, everything.

Everything is tuned toward efficient use of my time and my efforts.

I launch into it, going through my morning assignments, answering the emails that my secretary, Kerry, cannot answer for me, and making a flurry of decisions on projects that Goldstone is working on.

Finally, just as the clock on my third screen beeps one o'clock, I send off my final message and stand up. Locking my computer, I transfer everything to my server upstairs in case I need it.

I see Kerry sitting at her desk as I leave my office. She's well-dressed as usual, her sunkissed skin and black hair gleaming mellowly under the office lighting, the perfect epitome of a professional executive assistant. While she works for me, she has this older sibling protective instinct. It's not often that I need it, but I appreciate her looking out for me.

"Need something, Mr. Goldstone?" she asks.

"Just headed upstairs," I tell her.

"Of course," she replies, her eyes cutting to her

computer screen. “Just a reminder, sir, the governor will be hosting his charity event tonight at seven. I’ve already had your tuxedo dry-cleaned, and your car detailer called. Your car will be ready and downstairs by three this afternoon.”

I give her a nod. Three’s plenty of time. “I just sent you a list of other projects to work on, by the way.”

“Of course, Mr. Goldstone. I was looking that over, and I got an email from Hank also, the team leader you assigned the Taiwan shipping contract to. He said that he’s going to have to take a day off Friday, sir. His daughter’s going to college this year, and he promised her that he’d drive her up so she can get settled into the dorm.”

I stop, pursing my lips. “What is her name?”

Kerry taps her desk for a moment, searching her memory. “Erica, sir.”

“Tell Hank that I understand and wish Erica the best, but if he isn’t at work on Friday, don’t bother coming in on Monday.”

My tone has grown serious, and Kerry’s eyes tighten, but she knows Hank is crossing a line. He should’ve given notice, especially when he’s working a contract this important.

He’s usually a good employee. But he knew his

daughter was starting classes. No excuse for that.

*No excuse for you, you mean. Failure just drips down from the boss's office down to Hank, that's all.*

Leaving the twenty-fifth floor of the Goldstone building, I take the stairs up a level to stretch my legs. Not many people even know about this floor other than the executives. To everyone else, the Goldstone Building has twenty-five floors.

The twenty-sixth is mine. It's my penthouse, and while it isn't quite as large as the other floors, it's still six thousand square feet of space that's just for me.

I strip off my dress shirt, tie, and slacks, depositing everything in the laundry chute before pulling on my workout clothes.

Today's upper body day, and as I go into my home gym, I swing my arms to loosen up my shoulders. They're going to be punished today. Starting with bench presses, I assault my body, pushing myself to press the bar one more time, to get the fucking dumbbells up despite the pain, despite gravity kicking my ass.

*Just like everything kicks your ass.*

The finisher for today is brutal, even for me. The

300 . . . 100 burpees, 100 dips, and 100 pullups, in sets of ten, nonstop. By the time I'm finished, sweat pools on the rubberized gym flooring beneath me.

I have to force myself to my feet because I refuse to be broken by anything, even something as meaningless as a workout that's supposed to do exactly that.

Instead, I jump in for a quick shower and meditate for twenty minutes after. I need to focus because running Goldstone is a mental exercise.

Closing my eyes, I force myself to push all the responsibilities away, to let it all fade into the background.

I push away the flashbacks, the voice in my head, the memories that threaten from time to time, and imagine my perfect world . . . my empire. My perfect Roseboro, deep red petals soft as velvet and eternally blooming, ready to be passed from my generation to the next for tending and care.

I know I can do it.

I *must* do it.

Changing into my tuxedo, I head downstairs to the freshly cleaned limo waiting to take me to this event. The Roseboro Civic Library is one of the

newest public buildings in town, a beautiful hundred-thousand-square-foot building in three wings over two floors. The central wing is named for Horatio Roseboro, who founded the city in memory of his daughter, who died on the Oregon Trail, while the other two wings are named for the main benefactors . . . Goldstone and Blackwell. My only request was that the Goldstone wing contain the children's section, and they were more than willing to do that.

Tonight, though, it's the scene for a fundraiser for the governor's favorite charity. Governor Gary Langlee tends to ignore Roseboro most of the time—we're not his voter base—but when it comes time to get money, he'll go just about anywhere he can if someone will cross his palm with a little bit of green.

I arrive at just the right time, ten minutes before seven, in order to get the best of the press. I tolerate the leeches more than like them, but I do understand that the fourth estate has a purpose and a job to do.

And there are legit journalists who I respect. It's just the paparazzi and empty talking heads that I despise.

So I smile for the cameras, giving a little wave and shaking hands with our local state representative

before heading into the foyer, where the party has already started.

“Ah, Thomas!” the mayor says, greeting me in that hearty way that really endears him to the locals. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

“You know me, never pass up a chance to press the flesh,” I reply, making him laugh. He knows I’m lying but thinks that I’m only here because of the press and good PR that Goldstone will get for tonight.

The reality is far different. While Governor Langlee and I might not see eye to eye on most public policies, I actually agree with the goals of tonight’s event.

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy yourself,” the mayor says after a moment when I don’t follow up.

Clearing his throat, he looks around. “If you don’t mind telling me, Thomas, there’s a rumor around town that Goldstone is looking into building a sea transportation hub in Roseboro. I’m not saying I wouldn’t appreciate it, but if you are, I happen to know a man who’s got about seven hundred and fifty acres just outside of town. It’s county land, but I’m sure we could work something out.”

That’s the mayor . . . a good ol’ boy to the voters, a

sneaky dealmaker to those with money. The man would sell his grandmother's grave if it'd make him a buck.

*Oh, like you've been such a good son.*

“If we do move on such a project, I'll be sure to keep City Hall informed,” I tell him with a smile that turns just a little predatory at the end. “But of course, I would do my due diligence on the property. No use wasting my money when it could be spent on a proper seaport instead of along the Columbia?”

The mayor blanches just a little, which is what I want. A tiny reminder that while he may hold office, I hold the funds that make this city thrive or fail. Or at least a large share of the finances that do so.

Leaving him, I do my best to ‘mingle’. I know the faces. I've seen it all before.

A pat on the back here for a friend.

A backhanded compliment for the enemy whom you can't quite man up and call out in public. The icy stare from across the room at those whose families have somehow found the time to engage in feuds despite not having the time to make a difference in the world.



It's all old hat, and while some might find it interesting, I just tolerate it to get my goal here tonight done.

Finally, at nine o'clock, I can't do it any longer. I retreat to the children's section, which is relatively quiet in comparison, and I look over the newest books on the display.

"You know, I'm not too sure if *Long Way Down* really belongs in the children's section," a throaty voice says behind me, and I turn to see Meghan Langlee, Governor Langlee's daughter.

She's wearing a Chanel cocktail dress that fits her like a glove, highlighting a very fit body and a camera grabbing face. A former beauty queen like her mother, Meghan's parlayed her looks into a budding career as a political pundit.

"Actually, I personally insisted on it," I reply, turning away from her and looking at the books again. "While the subject matter might be a little dark and violent, the days of young people growing up needing little more than *The Andy Griffith Show* and reading Judy Blume are pretty much over."

"Hmm, well, I'll say my father would disapprove, but I understand what you mean," she says, stepping closer. "You know, Mr. Goldstone . . . mind if I call you Tom?"

“If you wish,” I reply, sizing her up immediately. She must be up to something, she’s coming on too hard, too boldly.

It wouldn’t surprise me if she’s been sent here on a mission. Her father’s a weasel and would see no issue with using his only daughter this way.

She takes my arm, as if she expects me to suddenly escort her and be happy to do so, giving me a false coquettish giggle. “Ooh. I’ve heard your reputation Tom, that you’re pretty *rigid* in your fitness routines, but wow, this tux is hiding a *beast* underneath all this worsted wool.”

“Clean eating and good habits,” I reply, already tiring of her and her lazily flirtatious innuendos. She tries to lead me back to the main wing, and I follow along simply to avoid any issues, but when she sees one of the press and starts trying to angle us in that direction, I pull my arm free. “Excuse me, Miss Langlee.”

She looks surprised, anger hiding in her eyes. I doubt she’s used to being denied. She reaches out and grabs my arm again, pulling herself close.

“Come on now, Tom. I’m sure we can find a little bit of fun.”

I can’t tolerate this any longer, and I pull away, my

voice tight. “Sorry. I haven’t had my rabies booster this year.”

I walk away, cursing myself at that last crack. Turning her down cold? That’s one thing.

But essentially calling her a disease-infested slut was probably too much.

“One of these days, you’re going to piss off someone important,” she says threateningly to my back. When I don’t reply, she stomps her foot like a petulant toddler, loud enough to cut through the hubbub of the party as she calls out, “Bastard!”

Everything stops, and I nod, glancing back over my shoulder at her with a charming smile. “That’s one of the things they call me.”

I keep going, and as I pass by the governor, he gives me a dirty look. Reaching out, he puts a hand on my arm.

“You know, my daughter—” he starts, already conciliatory, which makes me think he knew exactly what Meghan’s game was tonight.

I don’t let him finish. I just shrug him off, ignoring the snapping cameras. I only pause at the door to reach into my jacket and pull out an envelope that I slide into the donation box.

It's unmarked . . . but that's just what I want.

# Chapter 3

## Blackwell

The shadows of the unused wing conceal me, just as I planned. There are no lights up here, just the glow from down below, which is just how I like it.

Why should I waste my time mingling among the players on stage when I can be the director, up here in the shadows until the right moment for my cameo?

The velvet rope across the stairs to the upper floor sends a tasteful but pointed point to the people down below, giving me the privacy I want.

I sip my glass of Seleccion Suprema, enjoying the subtle tones of the fine tequila while watching Thomas Goldstone storm out of the library, the governor outraged and his little tramp of a daughter staring dark murder at him. It's exactly what I wanted.

“Scurry home, Golden Boy,” I whisper, sipping my drink again. “Storm out of here, showing the whole world your weakness.”

I've studied my adversary from afar for years, ever since The Golden Boy turned his attention from minor league playing the market and posting dramatic percentage gains to actually slinging weight in Roseboro.

I'll admit, I underestimated him at first. I laughed when Goldstone established his first 'headquarters' and even rented him the first building. The old three-story building had sat empty for awhile, caught in that gap between small business and big business and too difficult to divide up. I figured it could come to some use at least that way, but I'd thought Goldstone would crash and burn after a few years.

Little did I expect to have to look out of my office window to see Goldstone's own building, nearly as tall as my own, every morning.

I shake my head, wondering where I'd gone wrong. It should have taken him another decade or more to get to where he is now. It makes no logical sense for the Golden Boy, at just over half my age, to have already closed the gap on me so quickly.

I'd run the numbers and taken the time to double-check the figures personally . . . and knew the day after Goldstone cut the ribbon on that shining monstrosity a mile from my own tower that if I didn't do something to destroy Thomas Goldstone,

he'd steal my throne as the richest man in Roseboro.

Goldstone is poised to relegate me to the list of also-rans, the men who were big but not the biggest.

History remembers Secretariat, not the horses who finished second behind him.

I have no intention of ending my life as anything other than the undisputed master of my domain. Some may call me a dictator . . . but at least they'll remember me.

And so I plot, and tonight, I confirmed a suspicion I've had for a long time. Thomas Goldstone's infamous temper is very real and rather raw when it comes to beautiful women.

He didn't show it outwardly, and I'll give him that much. There was no yelling, no screaming like I've heard rumors about. But to just impetuously pull his arm away from Governor Langlee like that? Ill-advised, to say the least.

I chuckle and watch the governor console his stupid, status-seeking daughter while trying to get the focus back on tonight's charity cause.

Men's dress shoes click on the tile flooring of the landing. I refuse to let my wing of the library be

sullied with anything as plebeian as fuzzy carpet like Goldstone has in the children's wing. There's a reason they're called rugrats, after all.

Still, the shadows are so thick that even up close, I know the man can't see my face clearly, although the obsidian cufflinks on my tuxedo clearly reveal my identity.

Not too many people can pull off obsidian and platinum cufflinks while not mingling with the crowd.

“Sir, I assume you saw that?”

My operative is dressed like most of the men downstairs, in a suit that is appropriate for the evening but not a tuxedo. No, only the crème de la crème are wearing tuxedos, and I need my man to stay anonymous.

Which, in many respects, is very hard to do in a gossipy upper-crust crowd who eyes any newcomer with scrutiny and obvious analysis of their financial bearing. And unfortunately, my operative is as status-hungry as the governor's daughter, in his own way.

Not quite a peacock . . . but definitely not a chameleon. He's not quite seeking recognition though, which is useful to me. I need a snake, not a



chameleon.

“Of course,” I reply after a moment of savoring my tequila. Forget the flavoring, the mixings. Just let me savor the oaky vanilla tones of the extra anejo tequila while the agave essence sort of plays in my nose. “It went well.”

“I apologize that he didn’t leave with the girl. When I pointed her in his direction, I assumed he’d —”

“Never assume anything,” I say, looking over at the man. Intelligent, and with striking eyes that most people assume is a product of his upbringing. I know different, and know the fire inside them burns with hatred for Thomas Goldstone. Yes, he’s definitely not a chameleon.

But he’s not half the hunter he thinks he is, either.

He expects that by playing Judas to Goldstone, he will garner himself favor with me. I can’t blame him for the blossoming hope, since I planted the seed myself and have watered it with unspoken promises over these past few months.

The man has a future, as long as he keeps his eyes open. The very same knife he’s helping me to slip into Thomas Goldstone can quickly be turned on him as well if he decides to think beyond what he’s

told.

“It doesn’t matter. The Golden Boy has shown his weakness. All that glitters isn’t gold.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

I sigh and finish off my tequila. Perhaps my operative isn’t quite as smart as he pretends to be. But at the same time, it reassures me. The man isn’t smart enough to realize he’s being played.

For a man who is betraying his employer, he still has an ironic blind spot. He’s not very good at planning, just executing the plans of others.

“Piece of advice. There is a time when you set up, and plan, and project, and scheme. But there comes a time to just push that first domino and see what happens. Knowing when to do each . . . that’s power.”

My man says nothing, watching as the governor clears his throat and the party starts back up, tension starting to melt away . . . but I can see that many people won’t forget the scene Goldstone created.

Least of all, the governor.

“Sir . . . what shall we do about him?” my man asks. “Any man confident enough to just walk

away from Governor Langlee like that . . .”

I can't help but grin as I think through my plans. Goldstone is on his way to becoming a large enough problem that drastic measures will need to be used. It's not that I'm averse to that methodology, and in fact, I've nurtured a healthy relationship with operatives beyond the law.

But I prefer to stick with the quieter approach I've plotted, so as not to draw more attention to the famous Golden Boy.

I want the man crushed . . . not a martyr.

And there are so many, many ways to cut your enemy's legs out from under him. Quiet or loud, mercilessly or kindly, with confrontation or from the shadows.

“I have an idea . . . but for now, enjoy the party. After all, you have connections to make yourself, yes?”

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# About the Author

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